

Common Punctuation Errors Made by EFL Learners A case study of Students at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages & Translation, Zawia University - January, 2024

Aisha Ahmed Al-Magtouf Owheedah
English department / Al-zawia university
a.waheedah@zu.edu.ly

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the common punctuation errors made by Third-Year students of the English Dept. at the Faculty of Languages & Translation in Zawia University in the process of academic writing in English, to discuss the reasons underlying these errors, and to suggest some remedies for these errors. A random sample of 24 students from Third-Year students is given a punctuation test as a tool for collecting data. The researcher uses a statistical analytical method to analyze data. After their errors were identified, and quantified, the reasons for the errors were also discussed in terms of literature background. The results reveal that the most common errors among the students are the use of commas in the place of full stops, the incorrect uses of the comma, and the wrong uses of quotation marks, besides the misuse of some punctuation marks. Moreover, the findings show that there are significant differences in the number of punctuation errors among Third-Year students due to the insufficiency of exercises (unpunctuated sentences/texts), insufficient explanation to all types of punctuation marks, their uses and functions through examples for illustration, in addition to lack of practice. Furthermore, the results indicated that there were no significant differences in the number of punctuation errors due to gender; however, the results revealed that there were significant differences in the number of punctuation errors among the participants due to academic level. In the light of the findings, it is recommended that punctuation marks should be taught in the target language in detail, and both differences and similarities between native and target language should be pointed out in teaching punctuation.

Keywords: Error Analysis, Punctuation Marks, Writing.

خُلاصة الدراسة

أخطاء شائعة في علامات التقييم

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على أخطاء التقييم الشائعة التي يرتكبها طلاب السنة الثالثة قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية اللغات والترجمة بجامعة الزاوية أثناء عملية الكتابة الأكاديمية باللغة الإنجليزية ومناقشة الأسباب الكامنة وراء هذه الأخطاء، والتعرف على الأسباب التي أدت إلى هذه الأخطاء واقتراح بعض الحلول لهذه الأخطاء. تم اختيار عينة عشوائية مكونة من 24 طالبا وطالبة من طلاب السنة الثالثة واخضاعها لإجراء اختبار علامات التقييم كأداة لجمع البيانات. تستخدم الباحثة الأسلوب التحليلي الإحصائي لتحليل البيانات. وبعد تحديد أخطائهم وقياسها، تمت مناقشة أسباب الأخطاء أيضًا من حيث الدراسات السابقة في هذا المجال. وأظهرت النتائج أن أكثر الأخطاء شيوعاً بين الطلاب هي استخدام الفاصلة مكان القاطعة، والاستخدام الخاطئ للفاصلة، والاستخدام الخاطئ لعلامات الاقتباس، إلى جانب سوء استخدام بعض علامات التقييم. كما أظهرت النتائج وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية في عدد أخطاء التقييم لدى طلاب السنة الثالثة تعزى إلى عدم كفاية التدريب (كالجمل/النصوص غير المرقمة على سبيل المثال)، وعدم كفاية الشرح لجميع أنواع علامات التقييم واستخداماتها ووظائفها من خلال أمثلة لعلامات التقييم، بالإضافة إلى عدم الممارسة. كما أشارت النتائج إلى عدم وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية في عدد أخطاء التقييم تعزى للجنس؛ إلا أن النتائج أظهرت وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية في عدد أخطاء التقييم بين المشاركين تعزى للمستوى الأكاديمي. وفي ضوء النتائج يوصى بتدريس علامات التقييم في اللغة الثانية بالتفصيل، ويجب الإشارة إلى الاختلافات والتشابهات بين اللغة الأم واللغة الثانية في تدريس علامات التقييم.

1. Introduction

Writing is a very challenging task and mastering it requires both skills and effort. Writing is viewed as a multifaceted and tricky activity for many students; yet it is an essential skill for EFL learners because it is a mean through which they develop their critical thinking and enhance their creativity. Specifically, it is crucial for university students as it helps them to do well in their academic courses due to its interdisciplinary nature. For example, it enables them to write their essays, answer questions, prepare their reports, write their research papers, and do other writing assignments. In this regard, the consensus

in the education field is that errors are inevitable, for example, errors cannot be avoided. In the sense that they are an inseparable part of the language-learning process. There are various types of orthographical errors, such as errors associated with spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and word emphasis. The present study is restricted to punctuation. Students face many problems in the correct and appropriate use of punctuation marks while learning English as a second or foreign language. Appropriate use of punctuation marks makes writing understandable as it clarifies its meaning whereas their wrong use leads to ambiguity and confusion. According to Mccuen & Winkler (2000), punctuation errors occur with the omission or misuse of one of the punctuation marks. Normally students know the punctuation marks and their placement theoretically but when it comes to their practical application, they use them inappropriately and incorrectly. According to Carroll and Wilson (1993), learners face punctuation problems because there are no universal rules of punctuation. In the same way, Byrne (1988) said punctuation is extremely difficult because it has never been standard. Shokouhi and Dabbagh (2009) said that learners face difficulties in using periods and commas. Mahmood et al. (2014) say that errors of punctuation are the most frequent errors in the writing of students. He says that the students commit punctuation errors in a bulky magnitude, particularly, errors in the use of full stops, commas, and apostrophes. The students mostly use “of” to show possession for animate nouns. It means that the rules of punctuation are not taught to them properly and they keep on making errors of punctuation.

