SOLO Taxonomy: A Study Towards Improvement of EFL Essay Writing

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Abstract

This study investigates how the presence of different variables plays on a SOLO program implemented in the essay writing class of EFL learners. The program was devised keeping in mind the EFL curriculum and learners' proficiency and implemented on an experimental group of sixty randomly selected EFL learners enrolled in English departments at two universities: Al-Balqa Applied University in Jordan and Majmaah University in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A control group was also included in the study to verify the effects of the intervention more lucidly. The latter received traditional instruction. Writing performance of both the groups was compared using an independent sample t-test to examine statistical differences between the means of the two groups in pre-post-test models. Results indicated significant statistical differences in the performance of the two groups in favor of the experimental group. Based on the results of the study, the study makes pertinent recommendations.

Keywords: SOLO Strategy, Essay Writing, EFL, English writing

INTRODUCTION

Writing, however difficult it may be deemed by teachers and learners, is nevertheless an indispensable curricular component. Beyond the educational set up also it is the skill that is most needed in occupational settings. Compared to seasoned learners, writing is the biggest challenge for the beginners in the language learning journey. What adds to the challenge is for the teachers to be able to score the writing output appropriately enough to identify the stumbling blocks and hence, adoption of corrective measures.

Biggs and Collis developed the Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO hence forth) in 1982 as a robust assessment taxonomy for writing standards. This taxonomy identifies five progressive levels of understanding, moving from simple generation of an idea to the complex stage of developing and integrating many ideas thus introducing learners to depth and quality in learning as opposed to quantity. When applied to essay writing, SOLO enables the learners to graduate from a listing of points to higher order skills such as selection of some over others after comparing their usefulness in the essay. Beyond mere writing, SOLO has been examined as a great aid in self-editing to write better in ESL learners by Karahan and Ergene (2023), tiding over issues such as cohesion and coherence in writing.

In a similar study, Fei (2025) investigated the effectiveness of the SOLO taxonomy in the writing classroom with achievement of learner autonomy being one of the objectives. In this study with junior high school students in a mixed-methods approach spanning six weeks, hierarchical feedback was examined when SOLO was used for assessment. A control group, on the other hand, was assessed with traditional tools. Results indicated significant enhancements in post-test writing scores for the experimental group with enhanced cognitive levels, content depth, structure, and linguistic complexity. Additionally, students reported better self-efficacy concerning idea generation, writing conventions, and

self-regulation. Interviews revealed that the SOLO approach aided in problem identification, logical awareness, and motivation, concluding that SOLO Taxonomy effectively serves as a model for differentiated English writing instruction.

Not only in language classrooms, Chubko et al. (2019) examined the efficacy of SOLO in classrooms where learners had to manage English language as a foreign or second language in the course of STEM education, specifically in comprehending disciplinary literacy in science. The study showed the application of SOLO taxonomy to assess EFL students' literacy development in an astronomy course that used digital storytelling as an aid. Results in a pre-post-test model indicated positive changes in students' literacy skills, contributing to a better understanding of assessment for EFL/ESL science learners.

In the background of these studies, the current research tests how using SOLO in EFL essay writing pushes students up those levels faster than usual approaches, especially with AI tools to guide, offering fresh ways to teach writing without the usual pitfalls.

Statement of the Problem

Many EFL teachers encounter obstacles writing of essay such as determining if the students achieve the objectives of learning or not and how to evaluate students' progress from the lower levels to higher ones. From the researchers' knowledge, most of the students focus on the lower order thinking skills although there are several benefits of higher order thinking skills on students' learning, especially in writing essays. So, what the students need most is the development of critical thinking skills to be able to discover essay-level knowledge.

In an attempt to solve such problems, the researchers adopted the SOLO program as a suitable strategy to train the students in the skills needed to write an essay in English. The rationale for this intervention stems from the belief that SOLO develops students' essay writing skills because it facilitates their learning, serves as a pedagogical model for teachers to teach students how to develop their thinking, and is suitable to be used with advanced writing such as needed for writing essays.

