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Writing as developmental learning in L2 contexts: An interpretive case study using constructivist and register theory

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Background: Writing development in higher education requires both linguistic control and cognitive engagement. Register theory and constructivist pedagogy provide a framework for evaluating how students use language to persuade, reason, and reflect ethically in academic contexts.

Objectives: To investigate how genre-based assessment and constructivist reflection in argumentative writing enhance developmental learning and rhetorical awareness among second-language university students.

Method: Twenty-seven essays and 23 reflections were analysed. Essays were scored using register dimensions of field, tenor, and mode, while reflections were thematically coded for indicators of developmental learning.

Results: Students wrote argumentative essays on artificial intelligence in education. Their control of tenor and mode was evident in persuasive organisation, while field scores reflected moderate lexical precision shaped by engagement with the theme. Reflections revealed metacognitive growth and ethical awareness, showing that students were both writing to learn and learning to write.

Conclusion: Students demonstrated consistent control of tenor and mode, moderate lexical precision, and growth in metacognitive and ethical awareness. The combined rubric and thematic coding offered a multidimensional view of writing performance and progression.

Contribution: The study responds to calls for integrated register- and genre-based approaches, proposing a methodology that connects text-based features of content knowledge with metacognition, thereby contributing new insights to applied linguistics on writing as learning.

Keywords: argumentative writing; register theory; constructivist reflection; genre mastery; academic literacies.

Introduction

Background

Academic writing appears in many contexts, not only as a communication skill but also as a cognitive and developmental activity through which students shape their understanding of disciplinary knowledge and identity (Hyland 2004; Lea & Street 1998). In higher education, academic writing courses include argumentative essay writing as a key task to enhance students' critical and persuasive skills, serving as important contexts in which genre conventions, rhetorical awareness, and epistemic engagement are demonstrated. However, the teaching approach to writing often favours a product-oriented focus that emphasises what is written rather than how students learn through writing (Bazerman et al. 2005). This approach can restrict students' opportunities to develop metacognitive awareness and genre-specific strategies, highlighting the need for methods that combine process-based learning with disciplinary writing practices (Alawad 2026).

Recent research indicates that more integrated approaches combining linguistics and learning should be developed in writing pedagogy. Building on the foundational work of Halliday and Hasan (1985), later expanded by Martin and Rose (2008), there are some theories and models, specifically systemic functional linguistics theory (SFL), register theory, and related pedagogical models, offering a framework for understanding how students use language to navigate academic genres by adjusting for field (content), tenor (stance and audience), and mode (textual arrangement). In a relevant context, Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996) argue that student writing

practices are interconnectedly influenced by reflection, audience awareness, and moral reasoning. Together, these frameworks serve as valuable tools for exploring writing as a form of learning rather than just performance.

There are important topics in the writing process that should not be overlooked: the roles of feedback, peer interaction, and prewriting strategies. Many recent studies on academic writing have addressed these areas because of their significant role in the writing process. In addition, Alawad (2025) examined adaptive rubrics integrated with artificial intelligence (AI)-based feedback, showing that students who received rubric-aligned AI feedback achieved greater improvements in writing performance and reported clearer, more useful guidance than those who received traditional feedback. These findings suggest that such integration provides more reliable evaluations, enhances assessment retention, and supports sustainable learning. Furthermore, another study by Alawad and Mujumdar (2025) addressing peer feedback showed that, despite initial reluctance, students actively revised their drafts based on peer input. Similarly, Alawad, Ahmed and Nassim (2025) demonstrated that panel discussions during the prewriting stage improved students' referencing skills alongside the quality of their arguments, emphasising the pedagogical value of dialogic engagement. These findings underscore the importance of instructional design, combined with textual and reflective analysis, in enhancing understanding of how students construct meaning through writing.

Despite this rich theoretical foundation, pragmatic research often treats register dimensions and constructivist indicators as separate entities. Genre-based writing studies tend to focus more on linguistic features than on students' engagement with tasks in a metacognitive manner (Tardy 2009). In contrast, constructivist research might prioritise perception and reflection over the analysis of texts as artifacts (Moon 2004). Additionally, many of these studies exhibit a bias towards statistical generalisation and struggle to account for how students perform effectively within the specific genres of authentic academic contexts (Leki 2007). This limitation highlights the need for research approaches that foreground genre-sensitive analysis and contextualised learning practices, ensuring that writing is examined not only as a measurable outcome but also as a situated process of meaning making.

Problem statement

An applied linguistics gap remains in understanding how students demonstrate writing proficiency (as a facet of sustainable development) in a specific academic genre, such as argumentative essays in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where students often meet rubric criteria for grammar and vocabulary but struggle to sustain coherent argumentation and adhere to disciplinary conventions. Very few relevant previous studies have attempted to integrate register theory with constructivist learning in ways that address both language control and cognitive advancement. For example, Dewi (2025) reports that project-based learning, informed by constructivist principles, requires careful attention to classroom discourse, in which register choices shape how students negotiate meaning and demonstrate cognitive growth. Similarly, Zajda (2021) emphasises that effective learning environments depend on constructivist pedagogy that is sensitive to language use, noting that register variation influences both learner autonomy and the regulation of classroom interaction. In a related vein, Rai (2025) highlights that 21st-century constructivist classrooms demand explicit strategies for managing linguistic registers, arguing that these strategies are central to fostering critical thinking and higher-order cognitive skills. These studies illustrate the limited but growing recognition that register theory can serve as a bridge between language control and constructivist models of cognitive advancement.