1.2 Statement of problem

Third-year students of Dept. of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Zawia University, encounter numerous problems in writing. One of the most common problems, which are not taken seriously by most learners and many teachers, is the proper production of punctuation marks. This is a phenomenon that is clearly observed in almost all the courses that the researcher has run; consequently, she conducted this study. When people speak, they use voice intonation, hand gestures, and eye movement to express ideas. When students write, they take the help of punctuation marks to tell the reader when to slow down, stop, or emphasize. Thus, learning punctuation is very important because it brings clarity to writing. Punctuation marks are essential to communicating

meaning. Structure and coherence in every piece of writing are affected by punctuation marks (Gamaroff, 2000; Shaughnessy, 1977).

1.3 Aims of the Study

This study aims to investigate the most common punctuation errors made by third-year EFL students. In other words, it deals with students' difficulties in making successful choices between full stops and semicolons, semicolons and commas, commas, and dashes. These punctuation marks have been chosen because they are the most commonly used ones in writing.

1.4 Research Question

To realize the objective of this study, the following research question is raised:

- What are the most common punctuation errors made by third-year EFL students at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Zawia University?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of the study stems from the importance of paper orthography in writing. The study can be considered valuable for both students and teachers since it aims to improve teaching and learning of writing skills in English. It helps teachers to adjust their teaching methods according to the most frequent punctuation errors made by EFL students. Additionally, the study is designed to highlight punctuation errors to help EFL students to avoid making such errors

6. Review of Related Literature

6.1. What is *Punctuation*?

A very simple definition of **Punctuation** could be symbols that are used to aid the clarity and comprehension of written language. Some common punctuation marks are the period, comma, question mark, exclamation point, apostrophe, quotation mark and hyphen (Olson, 1980). Punctuation (formerly sometimes called *pointing*) is the use of spacing, conventional signs, and certain typographical devices as aids to the understanding and the correct reading, both silently and aloud, of handwritten and printed texts (Lukeman, 2006). [From a technical viewpoint](#), Truss (2004: 77) defines punctuation as "The practice, action, or system of inserting points or other small marks into texts, in order to aid interpretation; division of text into sentences, clauses, etc., by means of such marks".



Truss (2003) goes further to claim that in written English, punctuation is vital to disambiguate the meaning of sentences. For example: "*woman, without her man, is nothing*" (emphasizing the importance of men), and "*woman: without her, man is nothing*" (emphasizing the importance of women) have very different meanings; as do "eats shoots and leaves" (which means the subject consumes plant growths) and "eats, shoots, and leaves" (which means the subject eats first, then fires a weapon, and then leaves the scene). The sharp differences in meaning are produced by the simple differences in punctuation within the example pairs, especially the latter. Nordquist (2017) points out that punctuation is the set of marks used to regulate texts and clarify their meanings, principally by separating or linking words, phrases, and clauses. Similarly, Lowth (1762) claims that the doctrine of punctuation needs to be very imperfect: few precise rules can be given that will hold without exception in all cases, but much must be left to the judgment and taste of the writer. Still with the domain of writing skill, Partridge (1978) insists that punctuation is not something that one applies as an *ornament*, for it is part of the structure; so much a part that, without it, the structure would be meaningless--except after an exhausting examination. As Partridge writes (1978: 30): **Punctuation is not something that, like a best suit of clothes, you put on for special occasions. Punctuation is not something you add to writing, even the humblest: it forms an inescapable part of writing. To change the metaphor, punctuation might be compared to the railway line along which the train (composition, style, writing) must travel if it isn't to run away with its driver (the writer of even a note to the butcher).**

6.2 Importance of Punctuation

Punctuation marks are little things, but they are as essential to good composition as nails are to a carpenter. Mainly by their aid do we make sense or nonsense of what we write? Without punctuation marks, many sentences are mere jumbles of words. The art of punctuation, as any other art, is acquired only by study and practice. There are certain well-defined rules observed by all; the mastery of these will make one capable of deciding where rules do not apply. (Lukeman, 2006). According to EL-Shab and Varalakshmi (2008), it is an obvious fact that stress, pause, gestures, and other devices, which help us to convey our messages clearly when we speak, cannot be mentioned. However, the

moment we start to write, a lot of that work must be entirely handled by punctuation marks, such slight marks make a lot in changing the meaning from being something to something different. The following examples will make it clear:

- a. *Spare him not, kill him*
- b. *Spare him, not kill him.*

The First sentence means *'to kill him'*, whereas the second sentence means *'not to kill'* him. Therefore, just a comma has changed the meaning. Awad (2012) in his study denotes the importance of punctuation marks which have been developed to help learners make up for the lack of voice intonation and body language in written communication. They themselves carry meaning and express relationships between ideas; thus it is important to choose the punctuation mark that best expresses the relationship learners have in mind. Consider these two sentences:

