

## Difficulties of Punctuation for Secondary School Students Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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### Abstract

*The Paper highlights the difficulties facing secondary students in punctuation practices and skills, represented by (Wad Rawa High school for girls and boys) as well as English teachers to whom the interview is conducted with, in Gezera State. To achieve the objectives of the study, a purposive test is conducted with (40) of secondary students selected randomly, to know about the difficulties facing them in punctuation skills, then the data analyzed and discussed, the following results are shown out:*

*Students facing real punctuation difficulties and that due to their weak background of learning English language. School English lessons and exercises don't include punctuation tasks and activities and that caused weak punctuation performance. Some students are doing well at punctuation tasks and activities and that because of their personal extra efforts in improving their English language. More lessons and exercises together with teachers follow up are only solutions of overcoming punctuation difficulties besides, it is difficult to expect the students to learn to punctuate better, when they are exposed to so many problems. The teachers' responsibility then is to find way to encourage their students to tackle the punctuation tasks with positive anticipation.*

**Key words:** EFL:"English as a Foreign Language", ESL:"English as a Second Language", Punctuation – marks and signals of punctuation

## **1. INTRODUCTION:**

The Paper aims to examine the concept of punctuations from English perceptive and to identify the difficulties facing students in punctuation and to know the causes of their punctuation weakness and what working solutions are to be conducted, by asking the research questions: “ What are the Factors that cause difficulties for students in punctuation? “ How students achieve their punctuation task despite the difficulties?” “What has the teacher done to help students to overcome difficulties in punctuation?” “What do you expect from teachers of punctuation skills to help you overcoming difficulties in punctuation tasks?”

The Paper will apply the descriptive analytical method in collecting data from various texts of literature review that cope with the research purposes in order to identify the relations between variables. Students face difficulties in punctuation marks due to their ignorance of basic roles. English Spine Series neglect punctuation as syllabus, only a narrow field. Students do not know how to put the punctuation marks in their appropriate separate place between punctuation marks. E.F.L learners, come across difficulties in making equivalents between  $L_1$  and  $l_2$  in punctuation marks.

The importance of this paper represents the concept of punctuation and the teachers teaching methodologies of teaching punctuation in secondary schools, students adopt punctuation as basic of writing skill together with other language basic components for perfect learning English. However many difficulties facing the process that the Paper aims to identify.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:**

Early writing had no punctuation, as we know it at all. An invention appeared only in the last 20% of the history of writing. However, they did have symbols - determinants - for denoting parts of speech they considered important(*Alex King, U.K, Eng. Academy,2000 p.21*).

Good writing is important. The ability to write clear and accurate text is the most useful skill that you will learn at university. Whatever subject you specialize in, and whatever career you choose after you graduate, a command of language is a valuable asset. When employers offer a job, they *sometimes do not* interested in how much he or she knows about emotional labor or inter-generational social mobility, but they are *always* looking for someone with good analytic and communicative skills and an eye for details. In almost any job, you will spend time working with a range of texts. You may produce written reports, letters, or marketing copies. You may also give lectures or presentations. (*Adapted for Sociology by Dr. Alex King, U.K, Eng. Academy,2000 p.21*).

Reading and writing are closely connected. Improving skills in one area will have a knock-on effect in the other. Setting high standards in both these areas. One of the simplest ways to improve writing is to read actively and to look at how authors mould the language to their own purposes. Try to develop an eye for style and sentence structure as you read. This will help students to assess their own writing and expand their language skills. While at university, 'good writing' means being able to produce a clear, grammatical, logical argument to answer a question in an exercise, an essay or an exam. This is not the place to be innovative or poetic. Chances to be creative with language are available elsewhere. Academic writing should be clear, clean, and correct. It should display your knowledge and express your ideas. Good writing is always aimed at a particular audience. Audience is the teacher(s) who will mark your work. Your teachers are highly qualified, and are likely to be the kind of people who have an obsessive interest in grammar and spelling.

If the grammar is so poor that will obscure your argument, you may fail the assessment. Markers cannot give credit for what they think you might have wanted to say. What is on the paper is all that counts. Good writing is not an optional extra to a degree; it is the core of the education system. Make this your primary goal at university. Everything that your Paper can be channeled towards making yourself a more perceptive reader and a more accurate writer. (*Alex King, U.K, Eng. Academy,2000.p 45*).

