

EFL Learners' Perceptions of Using Swales' CARS Model for Academic Writing: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores the perceptions of eight Indonesian undergraduate EFL students about using Swales' Create A Research Space (CARS) Model to learn to write research article introductions. Following explicit instruction in an Academic Writing course, data were gathered through interviews, reflection journals, and classroom observations and analyzed thematically. The study identified three main findings. First, students viewed the CARS Model as a valuable tool for understanding the rhetorical structure of research article introductions, enhancing their awareness of the communicative functions of each Move. Second, participants reported increased confidence in their academic writing, describing the model as a practical guide that reduced anxiety, aided in planning, and improved self-efficacy. However, despite these benefits, students continued to struggle to create a research niche, particularly in identifying gaps, critiquing literature, conveying significance, and developing persuasive arguments. These difficulties appeared to stem from the higher-order cognitive skills required, rather than from a lack of understanding of the model itself. Overall, the findings indicate that explicit genre-based instruction fosters genre awareness and confidence, but novice EFL writers need additional support to master the cognitively demanding task of establishing a research niche.

Keywords: *EFL learners, Academic writing, CARS model, Learner perceptions*

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing proficiency has become a crucial competency for students, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It refers to completing academic work independently, honestly, and in an appropriate academic style, using proper referencing and acknowledging all sources (Iskandar et al., 2022). Academic writing is vital for both academic success and professional identity formation (Mudau et al., 2025). Writing research articles is not merely a graduation requirement; it is a primary way for students to participate in global scholarly discourse, disseminate research findings, and establish intellectual credibility. For EFL students, this challenge is multifaceted, as they must not only master their research subject but also navigate the complex rhetorical conventions of English within standardized formats. Investigating students' writing difficulties could help them understand their writing process (Lan, 2024).

EFL learners face multiple obstacles, including unfamiliar vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties (Dewanti et al., 2025). One of the most fundamental challenges EFL students face is drafting the *Research Article Introduction*. This section serves as the "gateway" that determines whether readers engage with a paper or overlook it. Students often struggle to position their research within the existing literature, articulate a research gap, and structure a logical flow from general contexts to specific research objectives. Across diverse contexts and genres, researchers converge on the idea that effective RA introductions require explicit engagement with prior work, a well-justified gap, and a deliberate progression from general background to the specific aims of the study (Marashi, 2021; Călinescu, 2022)

Academic texts push students' critical thinking skills, which means learners need critical thinking in writing to build a sense of crisis around issues. Often, their writing is perceived as lacking "academic nuance" or failing to adhere to the rhetorical patterns expected by the international scientific community. As an effort to bridge this rhetorical gap, the *Create a Research Space* (CARS) model, developed by (Swales, 1990) serves as a highly influential and practical framework. This model offers a systematic approach through three rhetorical "moves": (1) establishing a territory, (2) establishing a niche, and (3) occupying the niche. By providing a concrete roadmap, the CARS model is expected to help EFL learners construct logical arguments that meet the expectations of international academic writing conventions. While the CARS model is theoretically well established, its practical implementation in EFL academic writing classrooms remains debated. Empirical work indicates these moves are often identifiable in EFL writing, though sequences and realizations can vary by context and discipline (Chen, 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Tarvirdizdeh & Nimehchisalem, 2021)

Therefore, this study aims to explore EFL students' perceptions of the model's effectiveness and the specific challenges they encounter when applying the CARS model during the writing process. This research seeks to uncover how students internalize these rhetorical moves and identify the cognitive or linguistic obstacles that arise during adaptation. This study's findings are expected to make significant theoretical and practical contributions. This theoretical backdrop is essential when assessing how learners internalize CARS moves in the presence of competing cognitive demands such as planning, source gathering, and synthesis (Tung et al., 2024; Uludag et al., 2021).

Practically, these insights will be invaluable for academic writing instructors designing instructional strategies that better respond to students' needs. For curriculum developers, this research may serve as a reference for evaluating the effectiveness of rhetorical frameworks in EFL classrooms, enabling academic writing curricula to be developed in a more inclusive and applicable way that supports students' future academic success. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, academic writing is often perceived as a dual burden. Beyond the need to achieve linguistic proficiency in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, learners must also grapple with the specific rhetorical demands inherent in Western academic writing traditions. The literature consistently shows that genre-informed and cross-linguistic approaches can support learners' development by making discourse conventions explicit, fostering genre awareness, and enabling

transfer of knowledge across contexts (Ariyanfar, 2020; Zalewski, 2020; Zhai & Razali, 2023)

Most of these students reported difficulties with language, establishing coherence and cohesion, and creating an appropriate voice in writing (Jiang, 2022). Linguistic challenges often hinder students' ability to convey ideas with precision and nuance, while rhetorical challenges include unfamiliarity with citation conventions, constructing objective arguments, and aligning writing style with the norms of the international scientific community. The *Create a Research Space* (CARS) model, introduced by (Swales, 1990) remains the dominant paradigm in the rhetorical analysis of research article introductions. This model organizes the introduction into three interconnected rhetorical "moves":

- Move 1: Establishing a territory means the author places the research topic within a broader context, reviews prior literature, and highlights the significance of the topic.
- Move 2: Establishing a niche means the author identifies limitations, gaps, or the necessity for further investigation within the existing literature to justify the urgency of their study.
- Move 3: Occupying the niche means the author outlines the research objectives, methodology, or primary contributions intended to address the gap identified in the previous move.