- a. *Eat children.*
- b. *Eat, children.*

Both sentences are commands, but the first sentence would be correct only in a society where people eat human flesh. Oshima and Hogue (1991). So, wrong use of punctuation marks is a distinctive indicator of unclarity in texts. (Rumki, 2005 and Connelly, 2005). Rumisek and Zemach (2005), point out that punctuation is simply a device for making it easy to read and understand written texts, it is regarded as an established code of signs, which allow writers to make sense of writing. These slight signs should be concentrated in order to prevent misinterpretation of what the writers intended to send. Punctuation serves as an assistant whose function is to help reader make sense of what they read. Rumki (2005) makes a point of view of that, teachers should teach students to the value of punctuation marks as much as letters and words for conveying meaning. However, the wrong use of punctuation can interrupt the flow of ideas and changes the meaning.

To show the importance assumed by punctuation rules in writing, Olson (1980) uses an analogy of the traffic signs that govern the rules of the road. He assumes that when a driver sees a red blinking light or a red sign, they bring their vehicle to a full stop; when a driver sees a blinking yellow light, they proceed with caution. These traffic rules help make driving safe and efficient. The same is true with punctuation marks: in written communication, writers use punctuation marks to make their message especially clear to their readers.

6.3. Functions of Punctuation

Punctuation has three important functions:

- 1. Phonetic Function:** this is very important since punctuation marks show clearly the rhythm, pauses, and tone inflections in a written document; a written document has a tone. Many times the tone is ignored, and the readers are free to interpret the tone the way they want/feel/ (like it): that may lead to confusing situations, and it is worse than grammatical mistakes. The tone is controlled by commas, semicolons, colons, points of ellipsis, etc. (Connelly, 2005). In this regard, they are like traffic lights telling us to slow down and stop. They make clear thought.
- 2. Grammatical Function:** punctuation is used in direct style: to form interrogations; to mark emphatic content; to highlight syntactic elements displaced from their natural positions; and to build the structure of the sentences, complex sentences, paragraphs, documents, etc.
- 3. Semantic Function:** punctuation helps learners understand the meaning of particular words/phrases by marking/highlighting them differently than normal text, using italics, underlining, bolds, capitals, etc. In a short apposition, one could use commas to isolate it or not. Long appositions are always isolated by a pair of commas. Further, commas are needed almost in all instances when we have a nominative address (Rumki, 2005). In this respect, they are as essential to good composition as nails are to a carpenter (Lukeman, 2006). Wrong punctuation can interrupt the flow of ideas and change meaning, but properly used punctuation not only helps readers understand your meaning but also makes them engrossed in one's writing. (Rumki, 2005).

6.4. Punctuation rules: *static* or *dynamic*

The rules of punctuation are not *static*; they have changed throughout the years and will continue to change. What once might have been considered improper punctuation may now be considered correct. The rules of punctuation are created and maintained by writers to help make their prose more effective and their exact meaning changes over time, just as traffic rules change with time. (For example, in many states it is now acceptable to make a right turn at a red light if no oncoming vehicles are in sight.) At any point in time, a particular punctuation mark means what writers agree it means; as consensus shifts, so

will its meaning. If learners approach punctuation with this understanding of its flexibility, they will not be intimidated by the conventions of punctuation (Olson, 1980).

6.5. The most commonly used punctuation marks and their usages in academic writing.

Writing formally in English is more than just choosing the right words in the right order. Using punctuation in your writing helps the reader to clearly understand the message that is being conveyed. Punctuation primarily helps to indicate the pauses and the emphasis on certain ideas or thoughts that are discussed in the text. In particular, in academic writing, it is essential to accurately use punctuation because it helps to strengthen arguments that are made in the text. According to Byrne (1988: 37), the following is an overview of nine of the most common punctuation marks:

1) *The Full Stop/Period (.)*

- a) It neatly summarizes its major purpose: to help end a sentence. While most other punctuation marks in formal English mark a pause in a sentence or add an emphasis, the period completes a sentence.
- b) Full stops are used after initials, e.g.,

John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.

- c) Full stops are used to denote an abbreviation has been used. A list of Latin abbreviations that are used in academic writing is as follows:

et cetera = etc. nota bene = n.b. *et alii.* = et al.

conferre = cf. ibidem = ibid.

- d) Finally, three periods in a row are called an *ellipsis* and this indicates that entire words have been cut out of a quote, e.g., *“I hope it’s only a matter of time before... we reimagine zoos.”*

2) *The Comma (,)*

The comma is one of the most misused of the common punctuation marks, probably because it has so many technical uses. The three primary functions of comma in academic writing are as follows:

- a) Separating adverbial or introductory phrases from the main clause: this is a very common use in academic writing, which relies on transitional and adverbial phrases to develop a line of argument. Some very common

examples are: *However, the..., Therefore, researchers argue..., As a result, participants... After this occurred, the...*

- b) Separating dependent clauses from the main cause: the subordinate clause can be in the middle of the sentence, which requires a comma before and after it. For example:

This issue is, as described previously, central to this work.

or

This issue is central to this work, as described previously.

