

**English vs. Arabic Punctuation: A Comparative Study of Usage,
Influence, and Interference Among Libyan Learners**
**علامات الترقيم في اللغة الانجليزية والعربية: دراسة مقارنة للاستخدام والتأثير
والتداخل اللغوي لدى المتعلمين الليبيين**

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الملخص باللغة العربية:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل علامات الترقيم في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية من خلال دراسة تقابلية، وبيان أثر الاختلافات بين النظامين على استخدام طلبة الجامعة الليبيين لعلامات الترقيم في الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية. اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي القائم على التحليل التقابلي وتحليل الأخطاء، مدعوماً بالمنهج الكمي. تم جمع البيانات من ثلاثين مقالاً باللغة الإنجليزية كتبها طلبة ليبيايون متخصصون في اللغة الإنجليزية، إضافة إلى استبانة صُممت للكشف عن وعي الطلبة بقواعد علامات الترقيم والصعوبات التي تواجههم في استخدامها. ركز التحليل على أكثر علامات الترقيم شيوعاً في اللغتين، مثل النقطة، والفاصلة، وعلامة الاستفهام، وعلامة التعجب، والنقطتين، والفاصلة المنقوطة، وعلامات الاقتباس. وأظهرت النتائج وجود فروق واضحة بين النظامين من حيث الشكل والوظيفة والاستعمال، مما أدى إلى ظهور أخطاء متكررة في كتابات الطلبة، تمثلت في الحذف أو سوء الاستخدام أو الإفراط في استخدام علامات الترقيم، خاصة الفاصلة والنقطة، وذلك نتيجة للتداخل اللغوي من اللغة العربية. كما دعمت نتائج الاستبانة نتائج تحليل المقالات، حيث أظهرت ضعف وعي الطلبة بقواعد علامات الترقيم في اللغة الإنجليزية. وتوصي الدراسة بضرورة التركيز على تدريس علامات الترقيم بشكل صريح ضمن برامج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية لتحسين مهارات الكتابة لدى الطلبة.

English vs. Arabic Punctuation: A Comparative Study of Usage, Influence, and Interference Among Libyan Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of punctuation marks in English and Arabic through a contrastive analysis and examines the influence of Arabic punctuation conventions on the English writing of Libyan university learners. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative error analysis with quantitative analysis. Data were collected from 30 English essays written by Libyan undergraduate students majoring in English, as well as responses to a structured questionnaire designed to explore learners' awareness and perceptions of punctuation usage. The analysis focuses on commonly used punctuation marks in both languages, including the full stop, comma, question mark, exclamation mark, colon, semicolon, and quotation marks. The findings reveal significant differences between English and Arabic punctuation systems in terms of form, function, and frequency of use, which contribute to recurrent punctuation errors in learners' English writing. Common error types include omission, misuse, and overuse of punctuation marks, particularly commas and full stops, often resulting from negative transfer from Arabic. The questionnaire results support the essay analysis, indicating limited learner awareness of English punctuation rules and interference from the first language. The study highlights the importance of explicit instruction in punctuation in EFL contexts and provides pedagogical implications for improving the writing accuracy of Libyan learners.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In written discourse, punctuation functions as the framework that organizes language into interpretable units. It signals pauses, relationships between ideas, and meaning that words alone sometimes cannot convey. For native speakers of English, punctuation is often acquired implicitly; for second-language learners, however, punctuation is an explicit target of learning.

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The impact of punctuation on readability, meaning, and academic success makes it indispensable for advanced language proficiency. Punctuation marks are sometimes neglected by the Libyan students as they mostly don't know the correct use or position of each one. On the other hand, some students misuse the punctuation marks because of the interference of their mother language which is Arabic.

1.2. Research Problem

Despite studying English for several years, many Libyan EFL students continue to produce written texts that contain frequent punctuation errors. These errors often lead to unclear meaning, run-on sentences, and weak organization in academic writing. Punctuation is usually taught indirectly as part of grammar or writing lessons, and little attention is given to the differences between English and Arabic punctuation systems.