Significance and contribution of the study

The current study responds to the call for integrated register-based and genre-based approaches that draw on students' writing from both register-theoretic and constructivist perspectives. It advances applied linguistics in the areas of writing as a learning process and employs a research methodology that links text-based features of content knowledge with metacognitive processes. By analysing final course submissions and embedded reflections, the study provides a fundamental understanding of how students write and reflect on their actions during pen-based institutional writing tasks. This analysis not only uncovers patterns of language control and self-awareness but also demonstrates how institutional writing practices influence students' ability to connect cognitive development with academic accountability.

Purpose and objectives

The present study aims to understand how undergraduate students demonstrate writing mastery in a required academic writing course, with a focus on how they sustain learning through reflective practice and text-based performance. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Analyse the register dimensions (field, tenor, and mode) in undergraduate argumentative texts to assess genre-specific linguistic control.
- Review student reflections for signs of constructivist developmental learning.
- Map linguistic and cognitive attributes to performance criteria in the rubric using a coding matrix.
- Combine results from students' essays and reflective writing to spot trends in genre skills and rhetorical development.

Hypotheses

Grounded in SFL and constructivist theory, the study builds on previous research that considers writing both a social practice and a cognitive process. Using this theoretical framework and the reviewed literature, the study hypothesises that:

H1: Students demonstrate genre awareness and linguistic control by applying register dimensions that align with rubric criteria.

H2: Student reflections demonstrate constructivist indicators like rhetorical adaptation, audience awareness, and ethical reasoning.

Literature review

The increasing use of a genre-based approach to academic writing has established a strong pedagogical framework that highlights language as a resource shaped by function and context. This perspective directly supports the first goal of this study by situating genre pedagogy within a functional-linguistic analysis. Drawing on SFL, this model conceptualises language as a semiotic tool for meaning making that is 'socio-semiotically motivated' (Byram 2004; Hyland 2002). This review explores how genre-based pedagogy, especially when guided by register theory and constructivist learning principles, encourages sustainable writing development, as shown in previous research (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995; Freedman & Medway 1994; Hyland 2004; Martin & Rose 2008; Zajda 2021). It further aims to identify overlaps in ideas, pedagogical challenges, and empirical gaps that justify the current focus on writing as both linguistic performance and cognitive reflection. As illustrated in Figure 1, these three elements – genre-based pedagogy, register theory, and constructivist learning – combine to create a theoretical framework for writing development.

Figure 1 highlights an underdeveloped intersection of these frameworks, suggesting potential for methodological integration.

Genre-based pedagogy and linguistic functionality

In SFL, genre is understood not only as a literary category but also as a pedagogical concept encompassing predictable patterns in academic and professional discourse, such as reports, essays, and research papers. This directly relates to Objective 1 of this study by showing how genre-based teaching helps student writing development through linguistic functions (Bhatia 1993; Hammond & Derewianka 2001; Swales 1990). However, genres are not rigid frameworks; rather, they are adaptable responses to specific communicative situations in which linguistic units serve rhetorical purposes (Hyon 1996). From a teaching standpoint, genre-based instruction clarifies the norms and structures of academic genres, enabling students to produce well-organised, meaningful texts (Hyland 2007). This method has proven successful in improving argumentative writing skills, especially in EFL contexts, where students often struggle with developing thesis statements, maintaining logical coherence, and understanding audience (Amogne 2013; Kongpetch 2006; Luu 2011; Promwinai 2010; Trinh & Nguyen 2014). Still, many learners from East Asia continue to encounter difficulties mastering the rhetorical and linguistic tools of persuasive genres (Arsyad 1999; Choi 1988; Hounhanou 2018; Thompson 2001). As illustrated in Figure 1, this suggests that genre instruction should be supplemented through consideration of cognitive and contextual factors in writing, drawing on register theory and constructivist learning.

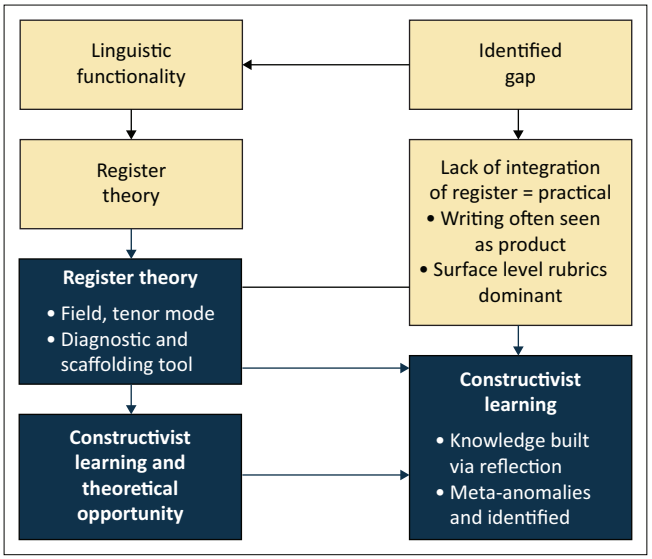


FIGURE 1: Theoretical synthesis of genre, register, and constructivist learning, highlighting meta-anomalies.