- c) Separating a list of items: this is the most well-known use of the comma. In American English, it is called *oxford comma*, whereas in British English, it is called *serial comma*. Commas are required only when we require clarity in a given list of items. Thus, using the Oxford/Serial comma helps improve clarity in a given list, although it may seem to be simply a matter of style to add a comma before *and*. Here is an example:

The application can be downloaded to PCs, smartphones, tablets, and iPods.

- d) Between the date and year in a date, e.g.

July 14, 1789, the fall of Bastille marked the beginning of the French rev.

- e) Between the road, city, And state /country in addresses, e.g.

I live on 43 ELM Street, Fan Diego, California.

- f) Between a city and the country, it is in, e.g.

The Colossus is in Rome, Italy.

- g) After the greeting and closing in a letter.

Dear Peter, / Dear madam, / Sir, Respectfully.

- 3) *The Colon (:)* has three main uses:

- a) After a word introducing a quotation, an explanation, an example, or a series.

He was planning to study four subjects: politics, philosophy, sociology and economics.

Descartes said: "I think; Therefore, I am".

- b) Independent clauses, when the second explains the first, similar to a semicolon, e.g. *I didn't have time to get changed: I was already late.*

c) For emphasis, e.g. *There was one thing she loved more than any other: her dog.*

A colon also has non-grammatical uses in time, ratio, business correspondence and references, e.g. *10:00 am* (time) *a student/teacher ratio of 1:2* (ratio)

4) *The Semi colon (;)*

It is used to connect independent clauses. It shows a closer relationship between the clauses than a period would show, e.g. *John was hurt; he knew she only said it to upset him.*

5) *The Question mark (?)*

It is used to indicate a *direct question* (i.e, interrogative sentences) when placed at the end of a sentence, e.g. *When did Jane leave for the market?*

6) *The Exclamation mark (!)*

It is used when a person wants to express a *sudden outcry* or add *emphasis*.

a) Within dialogue: *"Holy cow!" screamed Jane.*

b) To emphasize a point: *My mother-in-law's rants make me furious!*

c) After a strong command (imperative sentence). *Go to your room now!*

7) *Dash (–)* is used to separate words into statements. There are two common types of dashes: *en dash* and *em dash*.

a) The **en dash** is slightly wider than a hyphen. It is a symbol (–) that is used in writing or printing to indicate a range or connections and differentiations, e.g. *1880–1945* *Princeton–New York trains*

b) The **em dash** is twice as long as the **en dash**. The **em dash** can be used in place of a comma, parenthesis, or colon to enhance readability or emphasize the conclusion of a sentence, e.g. *She gave him her answer — No!*

Whether we put spaces around the *em dash* or not is a style choice. Writers are just required to be consistent.

8) *Apostrophe (')* is used to indicate the omission of a letter or letters from a word, the possessive case, or the plurals of lowercase letters. Examples of the apostrophe in use include:

a) Omission of letters from a word, e.g.

I've seen that movie several times. She wasn't the only one who knew the answer.

- b) Possessive case, e.g. *Sara's dog bit the neighbor.*
c) Plural for lowercase letters, e.g. *Six people were told to mind their p's and q's.*

9) **Quotation marks** (“ ”) are a pair of punctuation marks used primarily to mark the beginning and end of a passage attributed to another person and repeated word for word. They are also used to indicate meanings and to indicate the unusual or doubtful status of a word. Here is an example: *"Don't go outside," she said.*

Single quotation marks (‘ ’) are used most frequently for quotes within quotes, e.g.

Marie told the teacher, "I saw Marc at the playground, and he said to me 'Bill started the fight,' and I believed him."

2.6 British vs. American English

Dundar (2019) notes that there are a few differences between punctuation in British and American English. The following chart details some of those differences:

Symbol	British English	American English
The “.” symbol is called	A full stop	a period
The “!” symbol is called	an exclamation mark	an exclamation point
The position of quotation marks (“ ”)	Joy means “happiness”.	Joy means “happiness.”
The punctuation for abbreviations	Dr, Mr, Mrs, St, Rd, Ct	Dr., Mr., Mrs., St., Rd., Ct.

6.7. Previous Studies

In the previous discussion, it has been claimed that punctuation is an important skill in writing because punctuation is essential in clear and effective writing, especially academic writing. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that Wati (2014) conducted a descriptive study involving an error analysis of punctuation errors made by third-semester students of the Dept. English. Wati’s study aims to describe students’ errors in using punctuation in English texts. As a result, the researcher found that the error kinds made by students are period, comma, question mark, quotation marks, omission and exclamation marks. In addition, generally, the third-semester students have mastered punctuation but, some students didn’t understand how to use commas before quotations and how to leak a curacy. As for the kinds of punctuation errors, Corder (1981) divided errors into four types: (1) omission of some required elements; (2) addition of some necessary or incorrect elements; (3) selection of incorrect elements; (4) mis-ordering of elements.