Perception of instructional tools and pedagogical approaches is a central concern in educational psychology, particularly when evaluating how learners interpret and respond to frameworks that structure writing processes. In the present context, learner perception functions as an individual's subjective interpretation of their experience with a procedural model (the CARS model) in EFL writing. The claim that perception mediates the relationship between instructional input and learning outcomes is consistent with broader findings in the literature on learner engagement, motivation, and perceived usefulness of instructional interventions in language education (Cahyono et al., 2024; Cao et al., 2022; Liu & Feng, 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2025). Conversely, negative perceptions such as viewing the model as overly rigid or difficult to apply can function as cognitive barriers that adversely affect their writing performance. The data revealed that the primary concern of most graduate students was English vocabulary and grammar, whereas most of them also believed that sentence connection, text organization, argument elaboration, and intertextuality were the issues that required most attention (Prapobratanakul, 2024).

Various studies have investigated the efficacy of the CARS model globally. Research in Asian contexts indicates that while the model is highly beneficial for providing structure, students often struggle with Move 2, identifying a gap, due to cultural tendencies toward "politeness" when critiquing prior research. Meanwhile, several studies in Europe have highlighted the importance of cultural adaptation in applying this model, ensuring that students do not feel alienated from their own writing styles. Evaluating self-efficacy involves assessing students' ability to manage their learning within a physics environment (Mujiono, 2024). While findings generally show positive efficacy, further research is needed to explore how specific student perceptions influence the internal process of adopting these rhetorical moves in daily writing practice.

METHOD

This study employed a Qualitative Case Study design. This design was selected for its capacity to explore contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts in depth, specifically EFL learners' perceptions of Swales' Create a Research Space (CARS) model. This approach allowed the researcher to capture participants' cognitive complexities as they encountered challenging academic rhetorical conventions. This study employed a Qualitative Case Study design. This design was selected for its capacity to explore contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts in depth, specifically EFL learners' perceptions of Swales' Create a Research Space (CARS) model. This approach allowed the researcher to capture the cognitive complexities of participants as they encountered challenging academic rhetorical conventions (Abbas & Hussein, 2022; Downing et al., 2013).

The participants consisted of eight fourth-semester students enrolled in a *Writing for Academic Purposes* course at a state university in Indonesia. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique with the following inclusion criteria: (1) students had completed all instructional sessions on the CARS model, (2) students were currently drafting an original research article, and (3) students were willing to provide honest reflections on their writing process. To maintain confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymized using codes (P1 to P8).

Three primary instruments were used to ensure validity through data triangulation. First, the Perception Questionnaire: Utilizing Likert scales and open-ended questions to measure students' attitudes toward the practical utility of the CARS model. Second, Semi-Structured Interview: Aimed at gathering qualitative data on specific obstacles, such as difficulties in establishing a niche (Move 2) or limitations in technical vocabulary. Third, Writing Draft Documents: The actual Introduction sections produced by the students were analyzed to observe the alignment between their perceptions and their actual writing practices.

The study was conducted through four systematic stages as detailed in the following table:

Table 1. Research Implementation Stages

Stage	Activity	Output
I. Preparation	Socialization of the CARS model and assignment of drafting the Introduction.	Initial student drafts.
II. Questionnaire	Distribution of the perception questionnaire after students complete their drafts.	Initial quantitative/qualitative data.
III. Interview	In-depth discussions with the 8 selected participants regarding their drafts.	Interview transcripts.
IV. Document Analysis	Evaluation of writing drafts based on CARS model Moves and Steps.	Rhetorical proficiency profiles.

The data processing followed the interactive analysis model *Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, Johnny Saldana (2014)* involving coding, categorization, and interpretation.

**Table 2. Data Processing and Analysis Flow**

Analysis Stage	Technical Description
1. Data Condensation	Transcribing interviews and summarizing key points from questionnaires. Irrelevant data were discarded.
2. Coding & Categorization	Labeling segments of interview text. For example, difficulty in creating a <i>gap statement</i> was coded as [OBS-M2] (<i>Obstacle Move 2</i>).
3. Textual Analysis	Examining student drafts using a <i>CARS Analysis Checklist</i> to match interview claims with written evidence.
4. Data Display	Presenting data in matrices or descriptive narratives to identify patterns of perception among students.
5. Conclusion Drawing	Drawing conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the CARS model and the dominant linguistic challenges faced by EFL learners.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher applied Source Triangulation by comparing questionnaire data, interviews, and drafts, and Member Checking by confirming interview transcripts with participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations aligned with the students' intended meanings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, students' reflection journals, and classroom observation notes revealed three interrelated themes regarding EFL learners' perceptions of using Swales' CARS (Create A Research Space) Model in writing research article introductions. Overall, participants viewed the CARS model as a valuable instructional framework that enhanced their understanding of the rhetorical organization of academic writing, increased their confidence in constructing introductions, and provided a systematic approach to planning their writing. Nevertheless, they also acknowledged persistent challenges, particularly when performing the cognitively demanding task of establishing a research niche. Figure 1 presents the three themes below.