## **2-1: History of Teaching English in Sudan:**

Since 1889 and during the Anglo-Egyptian rule in Sudan, there was no proper education except those schools which were established by the Christian missionaries in some parts of the country. The only type of education was religious education in (Khalwas) (M.O. Bashir 1968-p.11).

Although English language was the instrument of the government, the latest intention to provide the people with only vocational and technical education and discouraged proper education for fear of having educated people who could destroy its rule. For the same purpose, English learning was unprofitable.

Then the government found that it was necessary to have some people who knew English in order to help in the administration of the country, so British teachers were appointed to teach in some established intermediate schools, and in 1902 Gordon Memorial College was established. In 1905, some schools in which English was used were established in Khartoum by American missionaries. In 1918, educated people started to hold meetings and they founded a club (M.O. Bashir 1968-p.91). They also founded a Sudanese unity. This progress within Sudanese people created a great misunderstanding with the government and made it stand against education.

In 1924, the educated people, led by Ali Abdullatif, revolted against the British rule. Since then Sudanese citizens started to struggle in order to get their independence and develop their country and as a result, new schools were opened for boys as well as for girls. In 1944, Gordon Universal College came to existence and in 1947 its candidates were allowed to sit for Oxford Certificate. In 1956, the Sudan became an independent country and education spread everywhere and English language was taught for teaching in the schools. Since then a new world for English teaching existed. Teachers of English used traditional ways of teaching and instead, new and modern techniques based on educational theories were applied for teaching English which became most widely spread as "language of international communication and modern technology (Harden 1978 p.25)".

Punctuation is no exception. It's all about doing more with less. This is how writing evolved from pictograms and logograms.

Every occasionally, too much is deleted and new symbols are added, which then reduce. Thus, determinants (originally, often to identify proper nouns, gender and other things not possible to learn from character values) are the first examples of semantic markup, but they did not denote the sorts of things we would ascribe to punctuation marks, such as flow. Punctuation “is the use of standard marks and signs in writing to separate words into sentences, clauses, and phrases in order to clarify meaning. The marks or signs are called punctuation marks.

## **2-2: Punctuation marks are signals to readers”.**

Punctuation is the system of signs or symbols given to a reader to show how a sentence is constructed and how it should be read. Sentences are the building blocks used to construct written accounts. They are complete statements. Punctuation shows how the sentence should be read and makes the meaning clear. (*Alex King, U.K, Eng. Academy, 2000, p 47*).

Every sentence should include at least a capital letter at the start, and a full stop at the end, exclamation mark or question mark at the end. This basic system indicates that the sentence is complete. (<http://www.skillsyouneed.com>).

**2-3: Styles of Writing:** Understanding the styles of writing used in various documents can help you put what you read into perspective.

There are many different and distinct writing styles that are adopted by authors depending on their audience and also on the medium in which they are publishing – for example, an article may be written differently online than it would be in a book or academic journal . (*Heaton (1978) gives a convincing, hurricanes formed (pages 27–p.32)*).

### **1. Academic Writing:**

Academic writing tends to be precise, cautious, lengthy and even pedantic. It is a style of writing which most students will quickly become familiar with.

Academic writers attempt to ensure that their analysis does not contain inaccurate information or omissions - essential points are usually clearly justified. This is a way of ensuring that the writer is saying exactly what he, she means - even if this means creating a lengthy piece in the process. This style can be tedious to read - but it

helps to ensure that the essential points of the text are interpreted correctly. (<https://www.englishclub.com.oxford> word power.) .

Some academic writers offer alternative interpretations by other academics. This is usually a good sign since it ensures that the reader is aware of the diversity of opinion and that the author is being objective.

## **2. Academic Journals:**

Different institutions produce academic journals across a broad range of subject areas. Academic journals are usually published regularly; quarterly or tri-annually although some may be more frequent. Because they are regularly produced they are able to respond more quickly to new research. For this reason, they are thought of as providing analysis of the latest ideas and thoughts from across the academic community. Academic journals will be written in very much the same tone as academic books containing the same analytical style. Academic journals are generally well-respected as their content has been peer reviewed. As you should use an element of common sense when using internet sources, so you should when reading journal articles. (Adapted for Sociology Dr. Debra Gimlin, 2007 p.7).