The diagnostic and scaffolding role of register theory

Recent research has explored how register theory, in conjunction with genre pedagogy, can address persistent challenges in writing pedagogy. This combination advances the study's second objective by offering diagnostic and scaffolding tools to evaluate how linguistic functionality contributes to clarity, cohesion, and appropriateness in student texts.

Register – defined by field (subject matter), tenor (social relations), and mode (channel of communication) – has been used to explain how language choice changes from one context to another (Halliday & Hasan 1985; Martin & Rose 2008). By aligning student writing with these dimensions, instructors can evaluate linguistic precision, context sensitivity, and textual patterning. Gebhard et al. (2013) validate the flexible design of SFL-inspired pedagogy across curricular domains, suggesting that an SFL approach may scaffold academic literacy for all learners. Schulze (2015) further demonstrates that register theory offers a powerful diagnostic lens for analysing linguistic functionality, though it has not been widely adopted in classroom practice as an assessment framework. This reflects a broader challenge noted in assessment scholarship, where theoretical models often remain underutilised in everyday pedagogy (Ghaicha 2016; Hopfenbeck 2024; Machin et al. 2016). Only a small number of studies have implemented register dimensions as assessment principles for introducing analyses into student writing and integrating them with developmental criteria, such as metacognition or ethical reasoning, as shown in Figure 1.

Constructivist learning theory and writing as mental processes

Building on this linguistic framing, constructivist learning theory has played a crucial role in shaping writing pedagogy from both cognitive and developmental perspectives, thereby underpinning the study's objectives by situating genre instruction within learner-centred frameworks and linking linguistic functionality to the mental processes involved in text production. Based on the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, constructivism asserts that learners develop knowledge through experience, reflection, and social interaction (Givi et al. 2021; Von Glasersfeld 2004). In writing education, effective pedagogy involves participating in activities that foster metacognitive insight, ethical judgment, and rhetorical adaptation, key elements for long-term learning. Incorporating these constructivist principles into genre-based instruction offers teachers tools to evaluate both the completed work and the learning processes behind it. However, much research still treats genre and constructivism as separate, unrelated approaches (Christie 2017). There is limited empirical evidence on how genre-based writing tasks can be designed to promote reflective learning or how reflection can be recognised within the context of purpose and impact when developing literacy skills. As illustrated in Figure 1, the disconnect between detailed and broad views of language and thought emphasises the need for a model that links linguistic and cognitive perspectives.

Research gap and methodological contribution

Although more attention has been paid to the roles of genre-based and constructivist theories in writing development, few studies have attempted to conceptualise writing as a dual process involving both linguistic performance and cognitive change. Li et al. (2020) suggest promoting localised English for specific purposes genre pedagogy, but the connection between register control and reflective learning remains under-explored. Additionally, most existing rubrics emphasise surface features such as grammar and coherence while overlooking rhetorical awareness and ethical engagement. This study addresses that gap by analysing student writing and embedded reflection to track how students engage with and reflect on institutional genres. By adapting the institutional rubric criteria and constructivist-based indicators to the dimensions of the register, as shown in Figure 1, the model offers a framework for understanding how writing can be assessed as a form of learning that is both theoretically sound and pedagogically effective.

Research methods and design

Research design

This study adopts an interpretive, qualitative, text-based approach to conduct a case study exploring how college students achieve writing mastery in ways that enhance their learning. Drawing on register theory and constructivist learning theory, the study examines argumentative writing through linguistic patterns and cognitive markers of expertise. The research is conducted in a single instructional course context, analysing final submissions from a single point of instruction.

Participants

The sample consisted of a purposive selection of students enrolled in the ENG102 academic writing course in the Department of General Education at Modern College for Business and Science (MCBS), Oman, during the Fall 2025 semester. The targeted data set included 27 anonymised argumentative essays drawn from student submissions, which served as diagnostic tests. This sample size was intentionally chosen to provide genre-specific depth and detailed linguistic analysis. To enhance interpretive understanding, the researchers also gathered reflections from the students who submitted the diagnostic test. Of these, 23 students responded to the post-task prompt, while four did not. These reflections aim to offer valuable context for understanding rhetorical choices and the development of writing. Bazerman (2019), Hyland (2004), and Lea and Street (1998) emphasise that genre theory favours interpretive understanding over statistical generalisation, a perspective that influences how students construct meaning and demonstrate mastery within academic genres.

Instructional context and assessment timeline

The writing tasks were embedded within the course's genre-based syllabus, serving both teaching and research goals. By week 5, students had already completed introductory activities in genre awareness and practised shorter analytical responses, which prepared them for a more extended argumentative task. This timing ensured that the in-class diagnostic test aligned with the syllabus's gradual scaffolding of skills. In week 5, students wrote an argumentative essay for a monitored in-class setting, with clear instructions not to use external aids. After submitting their essays, students completed a structured set of reflection questions via a Google Form distributed through Microsoft Teams. The reflection questions were designed to elicit students' awareness of their learning process, thereby directly facilitating the study's constructivist dimension.