Also, Abdall and Samhon (2016), in a study investigating the common punctuation errors made by students of secondary school in writing, report that there are various errors. The results reveal that there are significant differences in the number of punctuation errors among secondary students due to insufficiency of exercises (unpunctuated sentences/texts), and insufficient explanation of types of punctuation marks. This view is supported by Mayo et al., (2000), who think that punctuation rules are necessary to be taught and explained with examples. They insist that teachers should provide their students with short pieces of unpunctuated texts to help them apply punctuation marks correctly. However, students might find the rules are not hard and simply can use a full stop at the end of any sentence. However, the rules alone are insufficient; they need explanation with examples and application through using exercises for practice and reinforcement.

Awad (2012) investigates the most common punctuation mistakes that the English and TEFL majors at An-Najah National University make in their writings. The results indicate that there are no significant differences in the number of punctuation errors due to gender and department. However, the result reveals that there are significant differences in the number of punctuation errors among the participants due to academic level.

A more recent study was carried out by Gezmiş (2023) to analyze the punctuation errors that the students made in the process of academic writing in English. The data collection procedure was accomplished through 56 English essay papers written by the participants as a final assignment in the writing course. The findings demonstrate that the students frequently made errors in using commas and that the students had a tendency to commit interlingual errors, although their errors were also caused by their target language.

8. Methodology

8.1. Data Collection of the Study

This study is quantitative. To collect the data for the study, a specially designed punctuation test was administered by the researcher (Appendix 1). The test was taken from an online website called *Workbook for developmental*. It was adapted to suit the purpose of the study. It comprised a total of 11 test items. Specifically, there were 10 sentences with the punctuation marks removed. The participants were required to insert the correct punctuation marks. The 11th sentence was done as an example.

8.1 Participants of the Study

The study is conducted with the participation of 24 third-year students (1 male and 23 females) of Dept. of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Zawia University. The students were randomly chosen depending on their desire to participate. The participants were registered for the academic year 2023-2024, and their ages ranged from 19 to 21 years. By the end of the academic year 2023-2024, participants will have taken three writing-centered courses (Writing I, Writing II, Writing III) as part of the department requirements of their study plans.

8.3 Procedures of the Study

The punctuation test was administered during the regular writing class time. The participants were given clear instructions and allowed about 20 minutes to complete the test. The collected data were analyzed statistically and the results were discussed.

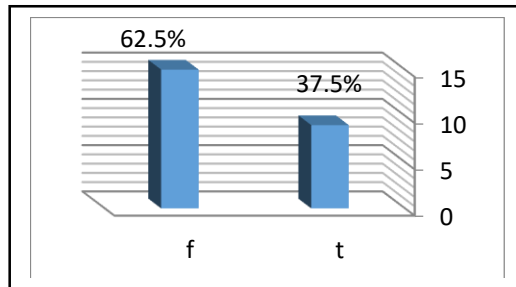
9. Data Analysis & Results

Sentences	Correct Answer	Percentage %	Wrong Answer	Percentage %
I expected a package this morning; however, I waited all day for it.	9	37.5 %	15	62.5 %
Rainy days are not all that bad – they prove the water crucial for all.	4	17 %	20	83 %
We traveled to Rome, Italy; Athens, Greece; and Paris, France.	0	0 %	24	100 %
Shakespeare said it best: “All is well that ends will.”	7	29 %	17	71 %
What a very cold night it was going to be!	8	33 %	16	67 %
Shall we resume the story?	12	50 %	12	50 %
It's a perfect day.	20	83 %	4	17 %
My professor – he is also my uncle – gives us a lot of research to do.	3	12.5 %	21	87.5 %
She said, “I'm coming tomorrow”.	5	21 %	19	79 %
Nothing!	14	58 %	10	42 %

Table 1: Percentage values of the participants' correct VS wrong responses to the punctuation test

Sentence 1: *I expected a package this morning; however, I waited all day for it.*

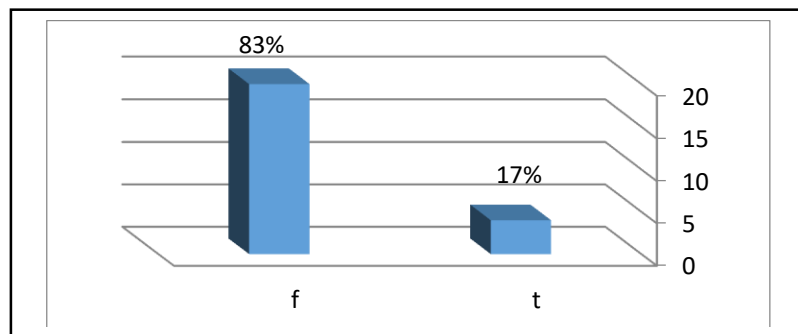
The participants' performance on this sentence indicates that 9 of the answers (37.5%) were correct, while 15 (62.5%) answers were wrong. This is shown by the Graph 1 below.



