

An Investigation of Writing Challenges among EFL Students: Emphasis on Punctuation and Capitalization



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MA. Rima Saleh M. Omar

Lecturer in the English Department Ajdabiya University.

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Abstract

This study looks into the challenges EFL students face when writing in English utilizing proper capitalization and punctuation. Students in their second and third semesters were given an exam that included a paragraph with deliberate faults. They were instructed to find and fix the problems. According to the findings, 36 pupils made a total of 641 mistakes, of which 58.8% were punctuation problems and 41.2% were capitalization errors. Compared to the mean capitalization errors of 7.33, the average number of punctuation errors per student was 10.47. Both results show that students had more difficulty with capitalization than punctuation, underscoring the need for targeted

education to increase writing accuracy in both areas.

Key Words: Challenges Writing, Foreign Language, capitalization and punctuation.

* Introduction

English is recognized as the language par excellence of universal communication; English is not only considered an important teaching method in which individuals can access information and knowledge from anywhere, but it is also an important means by which students can improve their grades and also performance, success and maintain important relationships with people around the world. They can also improve their cultural knowledge, in addition to expanding their knowledge and worldview. Furthermore, English is the universal

language of business, commerce, and professional communication (Yahya and Hashim, 2013).

Learning a foreign language involves working on four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Writing is the final skill that students must master; it is a basic communication skill that cannot be easily acquired. It can be learned culturally or learned through formal education. Among the four skills of language, writing and speaking are considered productive skills. Of course, there are important differences between them. All ordinary people learn to speak while writing must be taught to them. Compared to speaking, writing places more demands on students because there is no immediate feedback in written communication (Mehrabi, 2014).

Writing is one of the language skills, and it is absolutely necessary to master it while learning English. According to (Sokolik, 2003), writing is a mixture of processes and products. This process provides a set of ideas or a stage of people articulating their thoughts when writing a text, while the final product is considered a text. Although writing is a productive skill, it requires high demands to be one. Writing is a knowledge of skills that include rules,

vocabulary, concepts, fluency, and many other parts of the language. By developing their writing skills, young language learners are making

valuable investments that will benefit them in their future studies. Writing also provides students with the opportunity to explore ways to communicate their ideas in a foreign language (Setiawan et al., 2014)

However, writing is often seen as part of the teaching and learning of grammar and syntax, which therefore underestimates the nature and importance of writing and its developmental acts. Therefore, the improvement of this skill attracts considerable attention for its learning and teaching from the first stage of language teaching. Writing is also considered an extremely difficult cognitive activity, which requires the student to take control of many factors. These factors vary according to the author's academic background and personal interest in various psychological, linguistic, and cognitive phenomena (Dar and Khan, 2015, Haider, 2012).

Writing is rightly considered a vital challenge for native and non-native learners alike. However, this problem is much more significant for students of English as a second language. These difficulties are mainly due to incompetence in terms

of syntax, coherence, extension of ideas, selection of content, topic sentences, rhetorical conventions, mechanics and organization, as well as a lack of vocabulary, and inappropriate use of vocabulary. Additional research is needed to explain and examine the factors that negatively affect students' writing skills, since writing problems can be better managed if the factors that generate them are addressed (Helland, 2003).

In fact, many of the challenges that students face in writing often come through discussion during the writing solution. For example, students often revise and correct their writing after having a chance to read it, in addition to comparing their written work with that of other students. Working in groups or pairs to form a text, students have the opportunity to ask each other questions about spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, which is the best way to express ideas (Western, 2015).

*** Statement of the Problem**

The issue brought to light is students' disregard for writing, which is essential to reaching academic objectives. Technological developments that make it simple to acquire pre-made projects worsen this problem and have a detrimental effect on writing abilities. Teachers

frequently focus on the subject rather than writing styles, seeing writing only as a means of communication. The researcher highlights the need for improving pupils' writing skills while identifying spelling and punctuation errors. The researcher was inspired to carry out this study by the belief that pupils are ill-prepared to write because of their shortcomings.

*** Research Questions**

The research tried to answer the following questions: -

- 1- What punctuation and capitalization issues do EFL students at Ajdabiya University frequently face?
- 2- What methods are suggested to assist EFL learners in overcoming these challenges?

*** Aims of the study**

- 1- Investigating writing challenges among EFL students with an emphasis on punctuation and capitalization.
- 2- Determine the most common punctuation and capitalization mistakes that students make.
- 3- Offer doable tactics and suggestions to enhance students' writing accuracy in capitalization and punctuation.

