

# Punctuation Marks as Discourse Structure Indicators Used by Iraqi EFL Learners

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## Abstract

*Lexical, punctuation and graphical markers represent the interdependent systems in language texts to indicate the structure of discourse. This study concerns with punctuation marks which are an integral part in the written phase of discourse. Punctuations are tools supporting the writers/ the readers to disambiguate the sentence meaning and confusion and to make reading be easier. The aim of the study is to investigate the most frequent use of punctuation marks utilized by the Iraqi EFL learners. Also, it is to make a comparison between Iraqi male and female EFL learners in the use of punctuation marks based on the accuracy and frequency to unravel the most frequent use in the monthly test of writing essays regarding punctuations as a part of written system. The data of the study are random samples of 30 students' essays in the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage/ Department of English in College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar. The results of the study, relying on the frequency and the percentage scales for each punctuation marks, have shown that the most frequent uses of punctuation marks are capital letters, full stops, commas and apostrophe consecutively. In addition, the accuracy and frequency levels between the two genders are variable from one mark to another. In other words, the Iraqi female EFL learners are more accurate than males in this aspect.*

**Key Words:** written, punctuations, punctuation significance

## 1- INTRODUCTION

Discourse analysis consists of spoken and written forms. Halliday (1989: 37) agree with the idea that two reasons behind the punctuation choice: "punctuation according to grammar, and punctuation according to phonology". In spoken English, a clarified and disambiguated meanings can be shown by the use of stress, intonation, rhythm, and pause. In written English, the matter is different. That is, these devices are not existed in writing system, but they are replaced by punctuation marks. Written phase is the core of the study that is represented by the utilization of punctuations as a part of written coherence text. Halliday (1985) categorizes punctuations into three groups: boundary markers that show grammatical units, status markers which show the function of units and relation markers that show links between units. Punctuations are defined as rules that organize a text and help to clarify and understand the text per se. All these marks are not randomly found in one text, and they must occur where they are necessary relying on the text context. They are used to separate or link words, phrases or clauses/ sentences. So, it clarifies the writer's text and they are the basis of how to write. It has a long history beginning from the 18<sup>th</sup> C. It passed through gradual developments. It is possible to say that it is a part of writing system. Punctuations play a vital role in both writing and reading.

All languages, including their writing systems, usually change over time. The punctuation system is considered to be the last system establishing within the writing one. The function of these marks is now to explain structural information of written texts. Each language has its own punctuation system which is slightly different from other languages, (i.e.), in European languages, French writing system is a little different from German one. As a matter of fact, American punctuation system is a little bit different from British in certain aspects. Besides, it is possible to say that old

punctuation system is different from the modern one. This affirms the fact that punctuation can gradually change, too (R.L. Trask & P. Stockwell, 2007:238).

The study aims to accomplish specific objectives which are summarized as follows:

1. What are the most frequent uses of punctuation marks that are used by the Iraqi EFL students?
2. According to the gender, who properly uses the most frequent of these marks, on the basis of their accuracy and frequency levels, in their written texts?

In this aspect, a test which is a monthly one of the first semester, was presented to the Iraqi EFL learners of the English Department (3<sup>rd</sup> stage) in College of Education for Humanities/University of Anbar in the academic year 2019-2020. They were asked to answer a question related to the course of writing essay. Actually, they must know when and where these marks are used in their written texts and their roles to add, clarify, and even disambiguate meanings to the text. It is necessary to mention that not all punctuation marks are found in one text which depends on the nature and content of the essay texts.

## 2- Literature Review

Punctuations are tackled by many researches and linguists from various aspects since they have a significant role in clarifying and disambiguating the written texts. Some of these studies are as follows:

One of these studies is presented by M. Mayo, A. Mitrovic and J. McKenzie (2000) who adopted a new Intelligent Tutoring System to teach the mechanical rules of English capitalizations and punctuations. The system was designed for school children at the age of 10-11. The researchers asked them to complete specific capitalization and punctuation exercises following the rules of the system. The results were that the school children had the ability to apply for 25 rules that were found in the system itself.

E. A. M. Samhon and A. Y. Abdall (2016) present a study to investigate the common errors of punctuation marks in written tests. The data was a sample of 80 secondary school students. The researchers gave the students two tests (pre-test and post test) as tools for collecting data. Samhon and Abdall followed a descriptive analytic method in their study. The results reveal that the most common errors of punctuation marks were the commas, quotation marks, and exclamation marks. Additionally, there was a variety in the punctuation error number among the students.