Data collection and instruments

The primary data consisted of argumentative essays and paired reflections, specifically designed for the present study to focus on the development of academic writing. Each essay was evaluated according to an institutional rubric that is consistent with the course learning goals and genre expectations. The full rubric is provided in Appendix Table 1-A1. Reflections were analysed thematically for metacognitive awareness, rhetorical reasoning, and ethical stance (constructivist indicators), which complement the register-based analysis of the essays.

Procedures and coding tools

A coding matrix systematically aligned institutional rubric dimensions to register voice elements and constructivist

cues, ensuring that both linguistic patterns and cognitive markers were captured in the analysis. Essays and reflections were manually coded employing thematic and linguistic analysis. Register dimensions were derived through close reading, while constructivist indicators were identified through reflection, prosody, and discourse. Ordinal scores were aggregated to inform qualitative results and to identify patterns of mastery across the argumentative mode.

Methodological justification

The methodological design was structured to reflect and support the study's objectives. Register dimensions were used in testing genre-based developmental aspects of EFL control (Objective 1), drawing on Halliday's SFL framework, which emphasises the analysis of field, tenor, and mode in relation to language development (Halliday 1978; Halliday & Hasan 1989). Constructivist variables were applied to explore the development processes in argumentative writing (Objective 2), consistent with perspectives that highlight the role of reflection and social interaction in knowledge construction (Dewey 1933; Piaget 1972; Vygotsky 1978). The matrix coding structure enabled the alignment of text features with rubric dimensions (Objective 3), following established practices in qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994; Saldaña 2016), and facilitated comparisons across genres to identify evidence of mastery patterns (Objective 4), as supported by research on genre-based pedagogy and developmental writing assessment (Hyland 2004; Martin & Rose 2008). This analytic progression is visually represented in Figure 2, which charts the incorporation of register theory and constructivist learning into the study design.

Analytic framework

Two complementary theoretical perspectives informed the analysis of student writing tasks and reflections, providing a dual lens for interpreting both product and process:

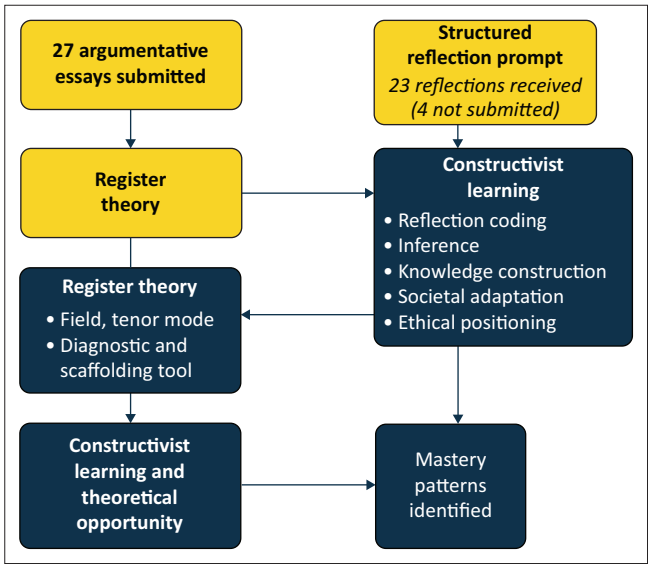


FIGURE 2: Methodological flow: Register and constructivist analysis of genre writing.

- **Register Theory:** The analysis of student essays drew on Halliday's SFL (Halliday 1978; Halliday & Hasan 1989), particularly the dimensions of field (topic and depth of content), tenor (position, formality, and interpersonal relationships), and mode (cohesion, coherence, and linguistic flow). These dimensions were operationalised as rubric criteria for evaluating language command and genre awareness, consistent with the register-based approach to discourse analysis.
- **Constructivist Learning Theory:** The reflection tasks were informed by constructivist perspectives on learning (Piaget 1972; Vygotsky 1978), which emphasise the active role of learners in constructing meaning through interaction and self-reflection. In this study, reflective thought and literary selection were examined as evidence of audience awareness and ethical reasoning. The evidence consisted of rhetorical accommodation, source integration, and self-reported learning strategies, aligning with constructivist principles of knowledge-building through social and cognitive engagement.

The integration of these two perspectives is visually represented in Figure 2, which maps the methodological flow from argumentative essays and structured reflections through register analysis and constructivist coding to the identification of mastery patterns.

Ethical considerations

Ethical safeguards were central to the study design. All student identities were de-identified before analysis to ensure confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that their written responses and reflections would be used solely for research purposes and would not affect their coursework. Consent was obtained via a brief clause in the reflection form that explained the study and outlined data protection measures. Also, ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Modern College of Business and Science Research Ethics and Intellectual Property Committee. The ethical clearance number is RE/2025/042.

Findings

This section provides a more detailed analysis of student writing in the argumentative essay genre from register-theoretical and constructivist perspectives. The analysis is organised into two phases, each aligned with a specific hypothesis from the study's theoretical framework and research objectives. Scores from the rubric are used to assess mastery levels (quantitative), while writing samples are coded for register features (qualitative). Students' reflections are then thematically analysed for indicators of developmental learning, guided by constructivist markers.

