

تحليل اخطاء الطلبة المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية على المستوى الجامعي فيما يتعلق بعلامات
الترقيم اثناء الكتابة التعبيرية

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Analyzing Punctuation Errors in Paragraph Writing for EFL Students at University Level

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Abstract

Writing is one of the four skills of language learning that FL learners must have to comprehend and produce spoken/written language for proper and effective interpersonal communication. However, writing, for most EFL students, is something difficult to accomplish because it is a productive skill. One of the errors of EFL students in writing is punctuation. Hence, the current paper aims at surveying punctuation errors made by students at university level while writing paragraphs. It is hypothesized that though students know theoretically the punctuation rules and uses, they do not apply them when writing. According to data analysis, a little ability to choose the correct position of punctuation marks is found. In addition, students most used punctuation marks are commas and full stops. A rare tendency to use other punctuation marks is clearly seen. Hence, the results confirm the hypothesis of the study.

Keywords: paragraph writing, punctuation errors, capitalization errors, EFL students

تحليل اخطاء الطلبة المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية على المستوى الجامعي فيما يتعلق بعلامات الترقيم اثناء الكتابة التعبيرية

الخلاصة:

تعد الكتابة احدى المهارات الاربعة المطلوبة عند تعلم لغة اجنبية كي يكون المتعلم قادرا على فهم وانتاج اللغة كتابة ونطقا بشكل صحيح ومؤثر لأغراض التواصل. وهنا تجدر الإشارة الى ان معظم متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية يواجهون صعوبة عندما يتعلق الامر بالكتابة لأنها مهارة انتاجية. وتعتبر علامات الترقيم احدى تلك الصعوبات التي غالبا ما يخطؤون بها اثناء كتابتهم لفقرة تعبيرية. تفترض الدراسة ان الطلبة يعلمون جيدا من الناحية النظرية استعمالات علامات الترقيم لكنهم يفشلون في تحديدها واستعمالها بشكل صحيح عند تطبيقهم لها. وبحسب نتائج التحليل تبين وجود نسبة قليلة من الطلبة تمكنت من تحديد الاستعمال والموقع الصحيح لعلامات الترقيم. كما وجد ايضا ان علامات الترقيم الاكثر شيوعا هي الفاصلة والنقطة مع ندرة واضحة لاستعمال علامات الترقيم الاخرى.

1.1 Introduction

Writing is the outcome of what is going on in the mind of the writer. It is governed by some rules in order to be understood. Hussain et al (2013: 832) define writing as "*The visual medium through which graphical and grammatical system of a language is manifested*". However, writing, for most EFL students, is something difficult to accomplish because it is a productive skill. In this context, Corder (1974: 126) states that writing may contain a different distribution of error or a different set of errors types. Punctuation is one of these errors that happen due to the omission or misuse of punctuation.

Punctuation is a mechanism which makes a piece of writing look neat and meaningful. Lukeman (2006, cited in Awad, 2012: 215) maintains that without punctuation many sentences are only jumbles of words. Accordingly, it is an art like any other art for it is acquired by study and practice, i.e. not haphazardly. Thus good writers have to choose the punctuation which best expresses the relationship between the ideas of their piece(s) of writing.

1.2 Problem of the Study

EFL students/learners fail to choose the correct use and position of punctuation in their writing and sometimes they do not use them.

1.3 Aims of the Study

The study aims at surveying punctuation errors made by students at university level while writing paragraphs.

1.4 Hypothesis

The study hypothesizes that though students know theoretically the punctuation rules and uses, they do not apply them correctly in writing.

1.5 Procedure and Data Collection

Data to be analyzed in this study involve a set of paragraphs on the same topic. The study subjects were 20 students at first year from the department of English at Al- Hadba' University College. They were asked to write a paragraph on "Mobile Phones" as an assignment.

The paragraphs were broken down into sentences. Then, the punctuation of each sentence or a group of sentences was carefully looked at. A statistical method was employed to count the number of punctuation errors made by students.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The results of the current study may shed light on the correct use of punctuation and consequently remove the ambiguity for the reader. It may also be helpful for teachers because it gives insights to depend suitable strategies and develop effective practices which help to find solution for the problem of punctuation and increase EFL students' competence in writing correctly.

1.7 The Model

Ellis's (1994) error analysis model is adopted as a procedural analysis for dealing with the data collected. It involves the following steps:

- Collecting data
- Identification of errors
- Description of errors
- Evaluation of errors

Hence, a descriptive statistics which includes both frequency and percentage of correct and incorrect use of punctuation is used.

1.8 Punctuation

In her article, the *Mysterious Origins of Punctuation*, Houston (2015: 2) claims that this term ,i.e. punctuation, began to emerge and develop in the sixth century. She (Ibid) adds within 50 years the majority of the symbols which are used today were cast firmly in lead; they were frozen. However, with the spread of social media a new form of punctuation has appeared, that is punctuation of emoji¹.