Research question

The study attempted to answer the following main question:

Does SOLO-based intervention improve the participants' essay writing skills?

Research Hypothesis

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following null hypothesis was tested:

Are there statistically significant differences in students' essay writing performance between the experimental group using the SOLO strategy and the control group exposed to traditional pedagogy?

Research Objectives

To assess the role of SOLO program in enhancing the students' essay writing skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOLO is a cognitive taxonomy developed by John Biggs and Kevin Collis in the 1970s. It is used as a tool to improve the quality of examinations (Kayani, Ajmal, & Raahman, 2010) and a theoretical foundation for the design of curriculum (Jones, Langrall, Thornton, & Mogill, 1997).

SOLO is a useful method to assess learning outcomes by categorizing them into five levels: pre-structural, unistructural, multistructural, relational, and extended abstract. At the pre-structural level, the topic and focus are not clear. Besides, students use limited vocabulary, unrelated ideas, and disconnected sentences. At the unistructural level, learners grasp one related aspect by concentrating on a single element, lacking clarity, meaning, and connections. Also, they are not well-organized and they are not aware of audience and

purpose. At the multistructural level, students become aware of several relevant aspects without coherence or organization. At the relational level, learners combine different aspects with meaningful connections, clear focus, logical organization, and awareness of audience and purpose. At the extended abstract level, students use difficult words and they can apply previous knowledge to new fields of by using prediction and creativity. Moreover, they can apply knowledge in other contexts learned beyond the original context (Potter & Kustra, 2012).

Several researchers have found that SOLO can positively improve writing. For instance, Campbell, Smith, and Brooker (1998) argued that SOLO taxonomy can improve students' ability to write an essay by developing clear goals based on the structure of SOLO.

Chan, Tsui, and Chan (2002) conducted a study to analyze the effects of SOLO taxonomy method in ESL assignments. The study sample comprised 28 students in Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The study results established that many teachers thought that SOLO could be effectively used to assess mastery of content and language skills in ESL lessons.

Kayani et al. (2010) aimed to find the teachers' perception towards (SOLO) taxonomy. In a study with 360 teachers. The results indicated that teachers believed that SOLO would improve creative thinking, reading, and writing.

Mahmood et al. (2014) aimed at finding teachers awareness of the five SOLO levels by using a questionnaire. The sample of the study consisted of 272 primary teachers. Analysis of the data showed that most of the teachers were not aware of the first and fourth levels of SOLO taxonomy. However, most of them understood the rest of the levels, in particular, the third level which is multi-structural. Lastly, the study results suggested that teachers should be trained in how to use SOLO taxonomy in their classes.

Some students fail to master the lower order thinking skills level that makes their learning difficult. Abdullah and Masran (2021) conducted a pilot study aimed at evaluating the feedback for a writing module based on SOLO taxonomy to solve the problem by ensuring the suitability of the module in terms of time allocation, clarity of instruction, suitability distribution of sub modules and organized activities (Al-Ahdal,& Hameed, 2025; Aljabr & Al-Ahdal, 2024).

Because writing skill is one of the most important skills of English language, it is essential to adopt English writing teaching and learning strategies for its improvement. Also, instructors and teachers face problems in teaching and evaluating writing skills. Amongst the studies that studied this aspect are Gao (2025) and Abdullah and Masran (2021). Gao (2025) carried out a study that aimed to explore the application of the SOLO classification theory in senior high school English teaching from the perspective of the integration of teaching, learning, and assessment. In this practical study, the teacher assessed the students' levels of thinking by analyzing their expressions related to the pre-writing questions. Based on data, the teacher identified the students' needs to develop their thinking skills (Abusa'aleek & Alotaibi, 2022; Albelihi & Al-Ahdal, 2024; Alqahtani & Al-Ahdal, 2025; Alharbi & Al-Ahdal, 2025; Alotaibi & Alzu'bi, 2025). The results of the study indicated that SOLO Taxonomy can not only stimulate the students' learning but also, create better chances for them to have positive learning experiences and master the content.