*** Significance of this study**

This study is significant because it sheds further light on the typical challenges EFL students face

when learning capitalization and punctuation in English writing. The goal of the research is to pinpoint the causes of these frequent mistakes. It also aims to provide creative writing instruction and useful tactics for English teachers to improve their students' writing abilities.

*** Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This study, which is bound to second and third semester English Department students, focuses on the challenges students face with writing skills, particularly punctuation and capitalization.

*** Methodology**

This study uses a quantitative approach to examine writing difficulties related to capitalization and punctuation. A short sentence with errors in capital letters, commas, question marks, and periods was given to a cohort of 36 students to correct. The results were collected and examined to identify the most frequent mistakes and evaluate the students' editing skills.

*** Literature Review**

1- Definition of Writing Skill

Writing is a graphic symbol of speech. In both cases, the student is involved in communicating his thoughts and feelings. In the case of speaking, there is a communicative situation between speakers who

transmit their message to the listener. Nevertheless, in the issue of writing, the writer conveys his message through his feelings and ideas. Furthermore, writing is an act of forming letters of characters and putting them together with skill to express ideas. (Sperling and Fredman ,2001) tried to define the nature of writing as a set of "sub_process" that includes planning and reviewing Observing this process, the researchers believe that writing an essay requires steps to be followed. Regardless, there are some points to keep in mind such as: the quality of language and the audience for which it is written about.

Learning to write in ESL contexts is gradually becoming more important for researchers and academics. On the other hand, Writing has always been considered an essential skill in supporting grammatical structures as for the acquisition of the English language.

This importance pittance is due to the fact that well as the vocabulary in which teachers, try to teach pupils should be given sufficient, time to progress their skill. (Ismail et al,2012). In consistent with (Hornby,2005), Writing is defined as making letterer numbers on a surface, especially using a pen or pencil. (Khieder, 2012:9) Procedurally

defined writing skills as the skills that will be measured by the tools of the study and how applicable they are by the students.

2- Main Challenges of Writing Skills

Writing effectively is widely recognized as a significant challenge for both native and non-native students. Common difficulties in writing often stem from deficiencies in syntax, coherence, vocabulary, idea development, content selection, sentence structure, technical accuracy, and organization, alongside inappropriate vocabulary usage. Further research is essential to identify and analyze these factors, as understanding the root causes of writing issues can lead to more effective solutions (Abu Rass, 2015).

(Klimova, 2010, as cited in Al-Ghavabally, 2015) conducted a study at the University of Hradec Králové to analyze writing skills. Evaluations of students' written work revealed common stylistic errors, including inappropriate register, overly long sentences and incorrect word phrase usage. These findings highlight the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in writing.

(Haider, 2012) and (Hyland, 2003) noted that writing is one of the most complex aspects of learning a

foreign language. It requires strategic use of language, structural accuracy, and effective communication. Writing is a cognitive process that tests memory, critical thinking, and the ability to articulate ideas effectively. A well-structured text reflects successful foreign language learning.

However, learners encounter various challenges at different stages, categorized as linguistic, psychological, cognitive, and pedagogical (Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal, 2016). Additionally, poor structure in writing complicates content and comprehension, leading to difficulties in communication. Even students with strong syntactic, lexical, and grammatical skills may struggle with confidence due to incoherent text or teaching methods that don't align with their learning styles and cultural backgrounds.

Poor writing skills often result from issues involving both teachers and students. Teachers may lack effective instructional strategies, feedback mechanisms, and motivational techniques. On the other hand, students face challenges such as first language interference, insufficient reading, lack of motivation, and inadequate practice (Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal, 2016).

2- Types of Punctuation

Punctuation marks in English writing can be categorized into three main types: ending, non-ending, and enclosing punctuation marks. Learners of the English language often encounter difficulties when using punctuation marks correctly. However, when students write papers, they often limit their usage of punctuation marks to just a few.

* Types of punctuation marks

Kind	Symbol	Use
Full stop period	(.)	To end up a sentence for abbreviation website addresses
Comma	(,)	When listing items in a sentence - To separate words phrases of three or more - with Coordinate conjunctions (far, and, nor, but, yet, or so) with an introductory phrase to set
Question mark	(?)	-To get information -After each question in a series even if the question is not a complete sentence - After a rhetorical question - At the end of a tag question.

3- Punctuation and Capitalization Mark Errors in English Writing

The punctuation and capitalization mistakes that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students frequently make when writing in English are examined in this study. A number of different kinds of mistakes were found in the descriptive writings the students had submitted. These mistakes, which were found in a variety of student texts, mostly consist of omission, wrong capitalization, and poor punctuation.