Jones (1994: 421) defines punctuation as the central part of the range of non-lexical orthography. According to Oxford Online Dictionary, Punctuation is essential in writing; it shows the reader where sentences start and finish and if it is used properly it makes writing easy to understand. Another definition for punctuation is given by Shaw, he (1986:137) describes it as a method through which the meaning of a written text is made clear by the use of certain marks and mechanics (such as the use of capital and small letters, italics, abbreviations).

1.8.1 Kinds of Punctuation

Razzak and Al-Hassan (1986: 92-120) classify punctuation to *end-punctuation marks, non-end punctuation marks, enclosing punctuation marks, punctuation marks used within the word and mechanics*.

First, end punctuation marks involve the following:

- Full stop (period): it comes at the end of declarative sentences. It is the most important punctuation mark, as in: (*John and Jack went to the market.*)

- Question mark: it comes at the end of interrogative sentences, as in: (*Where will you go this evening?*)

- Exclamation marks: it ends the exclamatory sentences, such as: *What a nice car!*

¹ Punctuation of emoji will not be included in the current study.

Second, non-end punctuation marks, they involve the following:

- *Comma*: the most frequent used one of all the stops employed in English. It indicates a short pause. It can be used for the following purposes:
 - a) To separate items in enumeration, as in: *The air was raw, dark, and grey.*
 - b) To mark off nouns used in address, words or phrases in apposition and participial phrases (when not used restrictively), as in: *I think, madam, you are right.*
 - c) To mark off words and phrases like (*however, indeed, therefore, too, for instance, in fact ..etc.*) when they are used as asides or interpolations. For example: *This proved, however, to be a mistake.*
 - d) In complex sentences to separate an adverb clause from the following main clause , two or more noun-clauses, as in: *Although it was already getting dark, Tom set out through the forest.*
 - e) In double sentences to separate two co-ordinate clauses when the second subject is expresses, a non-defining relative clause from its antecedent. Consider the following example: *I asked what she was doing, and she answered that she is reading a new novel.*
 - f) In direct speech, where a break is made in the speech to indicate who is speaking, as in: *"You can say," she said, "exactly what you please."*
- *Semicolon*: it indicates a longer pause than is indicated by a comma. It is used to separate two related but independent clauses, as in: *The teacher asked the student to close the door of the classroom; there was too much noise out in the hall.* The semicolon is also used to

separate a complex series of items (i.e. to separate items and their explanations), for example: *I went to the show with Jan, my close friend; his friend, Jessica; and her best friend, Jack.*

- Colon: it is used to stand for "the following", "as follows" and to prepare the reader for a second thought contrasting or balanced with the first part of the sentence, as in: *The teacher has given us three options: to retake the exam, to accept the extra credit assignment, or to fail the class.* Another example is: *Speech is silver, silence is golden.*
- Dash: using dash indicates that the sentence is broken off in order to expand or to add an explanation of what has been said. Also, a pair of dashes may be used to separate parts of sentences. Here is an example: *Schooldays – or so we are told – are the happiest days of our lives.*

Third enclosing punctuation marks, they are of two types: Brackets and quotation marks. The former can be square or rounded. The bracket are used to enclose any words which are grammatically unnecessary to the sentence, yet they add explanation to it. Example: *I know (at least, this is what I have been told) that he lost much money in the business.*

Fourth, punctuation marks used within the word , they are:

- Apostrophe: it is used for the following purposes:
 - To indicate the omission of one or more letters, (as in: *I'm , o'clock*)
 - To mark possessive case (as in: *the eagle's feathers, ladies' coats*).
 - To indicate plurals of individual characters (e.g. *three a's, 1990's*).
- Hyphen: it is used with compound words (as in *twenty-six, bad-tempered*). Also, it is used to link a prefix to a base (*pro – soviet*), and to indicate that a printed word at the end of a line is not complete.

- *Dot*: it looks like a full stop. It is used to express abbreviation, as in: (*Mr. , i.e. , a.m.*). **Finally**, mechanism, it refers to the use of capitalization, indentions, spacing and numbers.

1.8.2 Functions of Punctuation

Today, no doubt, punctuation is of a great importance for it has several functions which affect the meaning of a written material. Quirk et al (1973:458) illustrate two functions that punctuation serves, they are:

1) Separation of

a) *Successive units (e.g. sentences by periods, or items in a list by commas)*

b) *Included units (as when parentheses mark off an interpolated phrase or clause)*

2) Specification of language function (as when an apostrophe indicates that an inflection is genitive).

Meanwhile, Shaw (1986: 137-8) presents four general functions for punctuation:

- To end or terminate a statement (like: full stop, question mark)
- To introduce (like : comma, colon)
- To separate parts of a sentence or word (like: comma, semicolon)
- To enclose parts of a sentence or a whole section (like: quotation, bracket)

Crystal (2003:279) mentions four functions: First, they enable stretches of written language to be read coherently, through the use of sentence -ending points, clause-dividing commas, and paragraph-marking indication .Second, they give prosody through features like question marks, exclamation marks and parentheses. Third, they may highlight semantic units or contrasts that exist in the text but which are not directly related to its grammatical structure, as in the choice of colons

vs. semi-colons so as to show the rhetorical structure of a complex sentence. Finally, they might add a semantic dimension as in the use of scare quotes to show that a word has a special sense.