Abdullah and Masran (2021) also conducted a study aimed at evaluating and assessing writing based on the SOLO taxonomy with 5 low achiever learners (LAL) in a primary school. The instrument of the study included a questionnaire. The findings of the study indicated that the participants can adapt the self and peer assessment approach effectively based on SOLO taxonomy in a short time.

METHODOLOGY

Population and study sample

The population of the study was the English students at Majmaa University in KSA and Al-Balqa Applied University in Jordan. The researchers randomly selected a sample of (60) students of English enrolled in the first and the second years. The sample of the study was then distributed into experimental and control groups to measure the effect of the intervention.

Instrument

The instrument of the study was an essay writing test designed to compare the performance of the participants in both groups at pre- and posttest stages (see Appendix A). Three topics were given from which students were free to select one to write an essay on. The three topics focused on different types of essays i.e., process, descriptive and comparative. As such, face validity of the test was established; this was confirmed by a panel of experts. The rubrics for the assessment of the students' performance were prepared based on University guidelines (see Appendix B).

Intervention and its validity

The intervention program was designed by the researchers to teach essays (See Appendix C).

Content validity of the instrument was ensured by specialists from the English Language and Curriculum and Instruction departments at three public universities in Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Study design

The study applied a quasi-experimental design comprising experimental and control groups engaged in a pre- and post-test approach. The experimental group was taught how to write an essay by using SOLO, while the students in the control group were taught through the traditional way. The independent variable of the study was essay writing with the SOLO program serving as the independent variable.

Statistical treatment

The researchers used Means, Standard Deviations, t-test, paired sample t-test and eta square to assess and compare the performance of the students in both the groups to understand the effect of using SOLO.

RESULTS

Group Equivalence

To verify the equivalence of the groups, the means and standard deviations of students' pre-writing essay performance were calculated according to the group variable (experimental vs. control). An independent sample t-test was used to examine statistical differences between the means, as shown in Table (1).

Table (1): Means and Standard Deviations of the two groups' overall writing performance in pre-test

VAR00019		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	sig
Background information statement	control	30	1.1000	0.30513	
	Experimental	30	1.1667	0.37905	0.456
Thesis	control	30	1.3333	0.47946	
	Experimental	30	1.2333	0.43018	0.399
Supporting paragraph1	control	30	1.0333	0.18257	
	Experimental	30	1.0333	0.18257	1.000

Supporting paragraph2	control	30	1.0333	0.18257	
	Experimental	30	1.0667	0.25371	0.562
Supporting paragraph3	control	30	0.6667	0.47946	
	Experimental	30	0.8667	0.34575	0.069
Conclusion	control	30	0.8667	0.34575	
	Experimental	30	1.0000	0.00000	0.043
Language and content	control	30	0.7000	0.53498	
	Experimental	30	0.7333	0.58329	0.818
Grammar	control	30	0.7667	0.56832	
	Experimental	30	0.9333	0.52083	0.241
Using linking words	control	30	0.7333	0.52083	
	Experimental	30	0.9000	0.40258	0.171
Spelling	control	30	1.1333	0.34575	
	Experimental	30	1.3000	0.46609	0.122
Organization	control	30	0.7333	0.52083	
	Experimental	30	1.1000	0.30513	0.002
Vocabulary	control	30	0.7000	0.53498	
	Experimental	30	0.7000	0.53498	1.000
Format	control	30	0.5667	0.56832	
	Experimental	30	0.8333	0.53067	0.065
Punctuations	control	30	1.1000	0.30513	
	Experimental	30	1.1667	0.37905	0.456
Capitalization	control	30	0.5333	0.50742	
	Experimental	30	0.7000	0.46609	0.190

According to the data in the above table, comparison of the performance of CG students and EG using independent sample t-tests demonstrates success for content and mechanical skills, implying that the two groups started with equal and basic essay writing skills like grammar, selection of vocabulary, and spelling.