Furthermore, although students are generally aware of the importance of punctuation, their written performance suggests a serious gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. The influence of Arabic punctuation conventions appears to negatively affect students' use of English punctuation, yet this issue has not been sufficiently investigated in the Libyan EFL context. Therefore, there is a need for systematic research to identify common punctuation errors, examine their causes, and explore students' awareness and attitudes toward punctuation use in English writing.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How do punctuation conventions differ between English and Arabic?
2. Which punctuation marks pose the greatest difficulty for Libyan learners?
3. How do differences between English and Arabic punctuation systems contribute to errors?
4. What pedagogical strategies can reduce punctuation transfer errors?

1.4. Objectives of Study

This paper explores English punctuation features through a contrastive lens with Arabic (the primary language in Libya) to:

1. To make Libyan learners understand the similarities and differences between punctuation marks in Arabic and English languages.

2. To identify typical errors made by Libyan learners.
3. To analyze the causes of these errors.
4. Suggest instructional approaches for English teachers in Libya.

1.5. Research Hypotheses

Based on the research problem and the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- » Libyan EFL students commit frequent and systematic punctuation errors in English essay writing.
- » There is a significant influence of Arabic punctuation conventions on Libyan EFL students' use of English punctuation

2. Literature Review

2.1.Punctuation and Written Communication

Punctuation plays a crucial role in written communication as it helps organize ideas, clarify meaning, and guide readers through a text. According to Truss (2003), punctuation functions as a system of visual signals that supports grammatical structure and reading comprehension. Incorrect punctuation can lead to ambiguity, misinterpretation, and reduced coherence in writing, particularly for second language learners. In English, punctuation is rule-governed and closely connected to syntax and sentence structure. Marks such as full stops, commas, apostrophes, and quotation marks perform specific grammatical and semantic functions. Mastery of punctuation is therefore an essential component of writing proficiency (Hyland, 2003).

2.2 Punctuation in English

English punctuation includes marks such as the full stop (.), comma (,), semicolon (;), colon (:), question mark (?), exclamation mark (!), quotation marks (“ ”), and apostrophe ('). These marks are used to signal sentence boundaries, clause relationships, possession, and reported speech. Studies have shown that EFL learners frequently struggle with comma usage, run-on sentences, and apostrophe placement (Ferris, 2002; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

Research also indicates that punctuation errors are persistent even at higher proficiency levels, suggesting that punctuation instruction is

often neglected in ESL/EFL classrooms or treated as a minor aspect of grammar (Leki, 1991).

2.3 Punctuation in Arabic

Arabic punctuation developed later than English punctuation and was influenced by Western writing systems. Traditional Arabic texts relied more on syntactic and semantic cues rather than punctuation marks to indicate meaning (Al-Badawi, 1992). Modern Standard Arabic uses punctuation marks such as the comma (،), full stop (.), question mark (?), and quotation marks (« »), but their usage differs from English in form, frequency, and function.

One key difference is that Arabic does not use capital letters, which often leads Arab EFL learners to omit capitalization in English writing. Additionally, the Arabic comma is used more flexibly, which may contribute to overuse or misuse of commas in English (Holes, 2004).

2.4 Contrastive Studies of English and Arabic Punctuation

Contrastive analysis theory suggests that differences between the first language (L1) and the target language (L2) can predict areas of difficulty for learners (Lado, 1957). Several studies have applied this theory to punctuation use among Arab EFL learners.

Ahmed (2010) found that Arab learners frequently transferred Arabic punctuation conventions into English writing, especially in comma usage and sentence boundaries. Similarly, Mahmoud (2014) reported that the absence of certain punctuation marks in Arabic, such as the apostrophe, led to high error rates in English possessive forms.

Studies focusing on Arab EFL learners emphasize that punctuation errors are not random but systematic and influenced by L1 interference, limited instruction, and lack of practice (Al-Khasawneh, 2010).

2.5 Punctuation Errors in EFL Writing

Previous research on EFL writing has identified punctuation errors as one of the most common surface-level errors. According to Darus and Ching (2009), punctuation errors significantly affect the clarity

and readability of student writing. These errors often coexist with grammatical and spelling problems, compounding communication difficulties.

Ferris (2002) argues that explicit corrective feedback and focused instruction can improve learners' punctuation accuracy. However, many EFL programs prioritize grammar and vocabulary while giving little attention to punctuation.