Phase 1: Genre awareness and linguistic control

H1: Students show genre awareness and linguistic control through register dimensions aligned with rubric criteria.

Quantitative and qualitative analyses: Argumentative essays

Quantitative register scoring: Based on the rubric, the analysis of 27 student essays revealed patterns across all three dimensions of register: field, tenor, and mode (see Table 1). These results provide numerical evidence of both genre awareness and linguistic control, aligning with Hypothesis 1.

Dimension averages: To support interpretation, average scores across the three register dimensions were calculated using the arithmetic mean formula (depicted in Equation 1):

$$> Average\ Score = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} S_i}{n} \quad \text{[Eqn 1]}$$

In this formula, S_i represents the rubric-based score for each essay on a given dimension, and n = 27 (the total number of essays). For example, the average score for field was obtained by summing all 27 field rubric scores and dividing by 27. The same procedure was applied to tenor and mode, as shown in Table 2.

Descriptive summary and register coding: Field scores ranged from 2 to 3 points out of a possible 5 points on the rubric, indicating moderate topic engagement and lexical skills. Most students could discuss familiar and relevant topics, mainly about the impact of AI on education. However, their reasoning depth and lexical accuracy varied. Seven essays (E01, E03, E05, E09, E13, E20, and E23) scored 3 in field because they used more specific topic vocabulary and demonstrated more complex reasoning. This included examples or consequences beyond surface-level claims. Conversely, essays rated 2 (e.g., E02, E04, E10, E12, E15, E19) depended largely on anecdotal or general observations with little lexical variety.

The tenor scores showed remarkable variety, ranging from 4 to 5, and provided strong evidence of students' rhetorical stance and audience awareness. Essays earning a score of 5 in tenor (E02, E03, E05, E09, E13, E20, E23, E26) demonstrated a purposeful tone with clear positions and subtle handling of opposing views. These students often showed an ability to respect counterarguments and articulate their claims effectively. Essays that received a 4 (eg., E01, E04, E06, E07, E08, E10, E11, E12, E14, E15, E16, E17, E18, E19, E21, E22, E24, E25, E27) expressed and maintained a position but sometimes lacked rhetorical control or audience awareness, especially on emotional or ethical issues.

Mode scores were strong, with most students receiving 4 or 5 on the five-point rubric scale. These scores indicate that their papers were generally well structured, cohesive, and aligned with genre-appropriate conventions. Papers with a score of 5 (eg., E03, E09, E23) demonstrated apparent paragraph unity, logical order, and appropriate transitions. These essays included well-organised thesis statements and body paragraphs, along with a conclusion that effectively restated the argument. Essays that received a score of 4 (eg., E01, E02, E04, E05, E06, E08, E10, E11, E13, E14, E16, E17, E18, E20, E21, E24, E26, and E27) were adequately organised but varied in strength across specific areas. Body paragraphs were sometimes underdeveloped or lack internal structure, and cohesion between paragraphs was weakened by repetitive language or concepts not fully integrated into an authentic argumentive flow. Essays that received a score of 3 (eg., E07, E12, E15, E19, E22, E25) demonstrated a developing organisational structure but varied in coherence. They occasionally exhibited shifts in focus, and body paragraphs were often underdeveloped or lacked genre-specific features. These limitations reduced the overall argumentative clarity and weakened alignment with rubric expectations.

Qualitative results: Register dimensions

Field: Field was coded by identifying whether essays addressed the assigned topic (AI in education) and the depth of lexical engagement. Together, these measures captured topic relevance and vocabulary use as indicators of genre awareness.

Analysis showed that many essays relied primarily on personal experience or common knowledge. In contrast, stronger essays incorporated examples, applications, implications, or ethical arguments. Lexical precision also fluctuated: essays that scored higher of field employed discipline-specific terms such as *academic integrity*, *critical thinking*, or *plagiarism*; whereas lower-scoring texts relied on vague phrases such as 'bad stuff' or 'easy way out'.

Tenor: Essays demonstrated sensitivity to readers' expectations, especially in argumentative or ethically based essays that took charged stances. Some made balanced, assertive claims using polite language to clarify that their correctness was not intended to dominate the reader but to invite engagement. Statements such as 'some people believe …' (Student E2, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025) or 'I understand others may disagree' (Student E14, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025) were used to frame their positions. Essays with higher tenor scores showed less variation in rhetorical positioning and avoided emotional and dismissive language.

Mode: As prompted, most essay samples followed a specific argumentative structure: a thesis, two body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Stronger essays included transitions between paragraphs (eg., 'on the other hand', 'in conclusion') to guide the reader and maintain each paragraph's focus. Essays with lower scores in mode often lacked topic sentences or abruptly switched ideas without using logical, smooth transitions.

The findings summarised in Table 1 and Table 2, supported by descriptions of qualitative register coding, confirm Hypothesis 1: Students demonstrate genre awareness and linguistic control through register dimensions aligned with rubric criteria. The most prominent are in tenor (mean = 4.33) and mode (mean = 3.96), indicating a unified rhetorical stance

TABLE 1: Register-based scores for argumentative essays (field, tenor, mode).