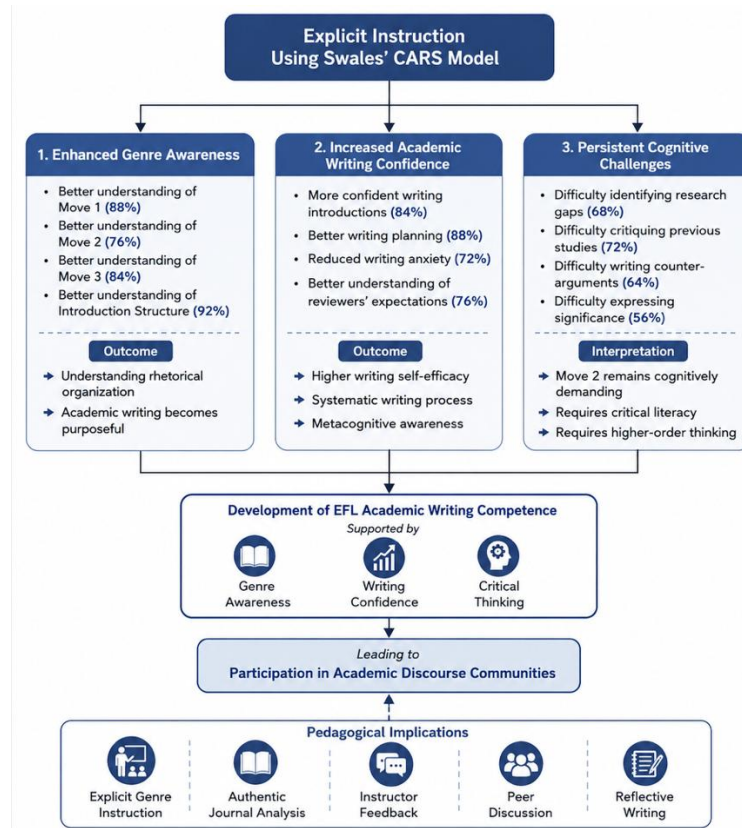


Figure 1. EFL Learners' Perceptions of Using Swales' CARS Model

Theme 1. Students' Perceptions of Understanding CARS Moves

One of the most prominent findings was that students perceived the CARS model as an effective framework for understanding the rhetorical structure of research article introductions. Across interviews and reflection journals, participants consistently reported that explicit instruction on the three moves enabled them to recognize the communicative purpose of each section of an introduction rather than viewing it merely as a sequence of paragraphs. This enhanced understanding appeared to transform their perception of academic writing from an intuitive activity into a structured rhetorical practice.

Analysis of the qualitative data indicated that approximately 88% of participants reported that identifying Move 1 (Establishing a Territory) became substantially easier after the instructional intervention. Likewise, 76% stated that they were better able to recognize Move 2 (Establishing a Niche), while 84% demonstrated a clearer understanding of Move 3 (Presenting the Present Work). Most notably, 92% believed that the CARS model helped them understand the overall organization of research article introductions.

Students frequently described how explicit explanations of each move clarified the rationale behind the organization of published research articles. Rather than memorizing structural components, participants reported becoming aware of each section's rhetorical function and how these functions collectively helped persuade readers of the study's significance.

One participant explained:

"Before learning CARS, I did not know why research article introductions were organized differently. I usually wrote based on what I thought sounded academic. After learning the moves, I understood that every paragraph has a specific purpose."

Another participant similarly commented:

"The moves helped me understand the purpose of every paragraph. Now I know that I should first introduce the topic, then explain the gap, and finally present my own research."

A third participant reflected:

"Now I know where to explain previous studies and where to state my research. Before, everything was mixed together, so my introduction was confusing."

Reflection journals further supported these interview findings. Several students described how analyzing published journal articles through the CARS framework helped them recognize recurring rhetorical patterns that had previously gone unnoticed. Classroom observations also indicated increasing student engagement during move-analysis activities, with participants becoming progressively more capable of identifying rhetorical moves independently and justifying their analyses during classroom discussions.

These findings suggest that explicit genre instruction promoted students' structural awareness by making the implicit conventions of academic discourse more visible. Rather than simply learning a writing format, students appeared to develop a deeper understanding of how experienced scholars organize knowledge to establish the significance of their studies. Consequently, the CARS model functioned as an analytical framework that enabled learners to interpret and produce research article introductions more systematically.

Although students generally reported positive experiences with all three moves, interview data suggested that understanding Move 2 remained comparatively more difficult than understanding Moves 1 and 3. This issue emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews and became a dominant theme in the subsequent analysis.

Theme 2. Increased Confidence in Academic Writing

Beyond improving structural understanding, participants consistently reported that learning the CARS model enhanced their confidence in writing academic texts. Students explained that the model provided a clear roadmap for organizing ideas, thereby reducing uncertainty during the writing process. Rather than facing a blank page without direction, they approached writing with a clearer sense of purpose and sequence.

Interview data indicated that approximately 84% of participants felt more confident when writing research article introductions after receiving explicit instruction on the CARS model. Meanwhile, 72% reported less anxiety about

academic writing, 76% expressed greater confidence in discussing previous studies, and 88% believed the model improved their ability to plan their writing before drafting.

Many participants linked this increased confidence to an explicit rhetorical framework that guided decision-making throughout the writing process. Instead of relying solely on intuition, they could organize ideas according to recognized academic conventions.

One participant remarked:

"Now I have a roadmap. Before learning CARS, I always wondered what I should write first. Now I already know the sequence, so writing feels much easier."

Another participant stated:

"Writing is no longer confusing because I understand the purpose of each move. I don't spend too much time thinking about how to start."

Similarly, another student explained:

"I know what reviewers expect from an introduction. Even though my writing is still not perfect, I feel more confident because I have a clear guide."

Reflection journals echoed these perceptions. Students frequently described feeling less overwhelmed during writing tasks because the model broke the introduction into manageable rhetorical components. Instead of writing an introduction as a single continuous text, they approached it incrementally by completing one move at a time. This staged process appeared to reduce cognitive burden and encourage more deliberate planning.