In the same context, Awad (2012: 213) groups three functions for punctuation: First, *phonetic function*, in this function, rhythm, pauses and tone inflexions are shown in writing through punctuation marks and consequently a written document gains tone. When such punctuation marks are ignored the text becomes toneless. Hence, the reader feels free to interpret the tone in a way, he feels, suits best, a matter which may lead to confusing situations. To control tone in writing, the writer should make use of punctuation like full stops, commas, semicolons, etc. These punctuation marks, anyway, may work like traffic light; they tell the reader where to slow down and where to stop.

Second, *grammatical function*, punctuation in this function is used to form interrogation and to mark emphatic content. Also, it is used to highlight syntactic elements which are displaced from their positions, and it is used to build and complete the structure of texts whether at the sentence level or up the sentence level.

2. Data Analysis and Discussion

Data analysis shows that punctuation errors made by students are classified under the following categories²:

- Capitalization
- Indention
- Spacing
- The use of full stop
- The use of comma
- The use of hyphen
- The use of dash

² Punctuations which are not mentioned were not found in the data collect.

Table (1) below shows the results of the common errors made by students:

Punctuation	Frequencies	Percentage %
Capitalization	80	52%
Full stop	34	22%
Comma	33	21%
No spacing	08	05%
Total	155	100%

Table 1 : Results of the errors

2.1 Capitalization

The analysis shows that 80 capitalization errors were committed by students with percentage of (52%) . However, these errors were not all of the same type. They fall into three types:

a. Starting new sentences with small letters

The frequency of this type, according to data analysis, is 27 with a percentage of 33.75%. Consider the following examples:

- *there are advantages and disadvantages.....*
- *the doctors warn us that using mobile phone.....*
- *a portable telephone can make and receive calls over radio frequency link.*

b. Inserting capital letters in the middle and at random

This type of capitalization errors has gained the majority of the total errors committed by student at this category. The frequency of inserting capital letters in the middle and at random constitutes 51 of the total number with a percentage of 63.75%.

Examples:

- *The device starts Transfer and exchanges files.....*
- *....to communicate with people who are away From us.*
- *Mobile phone is a portable deVice..*

c. Using small letters at the beginning of proper nouns

Only two students have used small letters at the beginning of proper nouns. The errors found are two (i.e. the percentage is 2.5%):

- *My phone is samsung.*
- *Mobile phone is known as cell phone in north America.*

2.2 Indention (Leaving a space at the beginning of each paragraph)

Six students did not make appropriate indention at the beginning of their paragraphs. They started writing at the very edge of the paper.

2.3 Spacing (leaving a space between words)

Eight spacing errors are found. The students joined two words or more together, as in (*helpus = help us*), (*canneed = can need*). Sometimes, the indefinite article *a* is joined with its preceding noun as shown below:

(*acar= a car*), (*avital role= a vital*), (*apart= a part*), (*amiracle= a miracle*) ...etc.

2.4 The use of full stop

The analysis shows that a total number of 34 full stop errors were spotted and they constitute 22% among other errors. In this context, three kinds of full stop errors were found in the analysis: Misuse of full stop, full stop omission, no use of it throughout the paragraph.

As for the first case, students misused the full stop 12 times in their assignments. Let's consider the examples below:

- *If you want to get benefit or to waste your time, the mobile phone....*
- *in addition to use in the field of study and research by internet, the invention of the smart phone....*
- *All people use it in a lot of things like call, Messages, video call*

The second case, where full stop is omitted, was found 15 times, for example:

- *The mobile phone is a portable device we use it to communicate with people.*
- *The mobile phone has some disadvantages if it is misused, then it is a disaster it is a waste of time we spend too much time chatting without certain purposes.*

Finally, six students neglected the full stop. They did not use it at all. They either used commas or did not use any punctuation.

2.5 The use of comma

The frequency of comma errors is 33 times, i.e. a percentage of 22% of the total number of punctuation errors. The errors of comma occur at three levels: misuse of comma, omission of comma, and/or never using it at the whole paragraph. As for the first level, the frequency of misusing comma is 17, as in:

- *I can use mobile phone for many uses, like a calculator, and I can open my website with it ...*
- *It is connect to, that cell sends a message....*

Meanwhile, the frequency of omission comma is 6 times, for example:

- *My phone is slim modern and black...*
- *First the good effect of mobile phone*

Finally, the analysis made it clear that 10 out of 20 students have never use it throughout their paragraph.

2.6 The use of hyphen

The analysis shows that there are two students who have used hyphens. The first student has used it once and correctly. The second student has manipulated the hyphen three times: once correctly and twice incorrectly.

2.7 The use of dash

Only one student has used the dash. It was a correct use.

- *They have found that the phones are more than a means of communication – having a mobile*

3. Conclusions

The current study comes up with the following conclusions:

1. Capitalization errors are the most committed errors.
2. Although the percentage of committing comma errors is 21% , comma errors come second because half of the total number haven't used it at all. If they used it, the percentage would have increased.
3. Full stop errors occupy the third rank of error making.
4. Students' choices of punctuation are very limited. In common, they used full stop and comma, and neglected other punctuations.

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