2.6 Research Gap

Although several studies have examined punctuation errors among Arab EFL learners, limited research has focused specifically on Libyan learners and on contrastive analysis between English and Arabic punctuation systems using both essay writing and questionnaires as data collection tools. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing common punctuation errors made by Libyan EFL learners and exploring their awareness and attitudes toward punctuation use.

2.7 Summary

This literature review highlights the importance of punctuation in writing, the key differences between English and Arabic punctuation systems, and the influence of L1 transfer on EFL learners' writing. Previous studies suggest that explicit, contrastive instruction can help reduce punctuation errors. Building on these findings, the present study investigates punctuation use among Libyan EFL learners to provide pedagogical recommendations.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods contrastive research design, combining qualitative error analysis with quantitative analysis. The study contrasts punctuation marks in English and Arabic and investigates how differences between the two systems affect the use of punctuation in English writing by Libyan university learners.

3.1. Participants

The participants were 30 Libyan undergraduate students majoring in English at a Libyan university. All participants are native speakers of Arabic and learners of English as a foreign language. Their

proficiency level ranges from intermediate to advanced, based on their academic level and coursework.

3.2. Research Instruments

3.2.1. Learners' Essays

The primary data source consisted of 30 English essays written by the participants. Each student was asked to write an essay of approximately 250–300 words on a general topic (e.g., education, technology, or social issues). The essays were written under classroom conditions to ensure authenticity.

3.2.2 Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was administered to the same participants. The questionnaire aimed to investigate learners':

- Awareness of English punctuation rules
- Difficulties in using punctuation marks
- Influence of Arabic punctuation on English writing
- The questionnaire included multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale items, and open-ended questions.

3.3. Punctuation Marks Selected for Analysis

The study focused on punctuation marks commonly used in both English and Arabic, including: (Full stop / period (.) ,Comma (, / ﻛﻮﻣﺎ) ,Question mark (? / ؟) ,Exclamation mark (!) ,Colon (:) ,Semicolon (; / ﻓﻮﻧﻜﺸﺎ) ,Quotation marks (“ ” / « ») , Parentheses ()

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Permission was obtained from the university and participants.

The essay task was administered during regular class time.

The questionnaire was distributed after the completion of the essays.

All collected data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

3.5. Data Analysis

3.5.1. Essay Analysis

The essays were analyzed using Error Analysis (EA) and Contrastive Analysis (CA) approaches. Punctuation errors were identified and categorized into:

Omission errors (missing punctuation)

Misuse errors (incorrect punctuation choice)

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Overuse errors (unnecessary punctuation)

Each error type was examined in relation to Arabic punctuation conventions to identify possible negative transfer from Arabic to English.

3.5.2. Questionnaire Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically to support and explain the findings from the essay analysis.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the research instruments were reviewed by EFL specialists. Reliability was enhanced by applying consistent criteria in identifying and classifying punctuation errors. Where possible, a second rater was consulted to verify the analysis.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained.

3.8. Limitations

The study is limited to 30 Libyan university students from one institution and focuses only on written English production. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all Libyan EFL learners.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Structural Differences

English Punctuation	Arabic Punctuation
Uses Latin-based marks; universal layout	Uses adapted marks, often mirrored or reshaped for RTL
Period (.) ends sentences	Arabic period (-) or full stop (.) in digital texts
Comma (,) separates clauses	Arabic comma (،) differs in shape and pause function
Question mark (?) on the right	Arabic question mark (؟) mirrored shape

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English Punctuation

Arabic Punctuation

Quotation marks “ ”

Arabic: « » or “” with different spacing

4.2 Essay Writing Results

Analysis of the 30 student essays revealed frequent and systematic punctuation errors in English. These errors were grouped into major categories based on type and frequency.

Table 1. Common Punctuation Errors in Students' essays

Percentage of Students with Errors	Punctuation mark	Typical Error
%83	Comma(,)	Comma overuse / misuse instead of full stop
%70	(.) Full stop	Run-on sentences
%67	Capitalization	Missing capital letters after full stop
%60	(') Apostrophe	Confusion between possessive and plural
%40	(?) Question mark	Missing question marks
%35	(" ") Quotation marks	Arabic-style quotation usage

The comma was the most problematic punctuation mark. Many students used commas where full stops were required, producing long run-on sentences. This reflects transfer from Arabic, where sentence boundaries are often marked differently and commas are used more flexibly. Students also showed difficulty with apostrophes, which do not exist in Arabic punctuation, leading to frequent omission or incorrect placement. Capitalization errors were also common, as Arabic does not distinguish between upper- and lower-case letters.