Table (2): Means and Standard Deviations of the two groups' overall writing performance in post-test

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig
Background information statement	control	30	1.233	0.430	0.079	0.000
	experimental	30	2.000	0.000	0.000	
Thesis	control	30	1.633	0.490	0.089	0.000
	experimental	30	2.000	0.000	0.000	
Supporting paragraph1	control	30	1.033	0.183	0.033	0.000
	experimental	30	2.000	0.000	0.000	
Supporting paragraph2	control	30	1.200	0.407	0.074	0.000
	experimental	30	2.000	0.000	0.000	
Supporting paragraph3	control	30	1.267	0.450	0.082	0.000
	experimental	30	1.900	0.305	0.056	

Conclusion	control	30	1.167	0.379	0.069	0.000
	experimental	30	1.867	0.346	0.063	
Language and content	control	30	1.833	0.461	0.084	0.000
	experimental	30	2.533	0.507	0.093	
Grammar	control	30	1.433	0.504	0.092	0.000
	experimental	30	1.900	0.305	0.056	
Using linking words	control	30	1.533	0.507	0.093	0.000
	experimental	30	2.000	0.000	0.000	
Spelling	control	30	1.367	0.490	0.089	0.000
	experimental	30	2.000	0.000	0.000	
Organization	control	30	1.567	0.504	0.092	0.000
	experimental	30	2.000	0.000	0.000	
Vocabulary	control	30	1.467	0.507	0.093	0.000
	experimental	30	1.967	0.183	0.033	
Format	control	30	1.400	0.498	0.091	0.000
	experimental	30	1.833	0.379	0.069	
Punctuations	control	30	1.200	0.407	0.074	0.000
	experimental	30	1.767	0.430	0.079	
Capitalization	control	30	1.000	0.000	0.000	
	experimental	30	0.933	0.254	0.046	0.161

The post-test findings show that the experimental group performance was superior as the p-value was 0.000 for 15 out of 16 essay writing features, and the experimental group participants scored almost the full marks. The zero values of Std. Deviation in several cases indicated that the intervention led to strong mastery at the highest band of the rubric, significantly higher than the mid-range performance and moderate variability of the control group. The only non-significant difference was in capitalization with p-value was 0.161, showing that on this count both groups did well, so this skill was likely already mastered in pre-intervention stage and not impacted by the treatment. These findings are justified by the fact that most pre-test equivalence was found around 87.5%.

Table (3): Eta square values of the performance of control group in pre- and post test

	eta square values	
1	Background information statement Dependent	0.845
2	Thesis Dependent	0.788
3	Supporting paragraph1 Dependent	0.967
4	Supporting paragraph2 Dependent	0.935
5	Supporting paragraph3 Dependent	0.850
6	Conclusion Dependent	0.874
7	Language and content Dependent	0.859
8	Grammar Dependent	0.755
9	Using linking words Dependent	0.891
10	Spelling Dependent	1.000
11	Organization Dependent	0.905

12	Vocabulary Dependent	0.850
13	Format Dependent	0.741
14	Punctuations Dependent	0.788
15	Capitalization Dependent	0.302

Table 3 shows the eta-squared (η^2) values for the control group's pre-post performance across 15 essay writing components, measuring size of effect for within-group improvement from repeated measures ANOVA. Amazingly, all values exceed conventional thresholds for practical significance ($\eta^2 > 0.14$ = large effect), confirming significant gains, with most approaching or reaching very large effects size (>0.70), while capitalization shows a moderate effect size.

The control group made huge improvements in essay structure for the following components: backgrounds, thesis statements, body paragraphs, conclusions, and overall organization. These improvements were so strong that most of the change from pre-test to post-test was seen to be very close to the top scores. Language skills developed greatly, including content quality, grammar, linking words, spelling, vocabulary, format, and punctuation.