Participant identifier	F	T	M	Total
E01	3	4	4	11
E04	2	4	4	10
E07	2	4	3	9
E10	2	4	4	10
E13	3	5	4	12
E16	3	4	4	11
E19	2	4	3	9
E22	2	4	3	9
E25	2	4	3	9
E02	2	5	4	11
E05	3	5	4	12
E08	3	4	4	11
E11	3	4	4	11
E14	3	4	4	11
E17	3	4	4	11
E20	3	5	4	12
E23	3	5	5	13
E26	3	5	4	12
E03	3	5	5	13
E06	3	4	4	11
E09	3	5	5	13
E12	2	4	3	9
E15	2	4	3	9
E18	3	4	4	11
E21	3	4	4	11
E24	3	4	4	11
E27	3	4	4	11

E, essay; F, field; M, mode; T, tenor.

TABLE 2: Average scores across register dimensions.

Dimension	Average score (out of 5)
Field	2.63
Tenor	4.33
Mode	3.96

Note: Averages derived from rubric-based scores across 27 essays.

and structural cohesion in most essays. The scoring results reflected how well essays upheld audience conventions and genre expectations within sections, particularly in transitions, paragraph unity, and respect when addressing opponents, which emerged as key areas of variation. In contrast, the field dimension was lower, with an average of 2.63; this score indicates some moderate engagement with the assigned topic (artificial intelligence in education), but also shows variation in lexical accuracy. Some students demonstrated developing control by using topic-related vocabulary and adding layers of meaning to their discussion, while others relied on repetition or anecdotes, showing little lexical diversity. These findings show that argumentative writing fosters a sense of rhetorical complexity, structural discipline, and audience-aware reasoning, thereby supporting the emphasis on genre-based teaching. The register-based survey effectively captured both broad (level 1) organisational features and detailed (level 2 and level 3) rhetorical choices, providing a straightforward way to assess genre mastery and development.

Phase 2: Constructivist indicators in reflections

H2: Student reflections reveal constructivist indicators such as rhetorical adaptation, audience sensitivity, and ethical reasoning.

Qualitative analysis: Student reflections

Thematic analyses of 23 student reflections were conducted using the themes outlined in Table 3. These reflections accompanied the submitted argumentative essay and described three fundamental indicators in developmental learning. Reflections were not scored, but rather coded for indicators of presence of indicators. The analysis aimed to identify patterns of developmental learning that correlate with genre proficiency and control over registers.

Metacognitive awareness

Reflections demonstrated metacognitive awareness, with students commenting on their writing strategies, the challenges they encountered, and the progress they made in their writing development. Many noted that the essay task helped them realise they could generate ideas independently, organise their thoughts, and rely less on AI tools. Some selected excerpts and coding patterns are presented below to illustrate these indicators of developmental learning:

> 'I learned that I can actually think and have a lot of information, so I do not have to actually rely on using AI tools.' (Student E17, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

> 'Writing this essay taught me to understand how to build a clear and balanced argument and how to introduce a topic by explaining it.' (Student E04, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

> 'It helped me think deeply and state my actual opinion on this controversial argument, which I never had an actual stance on ever in the past.' (Student E22, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

> 'I learned how to organise my ideas clearly and support my opinion with examples.' (Student E09, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

> 'My writing improved because I practised making my sentences simple but still complete.' (Student E25, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

> 'This essay helped me to improve my thinking and keep a respectful argument where we share our opinion about a topic, and that it should not affect us personally or ethically.' (Student E13, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

Reflections suggested that students struggled with the cognitive demands of argumentative writing. Their statements reveal increased awareness of mode (structure, progression) and a new sense of how rhetorical choices affect what the writer is saying. Most students felt proud of their ability to write independently without relying on AI, indicating a shift toward self-study and self-management.

Rhetorical reasoning

Reflections indicated that students discussed how they organised their essays, selected examples, and balanced tone to maximise clarity and persuasion. Their reflections showed an understanding of rhetoric and genre. Selected excerpts demonstrating rhetorical reasoning, as noted by the respondents, are presented below:

TABLE 3: Constructivist indicators in student reflections: Definitions and coding cues.

Constructivist indicator	Definition	Representative coding cue
Metacognitive awareness	Reflection on writing choices, challenges, and the learning process	'I struggled with organizing my ideas …' (Student E24, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)
Rhetorical reasoning	Justification of tone, structure, and evidence use	'I chose this example because …' (Student E1, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)
Ethical stance	Sensitivity to audience, topic positioning, and ethical implications	'I avoided harsh language to stay respectful …' (Student E9, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I started with the strongest idea and then explained it.' (Student E16, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I decided the order based on what can make my writing more convincing.' (Student E5, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I organized my ideas by using a simple writing structure: introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion.' (Student E21, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I used examples from real life and personal experience because they are the most accurate ones.' (Student E11, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I used examples like ChatGPT and Grammarly, helping students by giving them ideas. … they are common and realistic situations.' (Student E19, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I focused on the most common idea that is usually discussed … noticing repeated ideas in different research papers helped me.' (Student E25, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

Reflections revealed that students explained the rhetorical moves they made, including how they organised ideas, selected evidence, and shaped their arguments. These observations corresponded toto the field dimension (content depth and lexical specificity) and supported the view that students' genre-based reasoning is emerging. Some students also made explicit reference to clarity and structure, thereby strengthening their control over the mode.