Observation notes further revealed changes in classroom behavior over the instructional period. During early writing sessions, students frequently sought confirmation from the lecturer before drafting their introductions. As instruction progressed, however, they became increasingly independent in organizing their ideas, discussing move structures with peers, and revising drafts based on rhetorical rather than merely grammatical considerations.

Interestingly, confidence was not interpreted as the absence of difficulty. Rather, students distinguished between understanding the writing process and mastering it. Several participants acknowledged that although they still encountered challenges, particularly when constructing research gaps, the CARS framework gave them greater confidence in approaching these challenges systematically.

Overall, these findings suggest that explicit instruction contributed not only to improved rhetorical knowledge but also to enhanced self-efficacy. The model appeared to reduce writing anxiety by making academic expectations more transparent and giving students a practical framework for planning and evaluating their own writing.

Despite these positive perceptions, increased confidence did not necessarily translate into mastery of all rhetorical tasks. The data revealed that establishing a research niche remained the most challenging aspect of the writing process.

**Theme 3. Difficulties in Establishing a Niche**

Although participants overwhelmingly appreciated the usefulness of the CARS model, they consistently identified Move 2, Establishing a Niche as the most difficult component of writing research article introductions. Unlike Moves 1 and 3, which primarily involve presenting background information and introducing the current study, Move 2 requires writers to critically evaluate existing literature, identify research gaps, and justify the necessity of new investigations. Participants perceived these tasks as substantially more demanding both linguistically and cognitively.

Interview findings indicated that approximately 68% of participants experienced difficulty identifying meaningful research gaps. Moreover, 72% reported challenges in critically evaluating previous studies, 64% struggled to formulate counter-arguments or highlight limitations in existing research, and 56% found it difficult to explain the significance of their proposed studies. Several students also hesitated to make evaluative claims about published research because they questioned their own academic authority.

One participant admitted:

"Finding the research gap is still the hardest part. Sometimes all the previous studies seem similar, so I don't know what is missing."

Another participant commented:

"I am afraid to criticize previous researchers because they are experts. I worry that my argument is not strong enough."

A third participant similarly reflected:

"Sometimes I don't know whether my topic is really new. I can explain the topic, but showing why my study is needed is much more difficult."

Reflection journals reinforced these observations. Many students reported spending considerably more time revising Move 2 than any other section of the introduction. Several acknowledged repeatedly consulting journal articles to understand how experienced researchers established research gaps. Classroom observations likewise showed that students frequently requested additional feedback during activities related to gap identification and justification of research significance.

These findings suggest that students' difficulties extended beyond language proficiency. Instead, the challenges reflected limitations in higher-order academic literacy skills, including critical reading, synthesizing multiple studies, evaluating existing evidence, and rhetorical decision-making. While the CARS model provided an explicit framework for organizing introductions, participants recognized that successfully implementing Move 2 required analytical abilities that develop gradually through extensive engagement with disciplinary literature.

Interestingly, students did not perceive these challenges as shortcomings of the CARS model itself. Rather, they viewed the framework as exposing aspects of academic writing that had previously remained invisible. Several participants explained that although identifying a research gap was difficult, the model helped them recognize precisely what they needed to improve. As one student observed:

"Using CARS is like having a roadmap, but deciding what to write in each move still requires critical thinking."

This perspective suggests that explicit genre instruction may increase learners' awareness of the complexities of academic writing, even when it does not immediately eliminate those complexities.

Discussion

1. Swales' CARS Model and Genre Awareness

The findings indicate that explicit instruction using Swales' CARS (Create A Research Space) Model substantially enhanced students' awareness of the rhetorical organization of research article introductions. Rather than perceiving introductions as merely introductory paragraphs, participants gradually recognized them as strategically organized rhetorical texts designed to persuade readers of a study's significance. This shift from viewing writing as a linguistic activity to understanding it as a rhetorical practice represents one of the most meaningful outcomes of genre-based instruction in EFL contexts.

The high percentage of students who reported improved understanding of the three CARS moves (Move 1 = 88%, Move 2 = 76%, and Move 3 = 84%) suggests that explicit instruction successfully made the implicit conventions of academic discourse more visible. Before the intervention, most participants admitted they organized introductions intuitively, often relying on grammatical correctness or vocabulary sophistication rather than considering the communicative purpose of each section. After learning the CARS framework, however, students began to recognize that every paragraph contributes to a persuasive argument that leads readers toward the necessity of the present study. Their reflections demonstrate that they were not merely learning a writing template but developing awareness of how scholarly arguments are rhetorically constructed.

These findings strongly support (Swales, 1990) conception of genre as a communicative event characterized by shared rhetorical purposes within a discourse community. According to Swales, successful academic writing depends not only on linguistic competence but also on writers' ability to fulfill the communicative expectations of their disciplinary communities. The participants' increased awareness of Move 1, Move 2, and Move 3 suggests that explicit genre instruction enabled them to recognize these expectations more consciously. Instead of writing introductions as collections of unrelated information, students learned to organize ideas strategically by first establishing the research territory, then identifying a niche, and finally presenting their own study as a logical response to an identified gap.