At the same time, capitalization improved only moderately in the group at a p-value of 0.302, with little scope for further improvement. Yet, the global findings indicate remarkable educational gains for the experimental group especially in syntax and writing organization, both of which point towards development of natural, better writing abilities. In addition, the absence of progress of the control group clearly and undoubtedly establishes the value of the SOLO taxonomy in writing assessment since this was the only difference in the two groups in this study.

Data in this study points out the comparable proficiency of the two groups at the start of the study with no significant disparities in the pre-test. In the post-test, however, the progress of the EG across all parameters was unequivocally established, attributable to the intervention. This was so in contrast to the generally stable and unchanged output of the CG. The only parameter that showed similarities between the groups in the post-test as well was capitalization, this may be due to prior knowledge of the groups.

CG intragroup repeated measures ANOVA yielded uniformly substantial eta-squared magnitudes, denoting prodigious maturation in architectural and linguistic domains—save moderated capitalization effects—yet underscoring the intervention's transcendent efficacy beyond endogenous developmental trajectories. Future studies should be sensitive to effect sizes with inferential statistics to rule out current shortcomings.

DISCUSSION

SOLO in the EFL writing classroom is gainful to both teachers and learners. While the former are bale to delineate the specific areas of weakness and suggest remedies thus using SOLO as a diagnostic tool, the latter move from simple syntax to complex, analyzing and selecting content on the way. In addition, teachers can identify the problems early in the writing journey of the learners and prevent reinforcement of mistakes.

SOLO is also a kind of step-by-step writing guideline for learners where each step gives them a clear and defined design for writing. It encourages higher order thinking in them while allowing them to be autonomous when they select which points to include in their essays. This, in turn, boosts their independent writing, makes them think and analyze content deeply, helping them write better essays.

With these findings, the study can claim the supremacy of SOLO as a writing intervention as seen in the performance of the EG as opposed to the relatively stable outputs of the CG in the pre and post-tests. Linguistic substructures also showed improvement in the output of the EG, proving the efficacy of SOLO as a catalyst and writing better.

Capitalization's decreased effect size aligns perfectly with its invariable excellent accomplishment across assessments. Conversely, the CG's vigorous advancements, though validating strong innate ontogenetic tendencies nonetheless plateaued below EG tops, thereby illuminating the intervention's excellent incremental leverage in cultivating discursive coherence, syntactical precision, and compositional elegance.
CG intragroup repeated measures ANOVA yielded uniformly substantial eta-squared sizes, denoting extraordinary development in linguistic and structures domains.
Many previous studies have concluded that using SOLO taxonomy in writing is effective because of the characteristics and benefits of this strategy. For example, Abdullah and Masran (2021) claimed that the low achiever can make self and peer assessment process based on the rubric given when they have the opportunity to practice it in appropriate ways. The effect of using SOLO taxonomy on essay writing is positive and effective because students used pictures and they can recognize the words and construct sentences based on pictures given. The students can write their essays without spelling and grammar errors.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to explore the effect of SOLO on developing essay writing in Majmaah University and Al-Balqa university EFL classrooms. The results of the study indicate that though the experimental group and control group were equivalent before starting the experiment, the teaching of English essay writing through SOLO strategy plays a positive and significant role in improving the academic achievement of the students' essay. As indicated earlier, the teachers in EFL environments also gain as much as the learners int eh writing classroom as SOLO gives them a well-planned assessment rubric to apply while evaluating writing output. Early identification of problem areas and weak spots in learners' writing can keep their reinforcement at bay as teachers can take remedial measures to weed out the specific writing shortcomings. Lastly, capitalization appears to be the only area of EFL writing in the sample that needed little or no intervention across groups, this was perhaps due to the emphasis on imparting the basics of writing such as punctuation in the EFL classrooms.