Graph 1: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 1

Sentence 2: *Rainy days are not all that bad – they prove the water crucial for all.*

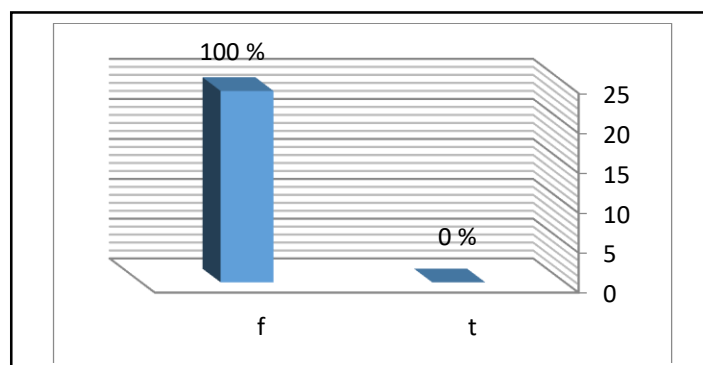
The number of true answers was 4 (17%), whereas the wrong answers of the participants were 20 (83%). This illustrated by Graph 2 below.



Graph 2: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 2

Sentence 3: *We traveled to Rome, Italy; Athens, Greece; and Paris, France.*

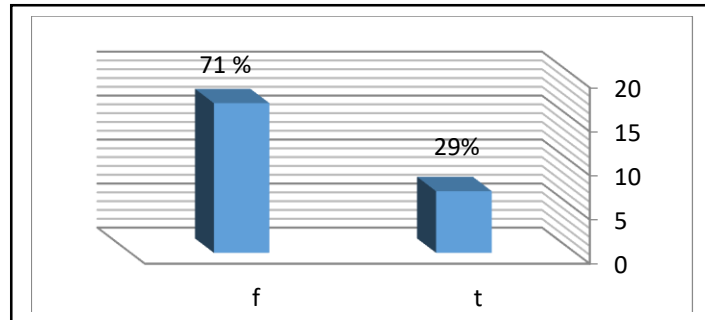
No one of the participants 0 (0%) punctuated this sentence correctly. This means that all the 24 (100%) answer were wrong. This illustrated by Graph 3 below.



Graph 3: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 3

Sentence 4: *Shakespeare said it best: "All is well that ends will."*

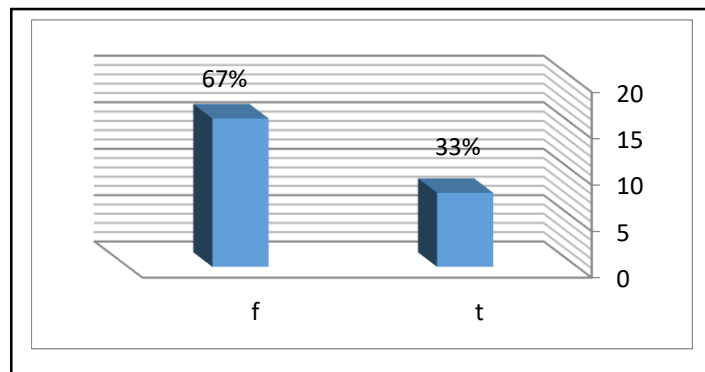
The statistical analysis of the participants' performance on this sentence indicates that there were 7(29%) correct answers, and 17(71%) wrong answers. This illustrated by Graph 4 below.



Graph 4: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 4

Sentence 5: *What a very cold night it was going to be!*

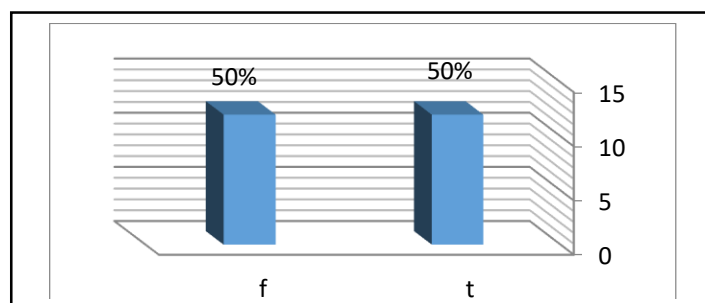
8 participants (33%) punctuated this sentence correctly, whereas 16 (67%) produced wrong answers. This illustrated by Graph 5 below.



Graph 5: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 5

Sentence 6: *Shall we resume the story?*

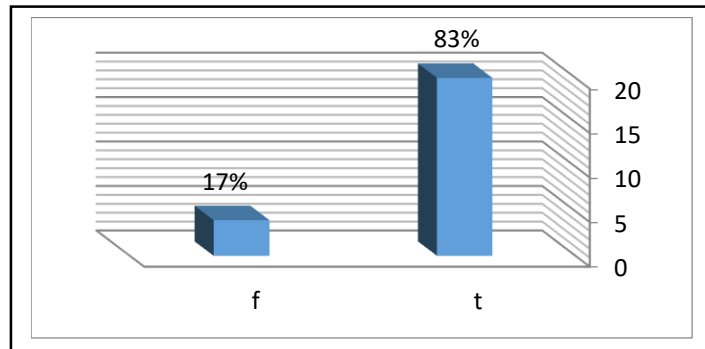
The answers of the participants were equally divided into 12 (50%) correct answers and 12 (50%) wrong answers. This illustrated by Graph 6 below.