The present findings also resonate with (Hyland, 2004) argument that academic writing is fundamentally a social practice rather than an isolated linguistic activity. Hyland emphasizes that academic texts are constructed through interaction between



writers and disciplinary communities, where rhetorical conventions function as shared resources for creating meaning. The students in this study demonstrated precisely this emerging understanding. Their interview responses revealed that they increasingly viewed introductions as conversations with previous researchers rather than simply as descriptive summaries of literature. This shift indicates an important development in rhetorical awareness because novice writers often focus primarily on transmitting information, whereas experienced academic writers aim to position their research within ongoing scholarly dialogues.

Similarly, the findings are consistent with (Bhatia, V. K., 1993) theory of genre analysis, which proposes that genres provide conventionalized rhetorical structures that facilitate communication within professional and academic communities. From this perspective, the CARS model serves not as a rigid writing formula but as an analytical framework that helps novice writers understand how expert writers accomplish specific communicative purposes. Participants' ability to identify rhetorical moves in published articles demonstrates that they were beginning to internalize disciplinary conventions rather than merely memorizing organizational patterns. Such awareness represents an essential step toward independent academic writing because writers who understand rhetorical purposes can make more informed decisions when adapting genre conventions to different contexts.

The results also align with (Johns, 2008) concept of genre awareness as a form of disciplinary literacy. Johns argues that becoming academically literate requires learners to understand not only language forms but also the social and rhetorical expectations embedded within disciplinary texts. The students' reflections suggest that learning the CARS model enabled them to "read like writers," noticing how published researchers construct arguments, justify investigations, and establish research significance. This analytical perspective extends beyond writing itself, fostering critical reading skills that are equally important for academic success. Consequently, genre instruction appears to bridge reading, writing, and critical thinking rather than function as an isolated instructional technique.

Importantly, the findings suggest that genre awareness develops through explicit instruction rather than passive exposure to academic texts alone. Although participants had read numerous journal articles, many acknowledged that they had never consciously recognized the rhetorical functions of different sections of the introduction. This observation reinforces the pedagogical value of explicit genre instruction, particularly for EFL learners who may lack opportunities to acquire disciplinary conventions implicitly. Making rhetorical structures visible enables students to engage more critically with academic texts and supports their gradual participation in scholarly discourse communities.

Overall, these findings show that the CARS model contributes significantly to the development of genre awareness by revealing the communicative logic underlying research article introductions. Rather than teaching students *what* to write, the model helps them understand *why* academic texts are organized in particular ways, thereby promoting deeper disciplinary literacy and rhetorical competence.

2. CARS as a Scaffold for Academic Writing

Another significant finding concerns the CARS model's role as a pedagogical scaffold that supported students' confidence during the academic writing process. Participants consistently reported that explicit instruction reduced uncertainty, improved planning, and enabled them to approach writing more systematically. These findings suggest that the CARS framework's value extends beyond structural organization; it also supports the cognitive processes involved in composing complex academic texts.

The increased confidence reported by participants can be interpreted through (Lev Vygotsky, 1978) sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Although the CARS model is not a scaffold in the traditional sense, explicit instruction turned it into a mediating tool that supported learners as they developed higher levels of academic writing competence. Through lecturer guidance, classroom modeling, collaborative discussions, and repeated practice, students gradually internalized the rhetorical principles represented by the three moves. As competence increased, dependence on teacher assistance appeared to decrease, indicating the gradual transfer of responsibility from instructor to learner.

The interview data illustrate this process clearly. Students frequently described the CARS model as providing "a roadmap" or "a guide" that enabled them to organize ideas before drafting. These comments suggest the framework functioned as a cognitive organizer, reducing uncertainty by making complex writing tasks more manageable. Rather than confronting the introduction as an overwhelming task, participants divided it into smaller rhetorical objectives, each with a clearly defined communicative purpose. This staged approach appears to have reduced cognitive overload while simultaneously increasing learners' sense of control over the writing process.

These findings support (Wingate, 2012) argument that academic writing instruction should explicitly integrate disciplinary conventions rather than assuming that students will acquire them independently. Wingate contends that successful writing instruction requires making tacit academic expectations explicit so that learners understand not only textual structures but also the reasoning behind them. The present study provides empirical support for this position. Participants consistently reported greater confidence because they understood what was expected in each section of the introduction rather than attempting to imitate published texts without recognizing their rhetorical logic.

The findings also correspond with (Hyland & Jiang, 2019) perspective that writing development involves acquiring both rhetorical knowledge and metacognitive awareness. Participants did not simply learn where to place information; they became increasingly aware of their own writing decisions. Reflection journals revealed that students consciously evaluated whether each paragraph fulfilled its rhetorical purpose, demonstrating the emergence of self-monitoring behaviors characteristic of more experienced writers. This increased metacognitive awareness likely reduced writing anxiety because students had clearer criteria for planning, drafting, and revising their work.

Furthermore, the results align with (Yasuda, 2015) research demonstrating that genre-based pedagogy facilitates writing development by encouraging learners to analyze authentic texts, reflect on rhetorical choices, and gradually internalize genre



conventions. Similar to Yasuda's findings, participants in the present study reported that repeated analysis of published journal articles helped them recognize patterns that later informed their own writing. The interaction between explicit instruction and authentic textual analysis appears to have strengthened students' understanding of disciplinary expectations while promoting greater confidence in applying those expectations independently.

An additional explanation for the observed increase in confidence may be reduced cognitive load. Academic writing requires writers to manage multiple demands simultaneously, including content generation, organization, language accuracy, citation practices, and rhetorical positioning. For novice EFL writers, these concurrent demands can easily overwhelm working memory. By providing an explicit organizational framework, the CARS model appears to reduce the number of rhetorical decisions students must make during drafting. Instead of determining organizational structure independently, learners can allocate greater cognitive resources to developing ideas, evaluating evidence, and refining arguments. Consequently, the framework functions not only as an organizational guide but also as a mechanism for supporting more efficient cognitive processing during writing.

Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that scaffolding does not eliminate all writing difficulties. Students remained uncertain when performing tasks that required sophisticated critical evaluation, particularly identifying research gaps and establishing the significance of their studies. This suggests that while explicit genre instruction effectively supports procedural aspects of writing, it cannot substitute for broader academic literacy skills developed through sustained engagement with disciplinary knowledge and critical reading practices.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the CARS model functions as an effective pedagogical scaffold by promoting explicit understanding, reducing uncertainty, encouraging metacognitive reflection, and enabling students to approach academic writing with greater confidence. These outcomes highlight the importance of combining genre instruction with guided practice and reflective learning in EFL academic writing classrooms.

3. Does CARS Support or Limit Creativity?

An enduring debate in genre-based pedagogy concerns whether explicit instructional frameworks such as the CARS model encourage effective academic communication or inadvertently constrain writers' creativity. The findings of the present study suggest a more nuanced perspective. Although participants acknowledged relying heavily on the CARS framework during the early stages of learning, they generally perceived it as a supportive guide rather than a restrictive template. Their experiences indicate that genre knowledge can promote creativity by providing rhetorical direction while leaving considerable flexibility in content development and argumentation.

The positive perceptions expressed by participants support (Swales, 1990) assertion that genres should be understood as dynamic rhetorical resources rather than fixed textual formulas. The CARS model identifies common communicative purposes found in research article introductions, yet it does not

prescribe identical linguistic expressions or paragraph structures. Students in the present study demonstrated awareness that different studies could realize the three moves in diverse ways depending on disciplinary contexts, research objectives, and target audiences. Consequently, the framework encouraged rhetorical awareness instead of mechanical imitation.

This interpretation is consistent with (Hyland, 2007) argument that genre pedagogy empowers rather than constrains writers because it makes disciplinary expectations transparent. Without explicit knowledge of genre conventions, novice writers often feel uncertain about what constitutes acceptable academic writing. By understanding these conventions, writers gain greater freedom to make informed rhetorical choices rather than relying on trial and error. Participants' descriptions of the CARS model as "a roadmap" illustrate this point well: a roadmap provides direction but does not dictate every decision taken during the journey.

The findings likewise correspond with (Tardy, C. M., 2009) perspective that genre knowledge develops progressively through participation in disciplinary communities. According to Tardy, novice writers initially depend more heavily on explicit genre frameworks, but as expertise increases, they can adapt conventions more flexibly to suit particular rhetorical situations. The participants in the present study appeared to occupy this developmental stage. While they frequently referred to the CARS model during drafting, interview data suggest that they were beginning to understand the underlying purposes of each move rather than merely reproducing structural patterns.

However, the findings also reveal potential limitations associated with explicit genre instruction. Several students admitted that they occasionally became overly concerned with placing information into the "correct" move, which sometimes diverted attention from developing richer arguments or exploring alternative rhetorical possibilities. Such tendencies reflect concerns raised by (Cheng, 2008), who warns that inexperienced learners may interpret genre models as rigid templates if instructional emphasis focuses primarily on structural conformity. Overdependence on prescribed frameworks may encourage mechanical organization, particularly when students prioritize completing rhetorical moves over engaging critically with disciplinary content.

Nevertheless, the present findings suggest that these risks can be mitigated through appropriate pedagogy. Participants who analyzed multiple authentic journal articles and discussed variations across texts demonstrated greater flexibility in applying the CARS framework than those who initially viewed it as a checklist. This observation reinforces the view that creativity in academic writing is not synonymous with abandoning conventions but with making informed rhetorical choices within them. In other words, genre conventions function as enabling constraints: they provide a shared communicative foundation while allowing writers to construct original arguments, adopt distinctive voices, and respond to the specific expectations of their disciplinary communities.

Accordingly, the findings support the argument that the CARS model does not inherently restrict creativity. Instead, when implemented through reflective, inquiry-oriented instruction, it equips novice EFL writers with the rhetorical awareness necessary to participate more confidently and creatively in academic discourse. Rather than limiting originality, genre knowledge appears to create the

conditions for meaningful academic creativity through informed, purposeful, and context-sensitive writing.

4. Pedagogical and Cognitive Factors

The findings indicate that the effectiveness of Swales' CARS Model is shaped by the interaction between pedagogical support and learners' cognitive readiness. Although explicit genre instruction significantly improved participants' understanding of research article introductions and increased their confidence in academic writing, the persistent challenges associated with establishing a research niche suggest that successful implementation of the CARS framework depends on more than simply introducing its three rhetorical moves. Instead, students' development is shaped by instructional practices that support genre learning and the higher-order cognitive abilities needed to engage critically with academic literature.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study demonstrates the importance of explicit genre instruction in making disciplinary conventions accessible to novice EFL writers. Participants repeatedly emphasized that systematic explanations of the rhetorical purposes of Move 1, Move 2, and Move 3 enabled them to understand research article introductions in ways they had not previously experienced. This finding reinforces the central premise of genre-based pedagogy that academic writing conventions should be taught explicitly rather than assumed to be acquired implicitly through exposure to texts. As (Hyland & Jiang, 2019) argues, effective writing instruction requires teachers to reveal the hidden expectations of academic discourse so that learners can participate more confidently in disciplinary communication. By explicitly explaining the communicative purposes behind each rhetorical move, the instructor transformed what had previously seemed like abstract writing conventions into meaningful, achievable learning objectives.