Recommendations

1. It is essential for English language teachers to vary their strategies of teaching according to their students' interests and achievement levels with more emphasis on applying the SOLO taxonomy in teaching writing.
2. English instructors at universities are encouraged to attend training courses held by their departments in order to be aware of various modern strategies of teaching English language like SOLO strategy.
3. Researchers should conduct similar studies in other regions. Besides, they should conduct other studies about the effect of SOLO strategy on other skills such as reading, listening and speaking.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Essay Writing Test

Write an essay of five paragraphs on any one of the following topics:
1. How to succeed at a job interview
2. The similarities between the educational system in Jordan and KSA
3. The role of AI in our lives

Appendix B. Assessment Rubric

Item	Scores
Background information statement	2
Thesis	2
Supporting paragraph1	2
Supporting paragraph2	2
Supporting paragraph3	2
Conclusion	2
Language and content	3
Grammar	2
Using linking words	2

Spelling	2
Organization	2
Vocabulary	2
Format	2
Punctuations	2
Capitalization	1
Total	30

Appendix C
Sample of Lesson Plan
(Descriptive Essay Writing through SOLO Taxonomy)
Lesson plan -1-
Subject: Essay Writing
Level: Undergraduate
Duration: 90 minutes
Objective
Students are expected to write descriptive essays by using SOLO Taxonomy.

Teaching and learning aids and materials:

1- Handouts
2- The smart board
3- Pictures and charts
4- Sample descriptive essay
5- SOLO taxonomy poster
6- Rubric for descriptive writing assessment

Procedures:
1- Pre- writing stage:
-The lecturer Introduces descriptive writing and gives examples of descriptive essays to describe people, things or experience. Then, he explains how the SOLO taxonomy helps writers move from basic easy description to sophisticated. (15 minutes):

2- Writing stage:
- The lecturer reviews the descriptive features and elements. Then, he asks students to use them in a sample text (10 minutes)
- The lecturer asks students to describe only one single detail by using simple descriptive words, weak organization without awareness of audience or purpose.
- The lecturer asks students to list descriptive details such as colors, shapes and sounds for a chosen topic independently without coherence or unity. They start writing correct sentences and non-cohesive paragraphs and show limited figurative language like similes, metaphors.
- The lecturer asks students to connect details together in a short descriptive paragraph and order them chronologically. Students should focus on their audiences and purposes and write appropriately with varied and effective details.
- The lecturer encourages students to move toward the 'Extended Abstract' level through creativity and figurative language. Students write a number of words to describe a familiar place, person or experience independently. They should create a perfect essay with strong language and sophisticated structures and vocabulary. (30 minutes)

3- Post- writing:

The lecturer gives students a rubric based on SOLO to be followed to self-assess so they can know which level they were currently at and how they could move higher.

Evaluation and Assessment Tools

1. Formative: The lecturer uses class discussions, brainstorming notes, draft writing, clustering and free writing to help students write their drafts.
2. Summative: The lecturer corrects the final descriptive essays by using SOLO- rubric.

SOLO- Rubric for Descriptive Essay Writing

No.	SOLO Level	Description
1	Pre-structural	- Limited understanding of descriptive writing - Unrelated and incomplete ideas - Lack of a clear topic and focus - Disconnected sentences - No use of sensory language - Limited Vocabulary
2	Unistructural	Identifying some inconsistent descriptive elements -Describing one aspect - Focusing on a single detail - Using simple descriptive words - Weak organization - No awareness of audience or purpose
3	Multistructural	- Using multiple sensory details without coherence or unity -Identifying several relevant aspects and treating them independently - Listing several descriptive features - Writing correct sentences without variety -Writing non-cohesive paragraphs - Showing limited figurative or sensory language
4	Relational	-Integrating details cohesively with clear structure and emotional tone -Integrating multiple aspects to create a coherent and vivid description - Clear focus and logical organization - Uses varied and effective sensory details - Employing figurative language (similes, metaphors) appropriately - Demonstrating awareness of audience and purpose
5	Extended Abstract	Demonstrating creativity, sophistication, and emotional depth; language enhances reader experience

		Creating a powerful, original, and evocative piece that connects ideas and emotions - Structure enhances meaning (e.g., strong introduction and conclusion) - Using sophisticated vocabulary