Graph 6: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 6

Sentence 7: *It's a perfect day.*

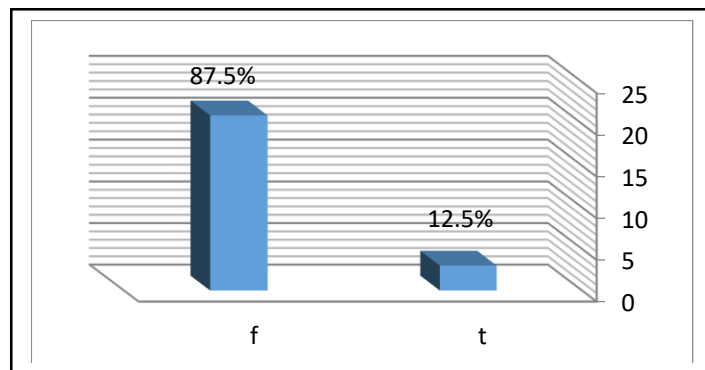
This sentence scored the highest percent of correct answers 20 (83%), whereas only 4 responses (17%) were wrong. This illustrated by Graph 7 below.



Graph 7: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 7

Sentence 8: *My professor – he is also my uncle – gives us a lot of research to do.*

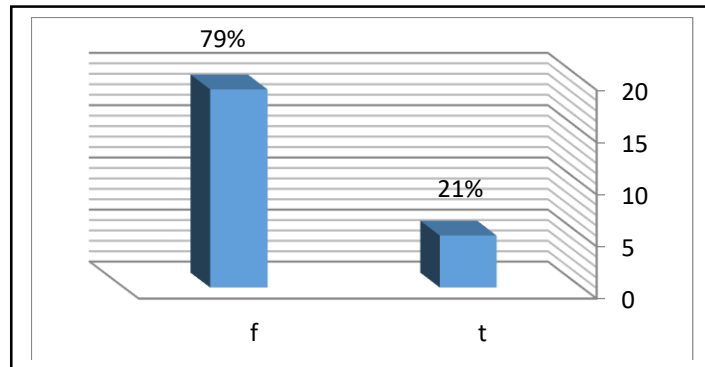
Out of the total of 24 responses, only 3 (12.5%) correct answers, while the remaining 21 (87.5%) responses were wrong. This illustrated by Graph 8 below.



Graph 8: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 8

Sentence 9: *She said: "I'm coming tomorrow".*

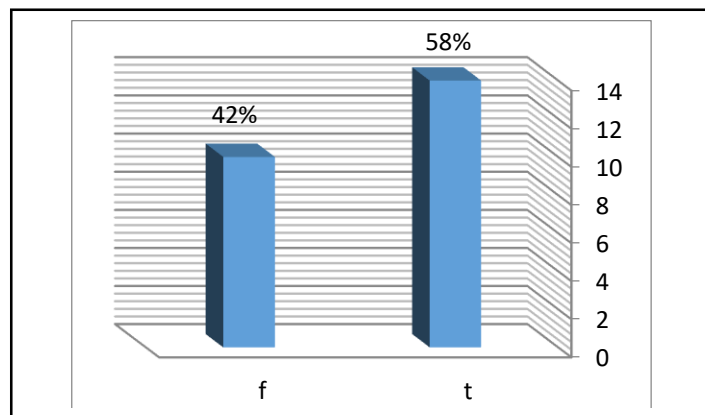
The statistical analysis of this sentence indicate that 5 (21%) of the answers were correct, while 19 (79%) of the answers were wrong. This illustrated by Graph 9 below.



Graph 9: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 9

Sentence 10: *Nothing!*

The last exclamatory sentence was correctly punctuated by 14 (58%) participants, 10 (42%) produced wrong punctuations. This illustrated by Graph 10 below.



Graph 10: Statistical analysis of participants' performance on Sentence 10

10. Discussion of the results

From the data analysis presented above, discussion of findings is presented descriptively based on the research question: “*What are the most common punctuation errors made by third-year EFL students at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Zawia University?*”

According to results, students made errors in using nine punctuations. From the nine punctuation marks chosen for the purpose of the study, comma, semicolon and full stop together have the first highest percentage of errors (100%). The second highest

percentage is represented by dash (87.5%), quotation marks (79%) and exclamation mark (67%). On the other hand, the lowest percentage is the use of the apostrophe mark (17 %).

It is worth mentioning that the results of the current study are in much alignment with Laili's (2018) and Thai's (2021) reported results. The three studies found that the errors mostly done by the students are in the use of comma, semicolon and full stop.

To researcher's surprise, the current study's findings also show that they are in harmony with Thai's (2021) reported results concerning errors in using the apostrophe mark. In both studies, the apostrophe mark accounts for the lowest percentage of punctuation errors.

The researcher assumes that these punctuation errors are probably due to the following factors:

- students' poor academic level.
- lack of confidence about their punctuation mark knowledge.
- lack of knowledge of using punctuation marks properly in writing: students often use punctuation mark arbitrarily.
- negative effect of technology development on written texts through not obeying formal writing requirements: The deformation of punctuation mark penetrates into classroom environment.
- poor reading skills: students practice reading so little. They only read when teacher asks them. Students often read to answer the exam questions without understanding the objective of using those punctuation marks.
- students' inability to differentiate between spoken English and written English: students have habits of using spoken language instead of using written language.
- the effect of teaching and the learning environment:
 - Students often make errors because of misleading explanation from the teacher or faulty presentation of information in a textbook. In other words, if the teacher fails to give clear explanations, students are more likely to make errors even though they are trying to write simple sentence.