Another important pedagogical factor the study identified was the role of instructor feedback. Interview and observation data suggested that students developed greater confidence when feedback focused not only on grammatical accuracy but also on rhetorical effectiveness. Rather than merely correcting language errors, the instructor guided students to consider whether each paragraph fulfilled its intended communicative purpose, whether the literature review adequately established a research territory, and whether the identified gap convincingly justified the proposed study. Such feedback encouraged students to think beyond surface-level linguistic correctness and to evaluate their writing from the perspective of academic readers. This observation supports genre-based approaches that conceptualize feedback as a process of developing rhetorical competence rather than simply improving language accuracy.

The findings also highlight the pedagogical value of classroom modeling through authentic research articles. During classroom activities, students analyzed published introductions to identify rhetorical moves and discuss how experienced researchers established research significance. This process enabled learners to observe how theoretical concepts were realized in authentic disciplinary writing. Such exposure appears to have reduced the distance between instructional explanations and actual academic practice, allowing students to recognize that the CARS model represents common rhetorical patterns rather than inflexible writing

formulas. Similar observations have been reported in genre-based writing research, which emphasizes that authentic textual models help learners internalize disciplinary conventions by demonstrating how rhetorical purposes are accomplished in real communicative contexts.

Peer discussion likewise emerged as an important instructional strategy. Observation notes indicated that collaborative move-analysis activities encouraged students to negotiate interpretations, compare rhetorical choices, and justify their analyses using evidence from the texts. These interactions appeared to promote deeper engagement with genre conventions than individual reading alone. Explaining rhetorical decisions to classmates required participants to articulate their understanding explicitly, thereby strengthening their conceptual knowledge of academic writing. Furthermore, peer discussions exposed students to alternative interpretations of research article introductions, reinforcing the idea that rhetorical choices often involve flexibility rather than rigid adherence to fixed templates.

Despite these pedagogical supports, the findings reveal that certain aspects of academic writing remain fundamentally cognitive in nature. Participants consistently identified Move 2, the most demanding component of the writing process. Their difficulties extended beyond language proficiency and reflected challenges associated with critical thinking, literature evaluation, synthesis of multiple sources, and rhetorical decision-making. These findings suggest that explicit genre instruction can clarify *what* writers are expected to accomplish but cannot fully develop the analytical abilities required to accomplish those expectations.

The difficulty of identifying research gaps illustrates this distinction particularly well. Many participants reported uncertainty when attempting to determine whether previous studies had adequately addressed a particular issue or whether their own study offered a genuinely meaningful contribution. Such judgments require writers to synthesize multiple sources, compare findings across studies, recognize unresolved issues, and evaluate the significance of competing perspectives. These are complex intellectual processes that extend beyond knowledge of rhetorical structure alone.

This observation is consistent with (Swales, 1990) explanation that Move 2 represents the most rhetorically sophisticated stage of the introduction because it requires writers to position themselves within an ongoing scholarly conversation. Successfully establishing a niche demands not only familiarity with existing literature but also the confidence to challenge, extend, or refine previous knowledge. For novice EFL writers, such positioning can be particularly intimidating because they often perceive published scholars as unquestionable authorities. The hesitation expressed by participants when critiquing previous studies therefore reflects both cognitive and affective dimensions of academic writing.

Similarly, (Flowerdew, 2000) argues that successful academic writing requires advanced disciplinary literacy, including the ability to evaluate evidence critically, synthesize diverse perspectives, and construct persuasive scholarly arguments. The present findings strongly support this perspective. Although participants understood the structural function of Move 2 after receiving explicit instruction, many still struggled to implement it effectively because they lacked experience in critical engagement with research literature. Their difficulties therefore appear to

originate not from inadequate understanding of the CARS framework but from limited opportunities to develop the analytical reading practices upon which effective academic writing depends.

Taken together, these findings suggest that genre instruction and critical thinking should not be viewed as separate components of academic writing pedagogy. Instead, they should be integrated through instructional activities that encourage students to analyze published studies critically, compare competing arguments, evaluate methodological limitations, and identify opportunities for future research. Such integration would enable learners not only to recognize rhetorical moves but also to understand the intellectual reasoning that underpins them.

5. Implications for EFL Academic Writing Instruction

The findings of this study have several important implications for the teaching of academic writing in EFL higher education contexts. First, the overwhelmingly positive perceptions reported by participants suggest that explicit genre instruction should become an integral component of Academic Writing courses. Rather than expecting students to infer rhetorical conventions independently through repeated exposure to journal articles, instructors should explicitly teach the communicative purposes of different sections of research articles and demonstrate how these purposes contribute to effective scholarly communication. Making disciplinary expectations transparent reduces uncertainty and supports learners in developing both rhetorical awareness and academic confidence.

Second, the findings indicate that authentic research articles should be incorporated systematically into writing instruction. Participants benefited considerably from analyzing published introductions because these activities enabled them to observe how experienced scholars realized the three CARS moves in authentic disciplinary contexts. However, exposure to authentic texts alone is insufficient. Students require guided analytical tasks that direct attention to rhetorical organization, linguistic choices, and argumentative strategies. Activities such as move identification, comparative genre analysis, and collaborative discussions can help learners recognize variations in genre realization across different studies while reinforcing the underlying communicative purposes shared by successful academic writing.