## **3. Fiction:**

Most of us will have read a book of fiction and will realize that the author has used imaginary people and events .Works of fiction do not usually contain a list of references and will not contain a bibliography. That is not to say that some of the aspects related in them are not factual, as in a historical novel, but they will not usually be useful for academic Paper purposes and would not normally appear in a list of books referred to (unless you are pursuing an English Literature qualification). Having said that, some works of fiction make use of academic conventions to give authority to their imaginary worlds and provide a list of sources at the end of their work .(*Heaton (1978)*).

## **4. Non-Fiction:**

Non-fiction deals with facts, examples of which include biography, history and special interest subjects such as gardening through to academic texts .Although these are all non-fiction it cannot be taken for granted that they contain undeniable facts. For example, there

has been a long running debate on the genre of history as it is agreed that all historical accounts will have been compiled with the prejudices of the recorder going unchallenged, although historians are now more aware of this likely bias .Most, but by no means all, non-fiction books will contain references to others' work and a biography. They will also range through different writing styles. (Adapted for Sociology Dr. Debra Gimlin, 2007p.10).

### **2-3: Punctuation Matters:**

It does not simply tell the reader when to start and stop. It organizes the text into meaningful units. Getting it wrong can seriously damage the sense of the text. To see the power of punctuation, look at this example from Lynne Truss's book, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*: (Dr. Hazel Hutchison, 2005 (Adapted for Sociology Dr. Debra Gimlin, 2007p.13).

#### **The Comma (,)**

The comma is useful in a sentence when the writer wishes to: pause before proceeding add a phrase that does not contain any new subject separate items. For example: The boy, who knew that his mother was about to arrive, ran quickly towards the opening door. Note that if the phrase or clause were to be removed, the sentence would still make sense although there would be a loss of information. Alternatively, two sentences could be used:

- The boy ran quickly towards the opening door. He knew that his mother was about to arrive.

Commas are also used to separate items in a list. As commas represent a pause, it is good practice to read your writing out loud and listen to where you make natural pauses as you read it. More often than not, you will indicate where a comma should be placed by a natural pause. Although, the 'rules' of where a comma needs to be placed should also be followed. For example: However, it has been suggested that some bees prefer tree pollen.

#### **2/ Full Stop (.)**

A full stop should always be used to end a sentence. The full stop indicates that a point has been made and that you are about to move on to further explanations or a related point. Less frequently, a series

of three full stops (an ellipsis) can be used to indicate where a section of a quotation has been omitted when it is not relevant to the text, for example, "The boy was happy... at the start of his summer holiday".

### **3/ Exclamation Mark(!)**

An exclamation mark indicates strong feeling within a sentence, such as fear, anger or love. It is also used to accentuate feeling within the written spoken word. For example, "Help! I love you!" In this way, it can also be used to indicate a sharp instruction "Stop! Police!" or to indicate humor "Ha! Ha! Ha!"

The exclamation mark at the end of a sentence means that you do not need a full stop. (*Heaton (1978)*).

### **4/ Question Mark(?)**

The question mark simply indicates that a sentence is asking a question. It always comes at the end of a sentence. For example: Are we at the end? Note that the question mark also serves as a full stop.

### **5/ Semi-colon(;)**

The semi-colon is perhaps the most difficult sign of punctuation to use accurately. If in doubt, avoid using it and convert the added material into a new sentence.

### **6/ Colon(:)**

The colon within a sentence makes a very pointed pause between two phrases. There are two main uses of the colon. It is most commonly used when listing. For example: (Human Resource Management:) (Guidelines for Telephone Advisers)

### **7/ Apostrophe(')**

The apostrophe, sometimes called an inverted comma has two main uses. The apostrophe indicates possession or ownership. For example. The girl's hat was green, (girl is in the singular). This shows the reader that the hat belongs to the girl. The girls' hats were green, (girls in this instance are plural, i.e. more than one girl, more than one hat.) This indicates that the hats belong to the girls.

**8/ Hyphen(-)** The hyphen is used to link words together. For example: sub-part - eighteenth-century people - week-end - second-class post - gender-neutral - non-verbal.