Discouraging learning environment also leads to students' poor punctuation learning. To overcome punctuation mark errors, students have to practice writing in class and at home

as much as possible.” A large number of L2 students pay little attention to using punctuation marks. Thus, students themselves do not try their best to learn them. Moreover, but not many students are keen on pursuing learning punctuation marks.

11. Conclusion

The present study has given an account of the punctuation errors made 3rd year students of Dept. of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Zawia University. It has been shown that most of these errors occur due to a lack of knowledge and practice which hindered to punctuate correctly. Generally, Third-Year students need more treatment or remedial work with punctuation marks.

In the light of results of the study, the researcher presents the following recommendations:

- Teachers should encourage their students to look at punctuation as a necessary element in writing. Their wrong uses will change the meaning of the sentences.
- Teachers are advised to explain the uses and the functions of punctuation marks using examples and rules for clarification.
- Giving an explicit explanation of punctuation marks and their purpose in writing.
- Syllabus designers should take punctuation exercises (unpunctuated sentences/texts) into account by introducing them into the syllabus.

References

1. Abdall, Y and M. Samhon (2016). Common Punctuation Errors Made by Secondary Schools Students in English: A Case Study at Secondary Schools, Nyala Locality. Journal of Humanities. Vol.17.No.4.
2. Awad, A. (2012). “The Most Common Punctuation Errors Made by the English and the TEFL Majors at An-Najah National University”, Vol. 26(1), p. 211-233. Faculty of Education.
3. Byrne, D. (1988). Teaching writing skills. London: Longman Press.
4. Carroll, J. & Wilson, E. (1993). Acts of teaching. How to teach writing. Englewood: Teacher Idea Express.
5. Connelly, M. (2005). Get Writing Sentences and Paragraph. Milwaukee Area Technological College Language Arts / Linguistics/ Literacy Thomson Wadsworth.

6. Dundar, S. (2019). Punctuation: American vs. British English. Dragoman Language Solutions. <https://www.dragoman.ist/punctuation-american-vs-british-english>
7. El- Ashab, O. and Varalakshmi, G. (2008). Learn to write. Libya. Zilten
8. Gamaroff, R. (2000). Rater reliability in language assessment: The Bug of All Bears. System, v28 n1 p31-53 Mar 2000, retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ601556> on 14th April, 2018
9. Gezmiş, N. (2023). Punctuation Errors in Writing in English. Kirikkale University Journal of Social Sciences. pp. 421-432. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2932572>
10. Laili, F. N. (2018). An Error Analysis on the Use of Punctuation Marks in Students' Writing: (A Study at Second Semester Students of English Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta).
11. Lukeman, N. (2006). The Art of Punctuation. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
12. Mahmood, M. A., Ijaz, M. T., & Ameer, A. (2014). A corpus based study of the errors committed by Pakistani learners of English at graduation level. Journal of Education and Practice, 5(24), 159-162.
13. Mayo, M. Mitrovic, A. and Makenz, J. (2000). "Intelligent Tutoring System for Capitalization and Punctuation: Dissertation Abstract". N. 6806323
14. Mccuen, R. and Winkler, C. (2000). "From Idea to Essay a Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook" 3rd edition. America: Wadsworth Publishing
15. Olson, G. (1980). Punctuation made simple: An Introduction to Punctuation <http://punctuationmadesimple.org/introduction.html>
16. Oshima, A. and Hogue, A. (1991). Writing Academic English. Longman. Third Edition. P.172.
17. Rahmawati, L. (2014). Error Analysis of Using Punctuation Made by Students in Writing II Class. Salatiga: (STAIN) Salatiga: Unpublished.
18. Rumki, S. (2005). "How to Punctuate. Your Personal Writer: Custom. Research Papers". Essays and Term Papers. www.perfectediting.com.
19. Shokouhi, H. and Zadeh-Dabbagh, S. (2009). Punctuation and spelling in learners' writing. Asian EFL Journal, vol. 40, pp. 3-27



20. Shaughnessy, M. (1977). Errors and Expectations. A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing. New York: Oxford University Press.
21. Thai, V. H. (2021). Problems with the Use of Punctuation Marks of English-Majored Students at Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City and Suggestions.
22. [Truss, L. \(2003\). Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation. Profile Books. ISBN 1-86197-612-7.](#)
23. Truss, L. (2004). Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation. New York: Gotham Books. p. 77. ISBN 1-59240-087-6.
24. Zemach, D.E. and Islam, C. (2006) Writing in paragraphs: From sentence to paragraph.
25. Zemach, D.E. and Rumisek, L. A. (2005). Academic writing from paragraph to essay.

Websites

<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/grammar/punctuation>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punctuation>

<https://www.enago.com/academy/category/academic-writing/language-grammar/page/5/>

http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_55.htm