Ethical stance

Reflections revealed that many students emphasised the importance of fairness and respect when expressing their positions, especially when disagreeing with other viewpoints. They discussed their efforts to maintain a balanced tone, acknowledge counterarguments, and avoid using dismissive or harsh language. These reflections can be confirmed through a set of illustrative responses, including:

'I respected other people's views by explaining their ideas clearly without saying they were wrong.' (Student E7, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I had to make sure my reader, who perhaps might have a different opinion, does not feel opposed or disrespected.' (Student E12, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I tried to explain the points of view without detracting from any point of view and without being biased towards my own.' (Student E18, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I made sure to stay fair by mentioning both sides of the argument before giving my own opinion.' (Student E4, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

'I found some difficulty keeping my opinion fair because AI tools have many uses … but it will not make sense unless framed properly.' (Student E8, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025)

Reflections demonstrated rhetorical empathy and ethical reasoning; the tenor was carefully managed in practice. The students demonstrated awareness of their audience and worked hard to moderate tone, even when expressing strong opinions. This aligns somewhat with constructivist pedagogy, which emphasises dialogic learning, perspective-taking, and reasoned argument.

The reflections analysed at this stage, coded according to Table 3, demonstrate a complex interplay among rhetorical development, moral reasoning, and action planning. Metacognitive control over writing, rhetorical reasoning in framing arguments and evidence, and ethical positioning regarding tone and audience negotiation were evident in student performances. These indicators relate to the tenor and mode dimensions identified in the essays, indicating a reflection practice in genre acquisition. This finding is consistent with Hyland's (2004) emphasis on genre pedagogy as a means of fostering rhetorical awareness and audience accommodation, and with Vygotsky's (1978) view of reflection as a socially mediated process of learning. Moreover, the evidence of ethical positioning resonates with Dewey's (1933) notion of reflective thinking as integral to moral and intellectual growth. The reflections not only support rubric-based scores but also provide a deeper understanding of students' developmental pathways, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2 and underscoring the pedagogical value of integrated reflection assignments.

Discussion

The findings of this study support the pedagogical value of genre-based instruction and constructivist reflection as mechanisms for fostering rhetorical awareness andimproving argumentative writing skills. Based on rubric scores and qualitative analysis, students demonstrated awareness of genre and mastery of language, particularly in the tenor and mode elements. These findings support Hypothesis 1 and are consistent with genre theory principles, which emphasise social purpose, rhetorical structure, and audience negotiation (Bhatia 1993; Hyland 2007; Martin & Rose 2008).

The tenor dimension appears as the strongest indicator of rhetorical reasoning competence. The students consistently demonstrated courtesy, considered counterarguments, and presented their claims with clear, logical argumentation. This resonates with Hyland's (2004) perspective of academic writing as a socially interactive activity in which stance and engagement are key areas of disciplinary discourse. It is also in line with Thompson's (2001) notion that powerful academic writing includes a dialogical relationship with the reader. The mode dimension also demonstrated strong reliability, as most essays followed a traditional argumentative organisation (thesis, body, conclusion) and

used transition signals and paragraph unity. These patterns justify the genre-based scaffolding proposed by Hammond and Derewianka (2001) and Luu (2011), which holds that structural modelling is one of the tools that assist EFL student writers.

Field scores, however, were notably lower, indicating differences in topic engagement and lexical accuracy. Some students demonstrated layered thinking and discipline-specific vocabulary. Others relied on generalisations or anecdotal evidence. This disparity shows that, while students demonstrate structural and stylistic skills, they may need additional support with content and vocabulary knowledge. Similar limitations have also been reported in cross-cultural rhetorical analyses, driven by students' prior knowledge and epistemological norms that guide topic development (Arsyad 1999; Choi 1988; Lo 2024; Prakash et al. 2025). Taken together, both classic and recent studies confirm that cultural and epistemological factors continue to shape rhetorical competence, underscoring the need for pedagogical strategies that address linguistic control alongside content development. The results suggest that genre study should be combined with targeted vocabulary building and higher-order thinking exercises to improve mastery in field, as recommended by Amogne (2013) and further emphasised by Trinh and Nguyen (2014). Such integration not only strengthens linguistic competence but also equips students with the cognitive strategies needed to engage critically with academic genres and sustain long-term learning outcomes.

The reflections examined in Phase 2 further support the constructivist nature of the research. Respondents demonstrated metacognitive awareness, rhetorical reasoning, and an ethical stance, supporting Hypothesis 2 and aligning with the constructivist tenets proposed by Vygotsky (1978), Bruner (1996), and Von Glasersfeld (2004).

Their remarks reflected an evolution in thinking toward independent study, with students overwhelmingly reporting a sense of accomplishment in writing without the crutch's support. This aligns with Alawad's (2025) research on transformative assessment, where adaptive rubrics and reflective tasks enable autonomy and rhetorical control.