A. Salamin, M. Farrah, R. Zahid, and N. Zaru (2016) studied the most frequent punctuation and capitalization errors that EFL Students made, and the significant differences of the frequent errors created by them due to the learner's academic level, major, or gender. The data tool was the test sheets of 157 students from the English Department of Hebron University/ Palestine in the academic year 2014-2015. The results proved that a variety of punctuation and capitalization errors were made in capitalization, comma, semicolon, period, quotation marks, hyphen, apostrophe and the question marks respectively. Plus, no significant differences in the frequency of these errors are made by the students on the basis of the academic level, major, or gender.

B. O. Adekola and O. F. Lawal's study (2017) is a descriptive research design of ex-post-facto type. The study focuses on the English comprehension errors made by Senior Secondary School Students. They considered English punctuation Errors as mechanical ones in comprehension with emphasis on punctuation marks and spelling. The participants were Ogun State Secondary Schools in Nigeria. They dealt with four geo-political zones in Ogun State of Nigeria (Ijebu, Remo, Yewa and Egba). They chose five schools with fifty Secondary Students III (SSS 3) per school totaling two hundred and fifty male and female students in each of the divisions. The instrument of the study was Errors in English Language Comprehension (EELC), and an achievement test in English Language Punctuation (ATELP) for data collection. So, one thousand students were participated in

the study. The findings proved that students made more errors in punctuation than in spellings because of the knowledge and understanding lack of common mistakes made in English.

In the Thai written texts, Nieves P. Tayco and Janet S. Casta (2017) conducted a study to show the learners' punctuation errors. They collected 474 essays among 84 freshmen Thai students. Certain punctuation errors were made in their compositions, (i., e) full stop, comma, question mark, exclamation mark, quotation mark, apostrophe, colon, semi-colon, dash, hyphen, ellipsis, parentheses, braces, and slash. The researchers followed frequency distribution and cumulative percentages to analyze the data. According to the data analysis, the findings unraveled that Thai learners tended to omit rather than misuse the punctuations in their written output. Moreover, the most erroneous usage of punctuations was the comma and period while ellipsis and colon are slightly committed errors. No occurrences of semi-colon, parentheses, braces, and slash were in the compositions. The frequent usage of quotation marks was notably seen. In other words, the results stated that Thai compositions were recognized by certain characteristics: extensive run-on sentences, splice commas, fragments, and erroneously punctuated cohesive devices.

Another study was presented by F.Y. Ginting (2018) who studies how to explore the students' ability in utilizing punctuation marks in a descriptive written paragraphs. The researcher followed a descriptive qualitative research in the study "to give description systematically and factually about facts of a certain population". The results proved that the category of the students' ability in using capitalizations and punctuation marks was low in descriptive writing paragraphs.

The previous studies resemble the present study in certain aspects. All these studies deal with one topic which is the vital role of punctuations in written texts and its importance in clarifying meaning. These devices are also means to add and disambiguate meanings to written texts. Plus, the EFL learners, as participants, are the core of the studies to show their ability to master such devices which are a part of written system. The test sheets are the tools to scale their comprehension, understanding and even accuracy levels in utilizing these devices in written texts. Finally, the similarity between the previous studies and the present one is related to what the EFL learners were formerly taught or learned by their teachers.

On the other hand, the present study is different from the previous ones in specific angles. The present study aims to investigate the most frequent uses of punctuations and to make a comparison on the basis of the gender, (i.e.) between the Iraqi male and female EFL learners, to show the most frequent punctuation uses in written essays. The previous studies aimed to investigate the most frequent punctuation errors made by the participants in their written texts. The data collection of this study differs from the previous ones. In other words, the data collection of the present study relies on the Iraqi EFL learners from the third stage of the English department in the College of Education for Humanities/Anbar University whereas the most previous studies are applied for other academic or secondary student stages. Additionally, the data collection of the present study is monthly written essays of the first semester in the academic year 2019- 2020. The present study is based on the quantitives and qualitative methods in analyzing the data collection and the statistics of frequency and percentage are used to reach the significant findings.

### **3- Punctuation Marks in English Language**

Each writer has his/ her definition of punctuation marks which explain a text and arrange his/ her ideas. Hence, various definitions are given by many writers. J. C. Richards and R. Schmidt(2010:434) define them as graphic tools, such as comma, semicolon, period,...etc., The purpose of their use is to clarify and disambiguate the meaning of written clauses and to describe spoken clauses in writing system. Another definition is stated by Trask and Stockwell (2007:238) that punctuation is a conventional mark system giving information, on the part of the reader, about

the written text structures. H. Bussmann (1996:969) describes them as "rules for the optical arrangement of written language by means of non-alphabetic signs, such as period, comma, and exclamation marks". They are related to both the grammatical and semantic aspects of the text. They show quotes, direct speech, ...etc. They are also related to the spoken language by showing its intonation.