4.3 Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire focused on students' awareness, attitudes, and self-perceived competence in punctuation.

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Table 2. Questionnaire Findings

Statement	Agree%	Disagree%
Punctuation is important for meaning	%90	%10
English punctuation is difficult	%73	%27
Arabic punctuation helps me understand English punctuation	%30	%70
Teachers focus enough on punctuation	%35	%65

Most students acknowledged the importance of punctuation, but a large proportion reported that English punctuation rules are confusing. The majority believed that Arabic punctuation does not help them when writing in English, suggesting limited explicit contrastive instruction.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Libyan EFL learners face significant challenges in using English punctuation accurately. These difficulties can largely be explained through contrastive analysis between English and Arabic punctuation systems.

5.1. Influence of Arabic Punctuation

Arabic punctuation differs from English in both form and function. For example:

The comma in Arabic (،) is often used more freely, which may explain students' overuse of commas in English.

Arabic does not use capital letters, leading to frequent capitalization errors in English writing.

The apostrophe has no equivalent in Arabic, which accounts for students' confusion or avoidance of this punctuation mark.

These differences support the idea of negative transfer, where features of the first language interfere with second language writing.

5.2. Awareness vs. Performance Gap

Although questionnaire results show that students are aware of the importance of punctuation, their essay performance indicates a clear gap between theoretical awareness and practical application. This suggests that

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punctuation is often taught implicitly or briefly, rather than through focused practice..

5.3. Contrastive Transfer

Negative transfer from Arabic manifests primarily in comma usage, sentence boundaries, and punctuation that serves different syntactic or rhetorical functions. Learners often map Arabic punctuation onto English structures without recognizing structural differences.

5.4. Comparative analysis of punctuation:

The following points show how English and Arabic punctuation marks are different:

- In both languages, punctuation marks are certain symbols used in writing.
- In both languages the purpose of using punctuation marks is to clarify meaning by separating words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs.
- Most of the punctuation marks are common in English and Arabic: comma, question mark, full stop, colon, exclamation mark, brackets, square brackets, dots, indentation, semicolon, quotation marks.
- Unlike Arabic, there are some special punctuation marks in English like: capitalization, apostrophe, hyphen, slash.
- Contrary to English, there are special punctuation marks in Arabic like: flowered brackets, equality, closing words.
- As in Arabic, punctuation marks can be used in initial, middle and final position in English.
- Generally, there are many common uses of punctuation marks, like the uses of full stop, question marks, indentation, dots, semicolon, and comma.
- Some difference in the usages occurs in exclamation mark, brackets, square brackets, and colon.

5.5. Instructional Gaps

In many Libyan EFL classrooms:

- Punctuation is taught implicitly.

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- Teachers focus on vocabulary and grammar, not punctuation.
- Students lack targeted practice and corrective feedback.

6. Pedagogical Implications

6.1. Contrastive Teaching Materials

Design lessons that explicitly highlight the differences between Arabic and English punctuation. Examples:

- Side-by-side charts
- Error analysis activities
- Translation exercises focusing on punctuation

6.2. Practice Activities

- **Activity 1:** Comma Placement Drill
- Give sentences without commas and ask students to place them correctly.
- **Activity 2:** Dialogue Punctuation
- Provide unpunctuated dialogues for students to punctuate.
- **Activity 3:** Peer Review with Punctuation Focus
- Train students to identify punctuation errors in peers' essays.

6.3 Teacher Training

- Teachers should receive professional development in:
- English punctuation rules
- Contrastive rhetoric
- Error correction techniques

7. Conclusion

Punctuation marks are essential tools for meaning in written English. Libyan learners often struggle due to negative transfer from Arabic, instructional gaps, and limited practice. A contrastive approach can help teachers and learners address these challenges by making differences explicit and practice meaningful. With targeted pedagogy, learners can develop greater control over English punctuation, thus improving overall writing proficiency.

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