* Common Punctuation Errors

Period Errors:-

Omission of periods at the end of sentences

Incorrect placement of periods in the middle of sentences

Comma Errors: -

Incorrect placement of commas within sentences

Omission of commas that is necessary to separate clauses or phrases.

Colon Errors: -

Omission of colons when introducing lists or explanations

* Common Capitalization Errors

Incorrect Capitalization of the First Word

Failure to capitalize the first word of a sentence.

Improper Capitalization of Specific Names

Mistakes in capitalizing the names of specific places, days, months, and titles of works (books, magazines, etc.)

* Capitalization in Titles

Failure to capitalize important words in titles, such as the first, last, and significant words in book titles, names of films, and other works. These types of errors are largely due to interference from students' native languages, lack of awareness of English writing conventions, and insufficient practice with the rules of

punctuation and capitalization in English.

Table 1: Types of Errors and Their Sources

Error type	Description of Errors	Example of Errors
Overgeneralization Errors	Using punctuation marks incorrectly or failing to capitalize certain words.	Missing periods, incorrect capitalization of proper nouns.
Interference Errors	Using punctuation marks as they are used in the student's first language (L1), and misspelling words based on their pronunciation in L1.	Misuse of commas based on the student's L1 structure.
Errors by Analogy	Misuse of punctuation marks based on similarities to their usage in other contexts.	Using a colon instead of a semicolon.
Spelling Errors	Confusing homonyms (words with similar sounds) Adding or deleting letters due to mispronunciation Substituting letters with similar sounds	Homophones like "there" vs. "their", or missing letters in words.

* Data Collection and Analysis

1- Research Design

The quantitative method is used in the research methodology for data collection and analysis. Objective measurement and statistical or numerical analysis of data gathered using organized instruments are the main goals of quantitative research. This method works well for spotting particular trends and assessing students' achievement in relation to their writing challenges.

The primary instrument for gathering data in this study was a written exam. Students from the

University of Ajdabiya's English Department in their second and third semesters took the test. There were 36 students who took part. The purpose of the test was to assess students' knowledge of and proficiency with written English capitalization and punctuation norms. It contained a number of elements that addressed punctuation marks such as full stops, commas, question marks, and apostrophes, as well as the proper use of capital letters at the start of sentences and in proper nouns, titles, and abbreviations.

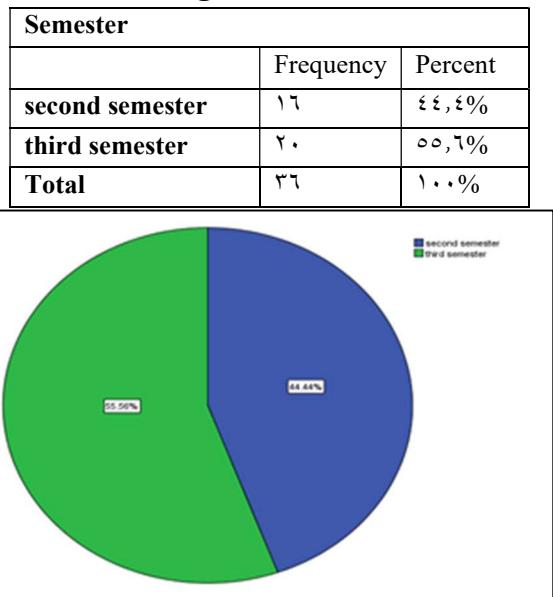
The test was printed and distributed in person, and students were given a set amount of time to complete it. After collecting the tests, the answers were entered into SPSS Statistics 28 software. The data were then analyzed using descriptive statistics and percentages in order to highlight the most common errors and difficulties encountered by the students in their writing.

2- Study Population and Sample

A total of 36 students participated in this study. The participants were randomly selected from the second and third semesters, with 16 students from the second semester and 20 students from the third semester. They were chosen from Ajdabiya University, Faculty of Arts, and Department of English

Language. Most of the participants were female, and their ages ranged from 18 to 27 years old.

Table (3-1): Distribution of students according to their Semester.



The figure (3-1) shows that the vast majority of the students were the third semester (55.56%), while the second semester is (44.44%).

Table (3-2) Distribution of the students according to Age.

No. Of students	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
36	18	27	20.53

The study included 36 students, aged between 18 and 27 years, with mean of 20.53 years.

4- Instruments of the Study

The study used a test containing a seven-line paragraph with errors in capitalization and punctuation. Students were asked to correct the mistakes to assess their writing difficulties.