**9/ Brackets ( )** Brackets always come in pairs, ( ) and are used to make an aside, or a point which is not part of the main flow of a sentence. If you remove the words between the brackets, the sentence should still make sense. For example: “The strategy (or strategies) chosen to meet the objectives may need to change as the intervention continues”. Ownership of wealth, together with occupation, are the chief basis of class differences. (Giddens, 1997, p.243)

**10/ Square Brackets [...]** A different set of square brackets [ ] can be used to abbreviate lengthy quotations - to correct the tense of a quotation to suit the tense of your own sentence. “We can define class as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources that strongly influence the types of lifestyle they are able to lead. Ownership of wealth, together with occupation, are the chief basis of class differences. The major classes that exist in Western societies are an upper class [...]; a middle class [...] and a working class”[...] (Giddens, 1997, p.243)

**11/ Slash (/)** Many people use the slash / instead of or, and etc., but this is not always helpful to the reader. There is, however, a modern convention in gender-neutral writing to use ‘she/he’ (Giddens, 1997, p.243).

### **3. METHODOLOGY:**

The Paper relied on the descriptive analytical method in collecting data through the test directed to (40) of students responded and (10) of English teachers from secondary level. The students of third secondary classes, third level from female, (20) respondents are selected randomly in order to conduct the questionnaire who represent the general students population. A test is to be analyzed and discussed using comparative techniques as ration analysis to identify the relations between variables, and the interview conducted with English teachers on comparable statement.

#### **4. DISCUSSION:**

In this chapter the Paper tends to analyze and discuss the data collected through cross-sectional sample directed to students and a semis-structured interview to the teachers of English language dealing with punctuation as element of writing skills in the secondary stage in Gazera State , Wad Rawa area, the sample composed of (40) respondents from both boys and girls , a (10) teachers selected randomly to achieve the purpose of the interview.

**Test (1): the boy's test statement of punctuation test (r right –w wrong):**

S /No	Punctuation mark	Right (r)	Wrong(w)	Percent (r)	Percent(w)
1	Comma	11	9	55%	45%
2	Question mark	7	13	35%	65%
3	Colon	2	18	10%	90%
4	Inverted comma	0	20	-%	100%
5	Brackets	4	16	20%	80%
6	Exclamation mark	3	17	6%	94%
7	Hyphen	19	1	95%	5%
8	Apostrophe	15	5	75%	25%
9	Full stop	20	0	-	-
10	Capital letter	12	8	60%	40%

#### **Discussion of table (1):**

**The higher (right score ratios) results in punctuation test:**

- The above table shows that , (95%) of the sample got the right score of the test in their application of the (hyphen) mark (practical test) of punctuation marks as greater ratio writing text and identifying missing mark test , students accustomed to do it in their exercises.
- Followed by (75%) of the sample who got the right score in the test of apostrophe mark in writing text and identifying missing punctuation mark test, that due to the teachers notices for students to pay good attention.
- (55%) of the sample got the right score in writing text and identifying missing punctuation mark test, in the most repeated punctuation marks tests.

**The (wrong score ratios) results in punctuation mark text test:**

- The above table indicates that, (100%) that is collectively the total sample got the wrong mistake score while testing inverted comma punctuation, since there is no correction for the previous punctuation mistakes and no extra exercises, in addition there is no practices in the curriculum focusing on giving extra exercises for punctuation mistakes and weakness.
- (94%) of the sample got wrong scores in testing (Exclamation mark) as punctuation application of texts and lack of application and exercised practices.
- (90%) of the sample in testing punctuation mark (colon) got wrong scores and that is connected with the negligence and students ignore the correct practices.
- (80%) of the sample got wrong scores in testing (Brackets) as punctuation mark in writing texts.
- (65%) of the sample got wrong scores in testing (Question mark) as punctuation mark in writing texts.

**Table (2): the girls' of secondary statement of punctuation test (r-w):**

S /No	Punctuation mark	Right	Wrong	Percent (r)	Percent(w)
1	Comma	5	15	20%	75%
2	Question mark	14	6	70%	30%
3	Colon	5	15	25%	75%
4	Inverted comma	9	11	45%	55%
5	Brackets	4	16	20%	80%
6	Exclamation mark	4	16	20%	80%
7	Hyphen	6	16	5%	95%
8	Apostrophe	17	3	70%	30%
9	Full stop	18	2	90%	10%
10	Capital letter	16	4	80%	20%

**Results of right score mark:**

- (90%) of the sample got right score of the punctuation test texts in full stop punctuation mark.
- (80%) of the sample got right score of the punctuation test texts in capital letter punctuation mark .
- (70%) of the sample got right score of the punctuation test texts in apostrophe punctuation mark.