In the area of rhetorical reasoning, students wrote about how they organised their essays, selected evidence, and managed tone to enhance clarity and persuasiveness. Statements such as, 'I started with the strongest idea …' and 'I used examples from real life …' (Student E13, Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025) suggest an intentional rhetorical discourse and a sense of genre. These findings resonate with field and strengthen students' command of mode, specifically through pattern-breaking at the level of logical patterns and structural clarity. This line of reasoning connects genre knowledge construction (Tardy 2009) with prewriting engagement strategies (Alawad et al. 2025), showing how panel discussions enabled students to refine their arguments and to select evidence critically.

Similarly, developing an ethical attitude was equally important. Students highlighted fairness, respect, and audience sensitivity when making their points. Sentences like, 'I respected other people's views …' and 'I made sure to stay fair …' (Student E22 Freshman, ENG102, Fall 2025) demonstrate rhetorical empathy and an ethical worldview – an example of tenor. These reflections show students' ability to participate in dialogic learning and responsible argumentation, which are key aspects of constructivist teaching (Moon 2004). They also align with Alawad and Mujumdar's (2025) findings on peer feedback, where respectful participation and rhetorical positioning are central to classroom discourse.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that writing is not a product but a process of learning. This combination of register theory and constructivist principles provided a strong foundation for assessing performance and development. The register-based rubric captured surface-level organisation and deeper rhetorical features, while thematic coding of reflections revealed their evolving cognitive and ethical engagement in their writing. This two-layered approach reflects the academic literacies model proposed by Lea and Street (1998), in which writing is seen as a socially situated, epistemologically rich activity.

Limitations

Finally, to fully contextualise these research outcomes, it is essential to acknowledge the following limitations:

- The present study was conducted with a sample from a single institution and within the domain of argumentative essays, potentially limiting generalisability to other disciplines or educational settings.
- The essay prompt was AI in education, a prevalent topic, as well as easily accessible. This may have increased tenor and mode scores at the expense of field variation.
- Reflections were not graded and were open-ended, which may have impacted depth and consistency. Some students may not have learned certain concepts sufficiently because of a lack of reward or feedback.

Recommendations

To tackle the study limitations and broaden the scope of the study, future research should consider the following points:

- For cross-genre and cross-institutional studies, using a register-based rubric and reflection coding schema across different genres (eg., narrative, expository, and research writing) in various institutional settings helps test transferability and robustness.
- A longitudinal tracking study design is necessary to monitor students' register control and constructivist indicators across multiple writing tasks and semesters, examining long-term growth and instructional impact.
- Integrating corpus tools will enhance the field analysis by tailoring content engagement based on lexical density, variation, and topic-specific terminology.

Leveraging guided reflection prompts or graded reflection assignments to gain more in-depth metacognitive and rhetorical insights, enhancing consistency, and tracking the analyses.

Conclusion

The study shows that argumentative writing, scaffolded through register-based assessment and constructivist reflection, also promotes genre mastery, epistemic engagement, and ethical awareness. Students demonstrated greater control of tenor and mode, showing their ability to deploy arguments and manage audience relationships with rhetorical purpose. Their reflections revealed metacognitive awareness, rhetorical thinking, and ethical positioning, indicating writing not just as a tool, but also as a reflective practice.

A register-based rubric was employed to document the complexities of linguistic performance, complemented by thematic coding to understand students' growth as writers and thinkers through reflective writing activities. This twofold analytic model offers a reasonably transparent, theoretically grounded approach to the challenges of assessing academic writing at the higher education level, aligning with Lea and Street's (1998) model of 'academic literacies', in which writing is viewed as a socialised, epistemologically diverse act.

Furthermore, the findings confirm the pedagogical importance of genre-based scaffolding (Bhatia 1993; Hyland 2007) and reflective engagement (Bruner 1996; Moon 2004) in developing rhetorical maturity. Combining text-based analysis with student voice, the study also highlights the importance of assessment designs that see learning as both a developmental and dialogic process, where students are not just following generic conventions but also actively constructing meaning, stance, and identity in writing.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Emad A. Alawad: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Software, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Ahmed M. Al Mata'ni: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Software, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Arwa A. Alhinai: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualisation. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

Data are not publicly available because of privacy and confidentiality policies but may be accessed upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, Emad A. Alawad, with approval from the MCBS academic committee.

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Appendix 1 starts on the next page→

Appendix 1

TABLE 1-A1: Revised rubric for argumentative essay task.

Criterion	Descriptor	Register dimension	Score range
Thesis and positioning	Presents a clear, arguable thesis; maintains a consistent stance throughout	Tenor	1–5
Audience engagement	Demonstrates awareness of the audience through tone, stance, and rhetorical appeals	Tenor	1–5
Argument development	Supports claims with relevant reasons, examples, and evidence; anticipates counterarguments	Field	1–5
Structural coherence	Organizes ideas logically; uses effective transitions and paragraphing	Mode	1–5
Lexical precision	Employs varied, accurate vocabulary appropriate to the topic and rhetorical purpose	Field	1–5
Evidence integration	Integrates sources effectively with appropriate citation and commentary	Field/Mode	1–5
Genre conformity	Adheres to argumentative genre conventions (eg., thesis, counterargument, conclusion)	Mode/Tenor	1–5

Scoring Guide: 5 = Mastery | 4 = Proficient | 3 = Developing | 2 = Emerging | 1 = Limited.