5- Validity and Reliability of Instruments

The test was reviewed by the project supervisor to ensure its validity. It was also piloted on a small group of students, including the researcher, to confirm its reliability.

6- Validity of Tests

The validity of research instruments is the second most important aspect of any quantitative study. The validity of instruments depends on the extent to which they measure the research questions. Furthermore, there are several methods for testing the validity of research instruments, depending on their nature. The researcher used content validity to verify the relevance of the research instrument to the research topic. He also asked English language teachers to review the tests. All responses were taken into account.

7- Data Analysis

The results of each item on the test were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods, such as arithmetic means, standard deviations, and regression analysis. Correct and incorrect answers were recorded. For each error, students were given a score of 0 or 1, indicating the correctness of the answer.

8- Results of the Capitalization Test

Table (3-3): Means, Frequencies and Percentages for the Difficulties in Capitalization

Error Type	Mean	Frequency	Percentage
Capitalization errors	7.33	264	41.2%

Table (3-1) provides a comprehensive overview of the statistical outcomes derived from the capitalization test, which was specifically designed to measure the students' ability to apply standard capitalization rules in written English. This table represents one of the key components of the study's quantitative analysis and serves as an essential indicator of students' writing proficiency at the mechanical level.

According to the data presented, a total of 264 capitalization errors were recorded among the 36 participating students. This figure accounts for approximately 41.2% of the total number of writing errors identified throughout the test, making capitalization one of the most frequently violated rules in the writing samples collected. Such a percentage clearly reflects a notable area of weakness in students' basic writing skills, particularly in their ability to identify the proper usage of capital letters in different

grammatical and contextual situations.

Furthermore, the mean number of capitalization errors per student was calculated to be 7.33. This average indicates that each student, on average, committed more than seven mistakes related solely to capitalization. When viewed collectively, these results suggest that the majority of students encountered significant challenges in adhering to conventional rules of capitalization, which are fundamental to clear and accurate written communication.

It is worth noting that proper capitalization plays a critical role in enhancing the readability and grammatical correctness of any written text. Failure to apply capitalization correctly can lead to confusion, misinterpretation, and a perception of poor language proficiency. Therefore, the high frequency of capitalization errors, as highlighted in this table, points to a pressing need for increased instructional focus on this area. Teachers and curriculum designers may need to implement more targeted strategies, including practical exercises and focused lessons, to reinforce students' understanding and correct application of capitalization rules.

In conclusion, the data shown in Table (3-3) underscores the importance of paying closer attention to basic writing mechanics, particularly capitalization, within the academic context. Addressing these issues at an early stage of language development can lead to significant improvements in students' overall writing performance and academic success.

9- Results of the Punctuation Mark Test

Table (3-4): Means, Frequencies and Percentages for the Difficulties in Punctuation Mark

Punctuation Mark	Mean	Frequency	Percentage
Comma	0.69	200	50.43%
Question Mark	0.61	22	5.84%
Full Stop	4.17	150	39.79%
Total	10.47	377	100%

Table (3-4) presents the means, frequencies, and percentages related to the difficulties students encountered with different punctuation marks. The test focused on three main punctuation marks: the comma, the question mark, and the full stop (period.)

Regarding the overall results for punctuation errors, the total number of errors recorded was (377), with a mean score of (10.47). This indicates that students faced significant challenges in correctly applying punctuation rules in their writing, which highlights the need for

further emphasis on punctuation instruction to enhance writing clarity and accuracy.

A closer examination of the types of punctuation errors reveals that comma errors accounted for the highest proportion among all the punctuation marks tested. Specifically, there were (205) errors related to commas, constituting (54.38%) of the total punctuation errors. This suggests that the comma presents a considerable obstacle for students,

likely due to the complexity of comma rules which require careful understanding of how to separate clauses, phrases, and list items within sentences.

Full stop errors were also notably frequent, with (150) recorded mistakes, representing (39.79%) of the total errors. This reflects difficulties students experience in accurately determining sentence boundaries, which may lead to misplaced or omitted full stops, thereby affecting the coherence and readability of their writing.

In contrast, question mark errors were the least common among the punctuation marks examined, with only (22) errors, accounting for (5.84%) of the total. This lower percentage could imply that students are relatively more familiar or

attentive to using question marks correctly at the end of interrogative sentences. Nevertheless, even this smaller percentage indicates a need for continued attention to proper punctuation usage to ensure writing precision.