- (70%) of the sample got right score of the punctuation test texts in question punctuation mark .

**Results of punctuation test wrong score text mark:**

- (95%) of the sample got wrong score of the punctuation test texts in hyphen punctuation mark .
- (80%) of the sample got the wrong score of the punctuation test texts in the brackets and the exclamation punctuation mark all together.
- (75%) of the sample got wrong score of the punctuation test texts in comma and colon punctuation mark.

**Table (3): total of secondary statement of punctuation test (Right -r- Wrong -w):**

S /No	Punctuation mark	Right (r)	Wrong(w)	Percent (r)	Percent(w)
1	Comma	16	24	40%	60%
2	Question mark	21	19	52.5%	47.5
3	Colon	7	33	17.5%	82.5%
4	Inverted comma	9	31	22.5%	77.5%
5	Brackets	5	35	12.5%	87.5%
6	Exclamation mark	7	33	17.5%	82.5%
7	Hyphen	25	15	62.5%	37.5%
8	Apostrophe	32	8	80%	20%
9	Full stop	38	2	95%	5%
10	Capital letter	28	12	70%	30%

**Discussing table (3): The total students sample right test scores:**

- (95%) as higher scores brought in full stop as punctuation mark, since the students accustomed to practice full stop, regularly in finishing paragraph and at the end of each work. In addition teachers while teaching punctuation marks , there is no specific rules to be explain only across the general language practices like writing skills and sometimes in narrow application while doing exercises .
- (80%) scores brought in apostrophe punctuation mark, this explain the linguistic practices during coping texts and in reading , when doing homework , no notices to be copied

specifically , thus students may repeat the previous instructions accordingly.

- (70%) scores brought in capital letter as punctuation mark, that is because practicing English language always stated the principles of writing , which start with capital letters.
- (62.5%) scores brought in hyphen as punctuation mark.

**The total students sample wrong test scores:**

- (87.5%) scores brought in hyphen as punctuation mark , which practiced through the exercises and the writing skills that mentioned through writing texts , it is familiar for students to practice hyphen.
- (82.5%) scores brought in brackets and exclamation mark all together as punctuation mark, writing skills under teaching methodology indicates the amount of knowledge of students about punctuation importance, this explain that students ignore doing such practices unless teachers explain what to do like in writing direct and indicated speech in a limited range.
- (77%) scores brought in inverted comma as punctuation mark , the same happened when doing punctuation like , the inverted comma , the same difficulties face them when doing texts exercise .

**CONCLUSION:**

The Paper tended to investigate the difficulties facing secondary students from both gender in punctuation practices and skills, represented by (Wad Rawa High school for girls and boys).

To achieve the objectives of the study, a purpose Test is conducted with (40) of secondary students selected randomly , to know about the difficulties facing them in punctuation skills, then the data analyzed and discussed, the following results are shown out:

- Students do facing punctuation difficulties and that due to their weak background of learning English language.
- School English lessons and exercises don't include punctuation tasks and activates and that caused weak punctuation performance.

- Some students are doing good at punctuation tasks and activates and that because of their personal extra efforts in improving their English language.
- More lessons and exercises together with teachers follow up are only solutions of overcoming punctuation difficulties.

Moreover, it is difficult to expect the students to learn to punctuate better, when they are exposed to so many problems. The teachers' responsibility then is to find way to encourage their students to tackle the punctuation tasks with positive anticipation. Especially, for students at secondary, and teachers should present some key words and structures before allowing the students to do their punctuation tasks and activities.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Teachers' explanation about components of spoken language such as: (punctuation tasks and assignments, clustering, redundancy, reduced forms, colloquial language was recommended by the study, as they cited in their test that:

1. "Teachers should conduct extra assignments and practices, at the phrases or sentences that contain punctuation, that students may understand or recognize punctuation signs.
2. Students must have an extensive punctuation practices in their written assignments with focus on punctuation tasks.
3. "Let them do more bottom-up exercises, focusing on pronunciation, intonation, word stress".
4. Students must perform punctuation to English signs at the end of each lesson with activities about that contains writing tasks.
5. Curriculum authorities and scholars of education must pay attention to modify punctuation lessons to be practices so that the difficulties could be minimized

It is hoped that teachers should be flexible in following-up, punctuation techniques so that they can help students overcome difficulties in language learning, especially in punctuation practices and other language skills as well.

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