Punctuation marks play a vital role in creating a coherent text; Therefore, they are important in writing system of every language, including the English language as illustrated by Crystal (2005:118) who indicates that they generally have two functions. Firstly, it possibly makes stretches of writing language to be read coherently. Secondly, it signifies the rhythm and colour of speech. He adds that there is nearly a correspondence between this system and the super segmental features in certain aspects. Stilman, (1997:p.3) they serve to show the relationship between each element in the sentence with others so as to communicate clearly and unambiguously. These marks form the text tone revealing the writer's skill in this field. Easy categorization is possibly defied by these marks" because all play more than one role and different marks may be used for similar purposes".

Awad (2012: p.213) mentioned three important punctuation functions which are as follows:

1. Phonetic Function: this function is important, because these marks "show clearly the rhythm, pauses and tone inflexions in a written document: a written document has a tone."
2. Grammatical Function: Since the utilization of punctuation is in direct style to perform specific purposes, (i. e.), "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, paragraph, document, etc."
3. Semantic Function: punctuations have a semantic significance since they help "learners understand the meaning of particular words/ phrases by marking/ highlighting, bolds, capitals, etc".

## **4- Data Collection and Analysis**

### **4.1 Data Collection**

#### **4.1.1 The Participants**

The participants in the study included 30 Iraqi EFL students from the third stage in the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities /University of Anbar. The participants were males and females between the age of 20-22. All of them wrote essays as requirement of a monthly test in the first semester in the academic year 2019-2020.

#### **4.1.2 The Instrument of the Test**

The test sheet is the instrument of the study that scales the participants' ability to use punctuation marks properly in written answers. They exactly did what they were required as a monthly written test of the first semester. Their answers, in which punctuations are regarded as a part of written system, were studied in their test sheets. Accordingly, the statistics of frequency and percentage were made in this study to reach the true findings.

#### **4.1.3 The Procedure of the Test**

To achieve the objectives of the study, the chosen participants were from the third stage of the Department of English/College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar in the academic year 2019-2020. They had studied punctuation marks in the first, the second and the third stages.

In other words, they specifically studied “Introduction to Academic Writing from Paragraph to Essay” by D. E. Zemach and L. Rumisek (2005) in the first year, “Academic Writing” by A. Oshima and A. Hogue (2007) in the second year, and “Essay and Letter Writing” by L. G. Alexander (1965) in the third year respectively. Accordingly, a monthly test of writing essay in the first semester were made and their results were studied to make statistics of frequency and percentage related to the study objectives.

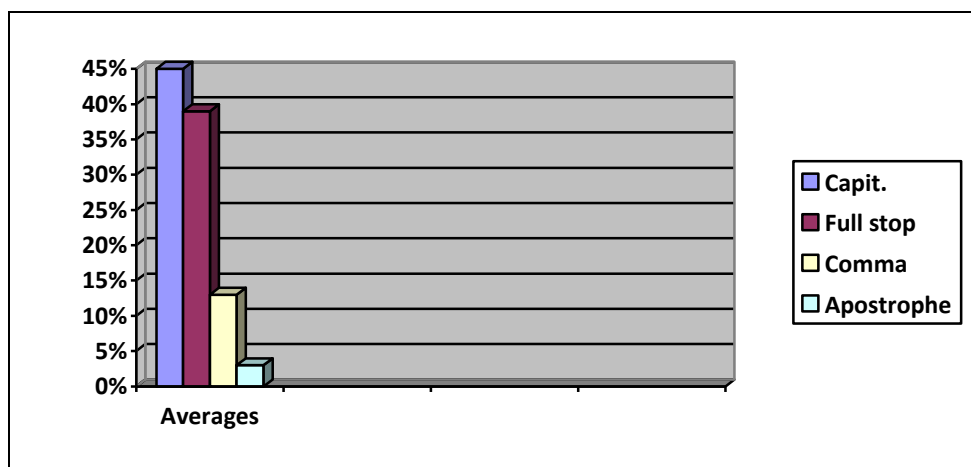
## 4.2 Data Analysis

Due to the data analysis, the results clearly show the total use of punctuations in written essays made by the Iraqi EFL learners scores 1461 occurrences. The data analysis proves that the majority of the learners' respondents is the capitalization in comparison with other punctuations. Capitalizations are estimated by 662 frequencies which is 45%, whereas full stop occurs in the second place scoring 570 corresponding to 39%. Comma, which comes in the third position, scores 187 frequencies to be about 13%. The fourth position is occupied by apostrophe which scores 42 frequencies that is 3%. Table(1) illustrates the results of the most frequent uses of punctuations.