In summary, these results clearly demonstrate that punctuation remains a significant challenge in students' academic writing, especially regarding commas and full stops, which together make up approximately 94% of punctuation errors. Therefore, it is recommended that greater focus be placed on teaching detailed punctuation rules and providing practical exercises to improve students' proficiency in this area, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of their written communication.

10- Results of the Capitalization and Punctuation Mark Test

Table (3-3): Means, Frequencies and Percentages for the Difficulties in Capitalization and Punctuation Mark

Error Type	Mean	Frequency	Percentage
Capitalization errors	7.33	264	58.8%
Punctuation Mark errors	7.33	377	41.2%
Total		641	100%

Table (3-3) presents the results of the capitalization and punctuation mark error analysis. The findings show that the total number of errors committed by the 36 students was 641, with 264 errors in capitalization

and 377 in punctuation marks. This indicates that punctuation errors were more frequent, accounting for 58.8% of the total errors, while capitalization errors represented 41.2%. Moreover, the mean number of punctuation errors per student was 10.47, which is noticeably higher than the mean capitalization errors of 7.33. These results suggest that students face more difficulties in using punctuation marks correctly than in applying capitalization rules.

11- Discussion of the Results

The results of this study show that EFL students at Ajdabiya University have a lot of trouble using English writing mechanics, especially when it comes to capitalization and punctuation. The prevalence of these issues is seen from the 641 mistakes that were found among 36 pupils. One important finding from the research (Table 4-3) is that, with mean mistakes per student of 10.47 for punctuation and 7.33 for capitalization, punctuation errors (58.8%) significantly outweigh capitalization errors (41.2%). This suggests that those who participate in this sample have more serious issues with punctuation. In terms of punctuation, the most common errors were commas (54.38%), full stops

(39.79%), and question marks (5.84%) (Table 4-2).

These particular error patterns imply that although basic sentence-ending punctuation is challenging, the more complex comma rules—which frequently determine sentence structure and clarity—are problematic. Similarly, even if they are less common overall, capitalization errors nevertheless present a significant challenge, especially when it comes to following the requirements for proper nouns and sentence beginnings (Table 4-1 and 2.11). These findings highlight the necessity of focused pedagogical interventions that specifically address these frequent mechanical errors, going beyond a strict emphasis on grammar and syntax to include thorough teaching and practice in capitalization and punctuation.

*** Conclusion**

Since academic writing is the main tool for clearly presenting arguments, analyzing material, and successfully communicating ideas, it is an essential talent that all university students must acquire. The proper use of capitalization and punctuation are two fundamental standards that have a substantial impact on the quality of written documents. Understanding these guidelines increases a text's readability and clarity as well as the

writer's academic credibility and general communication abilities.

This study looked into the challenges Ajdabiya University students faced when writing with proper punctuation and capitalization. The findings demonstrated that a large number of students had difficulty applying fundamental standards, particularly when it comes to utilizing capital letters at the start of sentences and proper names, as well as using punctuation marks like commas and full stops. Even though they understand how important certain writing norms are, students frequently lack the necessary practical expertise, which compromises the correctness and clarity of their work. The challenges were observed in both second and third semester students, suggesting that they require ongoing assistance throughout their academic careers. Therefore, it is advised that teachers give students more concentrated practice, concise explanations, and continuous feedback to assist them become more proficient in punctuation and capitalization. Strengthening these areas will enhance students' overall writing abilities and academic success.

* Recommendations

- 1- Students should focus more on punctuation and spelling, particularly when it comes to the use of periods, as this is one of the most common mistakes they make.
- 2- Teachers need to encourage their pupils to proofread their work for errors in spelling and punctuation. The sentences' meaning will change as a result of their improper application.
- 3- The punctuation exercises (unpunctuated sentences and texts) should be introduced and included in the curriculum by the syllabus designer.
- 4- To enhance students' writing abilities, the development of writing skills (spelling and punctuation) should be the main focus.
- 5- Developing continuous lessons that involve students in a number of writing skills (punctuation and spelling) exercises and tasks.
- 6- Identical experimental studies to enhance creativity in writing abilities (punctuation and spelling).
- 7- Conduct training sessions Plan easy training sessions to teach students proper punctuation and capital letter usage.
- 8- Include simple lessons in the curriculum incorporate simple, straightforward instruction on

punctuation and capital letters into the curriculum.

9- Check writing with computer programs Utilize or develop computer programs that can identify and correct writing errors, particularly those involving capitalization and punctuation.

10- Promote reading Urge students to read more books and texts so they can see the usage of punctuation and capital letters.

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