Third, greater instructional emphasis should be placed on teaching students how to establish research gaps. Although participants demonstrated substantial improvement in understanding the overall structure of research article introductions, identifying and justifying a research niche remained the most persistent challenge. Consequently, academic writing courses should include explicit instruction in critical literature reading, comparative analysis of previous studies, synthesis of research findings, and evaluation of methodological limitations. Rather than presenting research gaps as isolated statements to be inserted into introductions, instructors should help students understand that gap identification emerges through careful engagement with existing scholarly conversations.

Another pedagogical implication concerns the importance of reflective learning. Students' reflection journals provided valuable opportunities for them to evaluate their own writing processes, identify recurring difficulties, and monitor their developing understanding of genre conventions. Reflection encourages metacognitive awareness, enabling learners to move beyond completing writing tasks toward understanding how and why particular rhetorical choices are effective. Incorporating structured reflective activities throughout writing courses may therefore strengthen students' ability to regulate their own learning and gradually become more independent academic writers.

The findings also support combining explicit genre instruction with peer feedback. Classroom observations indicated that collaborative discussions enabled students to articulate rhetorical reasoning, negotiate interpretations, and evaluate alternative approaches to constructing introductions. Peer review sessions that focus specifically on rhetorical moves, research gap identification, and argument development may therefore complement instructor feedback by encouraging students to consider academic writing from both writer and reader perspectives. Such collaborative practices are particularly valuable in EFL contexts because they promote dialogue about disciplinary conventions while reducing learners' dependence on teacher authority.

More broadly, the study suggests that the CARS model should not be introduced as a one-time instructional technique but rather integrated throughout the Academic Writing curriculum. Genre awareness develops gradually through repeated engagement with authentic texts, sustained writing practice, and continuous reflection. Students require multiple opportunities to analyze published research, apply rhetorical principles in their own writing, receive constructive feedback, and revise their work in response to disciplinary expectations. A longitudinal approach to genre instruction is therefore more likely to promote durable academic writing competence than isolated instructional sessions.

Finally, the findings imply that effective academic writing instruction should balance rhetorical knowledge with critical literacy development. While the CARS model successfully provides a framework for organizing introductions, genuine participation in scholarly discourse also requires students to evaluate evidence critically, synthesize competing perspectives, and formulate original research contributions. Accordingly, future EFL writing curricula should integrate genre analysis with activities that cultivate analytical reading, argument evaluation, and disciplinary inquiry, thereby supporting the simultaneous development of rhetorical competence and higher-order thinking skills.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of research on genre-based pedagogy by demonstrating how explicit instruction using Swales' CARS Model shapes EFL learners' perceptions of academic writing. Rather than functioning merely as an organizational framework, the CARS model enabled students to develop a deeper understanding of the rhetorical purposes underlying research article introductions, thereby transforming their perception of academic writing from a language-focused activity into a purposeful act of scholarly communication. The findings suggest that explicit genre instruction not only facilitates students' comprehension of the three rhetorical moves but also enhances their confidence in planning and composing research article introductions. At the same time, the study

reveals that the ability to establish a research niche remains a cognitively demanding task, indicating that successful academic writing requires more than structural knowledge alone. Consequently, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how genre awareness, writing confidence, and higher-order thinking interact in the development of EFL academic writing competence.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce genre theory by supporting Swales' conceptualization of research article introductions as rhetorical structures designed to accomplish specific communicative purposes within disciplinary discourse communities. The study extends previous scholarship by illustrating that explicit instruction based on the CARS framework promotes not only procedural knowledge of rhetorical moves but also the development of genre awareness and metacognitive understanding among novice EFL writers. In line with the perspectives of Hyland, Bhatia, Johns, and Tardy, the findings suggest that genre knowledge should be viewed as an essential component of disciplinary literacy, enabling students to recognize, interpret, and participate in the communicative practices of academic communities. Moreover, the study highlights that genre-based pedagogy functions most effectively when it is integrated with instructional practices that cultivate critical reading, reflective learning, and rhetorical decision-making rather than emphasizing structural conformity alone.

The findings also carry important practical implications for EFL academic writing instruction. First, explicit genre instruction should become an integral component of Academic Writing courses rather than being introduced as an isolated lesson or supplementary activity. Lecturers should systematically teach the rhetorical purposes of each CARS move while guiding students to analyze authentic research articles, identify rhetorical patterns, and evaluate how experienced scholars construct research significance. In addition, instruction should incorporate iterative feedback, reflective writing, classroom modeling, and peer discussion to strengthen students' genre awareness and metacognitive development. Particular attention should be devoted to helping students identify research gaps, synthesize previous studies, and formulate persuasive scholarly arguments, as these higher-order skills were identified as the greatest challenges encountered by participants. Curriculum developers may therefore consider embedding genre analysis and critical literacy activities throughout Academic Writing programs to better prepare students for participation in academic discourse communities.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that Swales' CARS Model is far more than a structural template for organizing research article introductions. When implemented through explicit instruction, authentic genre analysis, reflective practice, and constructive feedback, the model functions as a powerful pedagogical tool that develops rhetorical awareness, strengthens academic confidence, and supports EFL learners' participation in disciplinary discourse communities. However, the study also underscores that mastery of academic writing ultimately depends on the integration of genre knowledge with critical thinking, disciplinary literacy, and higher-order cognitive skills. Therefore, the greatest educational value of the CARS model lies not simply in teaching students how to organize texts, but in enabling them to understand the rhetorical purposes of academic communication

and to participate more effectively as emerging members of the international scholarly community.

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