Punctuation marks	Frequencies	Percentage %
Capital letters	662	45%
Full stop	570	39%
Comma	187	13%
Apostrophe	42	3%
Total	1461	100%

**Table (1) The Most Frequent Uses of Punctuations with Their Percentage**

Plus, the percentages of the frequent punctuation uses are well clarified in figure (1)



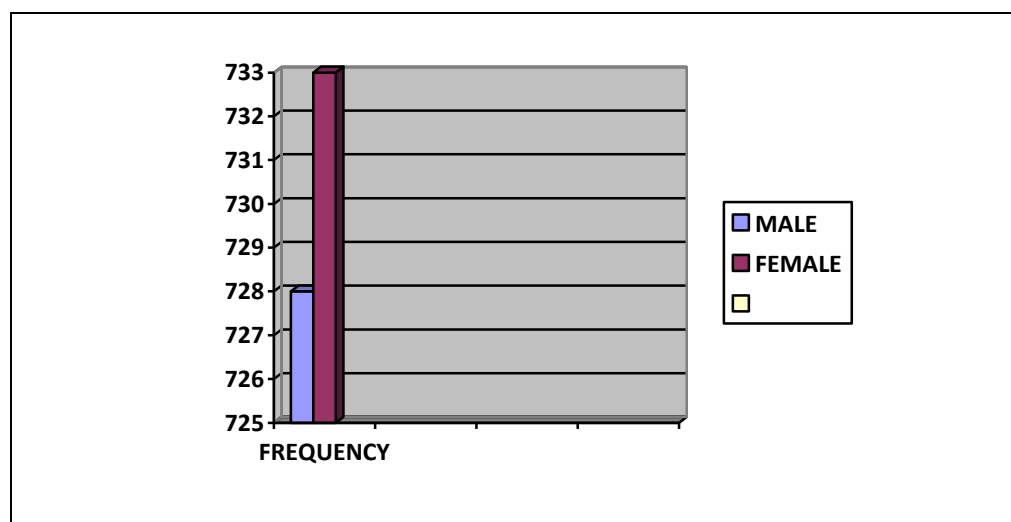
**Figure (1): The averages of frequent punctuation uses**

On the other hand, a comparison is made between the Iraqi male and female to show their level of accuracy and frequency in using punctuations in their essays. The data analysis states that the female learners come in the first position since they scores 733 frequent punctuation frequencies out of the total uses, (i. e.)1461, while the male learners occupy the second position estimated by 728 frequencies out of the whole punctuation uses, (i. e.)1461. All these details are explained in Table (2)

Gender	Capital letters	Full stop	Comma	Apost.	Total
Male	319	289	105	15	728
Female	343	281	82	27	733
Total	662	570	187	42	1461

**Table (2): The comparison between the Iraqi male and Female EFL Students**

Additionally, the comparison is clearly explained in Figure (2)



**Figure (2): The Comparison between the Iraqi Male and Female EFL Students**

## 5. Conclusion

Due to a phase of discourse analysis, punctuations play a significant role in adding, clarifying and disambiguate written texts. Punctuations are the visual clues on the part of the reader. They plan the way of how to read a coherent text. Firstly, the study aimed to investigate the most frequent use of punctuations that are made by the Iraqi EFL learners. According to the results of data analysis, the most frequent punctuations uses are capitalization, fullstop, comma and apostrophe respectively. This fact discloses that the Iraqi EFL learners benefit from constant studying punctuations in the previous and present college years. Although not all punctuation marks in written tests are used depending on the text content, it is possible to say that they mastered in using such marks.

Secondly, a comparison is made between Iraqi male and female learners based on the accuracy and frequency levels of utilizing punctuations in texts. The data analysis illustrates that the Iraqi female learners' respondents are better than the male learners' respondents re lying on both the



accuracy and frequency levels of punctuation uses in the texts. In other words, the Iraqi female learners score 733 frequency of punctuations compared with the Iraqi males who score 728 frequencies. As a matter of fact, there are no big significant differences between the Iraqi male and female with regarding that female being more careful and attentive than the males.

Overall, for gaining significant outcomes, in the constant tests of writing essays, punctuations are required. More readings, especially written works, are needed for reinforcing and developing the Iraqi EFL learners' ability in comprehension/ understanding the controlling idea and writing about a given idea by using all needed tools such as punctuations. Punctuations are the main tools that have functions in writing to add, clarify and disambiguate meanings, so they are a part of texts. Moreover, studying more than one book also give the Iraqi EFL learners the opportunity to read various styles presented by different authors. Accordingly, the Iraqi EFL learners can note not only the role of punctuations tools but also the role of other visual tools like cohesive devices in clarifying and understanding the meanings of written texts.

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