

# Analysis of Punctuation and Spelling Errors Associated with Academic Writing among Iraqi EFL Learners

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## Abstract

The present study aims to analyse and find punctuation and spelling errors EFL learners face in their academic writing as part of English proficiency tests. A quantitative method was adopted to implement the research objective. 117 written samples were collected and analysed. The participants were 82 females and 35 males. The average age is 23 to 37 years. The results showed different kinds of errors and challenges. The present study concerns limited errors and challenges: punctuation and spelling errors. The findings show a large prevalence of punctuation and spelling errors among Iraqi EFL learners. The most common errors using punctuation marks were using capital letters (54.72%), commas (25.71%), and periods (19.58%). In terms of spelling errors, omission recorded the highest percentage of errors (40.9%), followed by substitution (30.5%), transposition (15.0%), and insertion (13.6%).

**Keywords:** EFL, Iraqi students, errors, punctuation, spelling errors

## 1. Introduction

English is a common tongue, bridging communication gaps and uniting people from diverse backgrounds worldwide. English, the preferred language for international communication, allows native and non-native speakers to interact and collaborate. In Iraq, the first language is Arabic, and English is the foreign language acquired in schools. It has been learned from the first standard class until the graduation level. The learners try to focus, learn, and master different skills, including writing. Writing is one of the language skills. It is not as easy as many believe. It requires gaining a good number of vocabulary and mastery of grammatical rules. As Hundarenko (2019) states, mastering academic writing skills is crucial for EFL learners, as it impacts their academic success and plays a significant role in their professional lives.

There are several forms of writing, one of which is academic writing. Academic writing is known as a formal style of writing. It is divided into student academic writing and professional academic writing. This form of writing is mainly used in academic society to discuss ideas, thoughts, and knowledge of the academic world. It is the way of knowledge dissemination across the globe. Several forms of academic writing include essays, research papers, theses, dissertations, etc. Academic writing in English is entirely different from mother-tongue writing in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and arranging thoughts and ideas.

To effectively compose a text, students must master essential competencies: organization, grammar, vocabulary, and writing mechanics. Writing organization pertains to logically structuring sentences and paragraphs, enhancing the text's clarity and flow, and making it easier for readers to grasp the conveyed message. Grammar encompasses the set of linguistic rules that dictate sentence construction, encompassing syntax, punctuation, and the formation of words. Vocabulary is the judicious selection and application of words to convey thoughts precisely. Lastly, writing mechanics – including spelling, punctuation, and the use of capital letters – contribute to the legibility and professional appearance of the text.

English is a toural subject for most learners. They face challenges learning English for several reasons, including first language interference. Many studies have been carried out on the challenges facing learners in English writing (Al-Sobhi et al., 2017; Awad, 2012; Vethamaiccam & Ganapathy, 2017; Wu & Garza, 2014; Qin & Uccelli, 2016; Khuwaileh & Shoumali, 2000; Promsupa et al.; 2017; Fauzan et al.; 2020). Despite the significant number of related studies, no study has investigated the punctuation and spelling errors in the English proficiency test conducted in the Electronic Computer Center at the University of Diyala. English proficiency tests play a crucial role in Iraq, serving as a gateway to higher educational studies. These tests assess an individual's ability to effectively communicate in English, a language that has become indispensable in today's globalised world. Writing skills are a particularly important component of these tests, as they demonstrate a candidate's ability to express ideas clearly, coherently, and accurately in written form. This skill is essential for academic success, professional advancement, and effective communication in international settings.

In Iraq, proficiency in English is increasingly recognized as a vital skill for both academic and professional success. It often involves essay writing that requires the test-taker to present arguments, provide evidence, and draw conclusions. This requires students to demonstrate not only their English language skills but also their critical thinking abilities. Writing skills are, therefore, a measure of a student's ability to engage with abstract ideas and logical reasoning, which are important in academic and professional contexts. On the other hand, the writing part of proficiency tests are designed to assess an individual's command of grammar, and vocabulary, and their ability to structure their thoughts coherently. Students in Iraq, where English a foreign language, often face challenges with these aspects. The tests evaluate their capability to use a variety of sentence structures, appropriate word choices, and correct grammar, all of which are essential for professional and academic writing.

It is worth mentioning that the English Proficiency Test impacts students' Academic Opportunities specifically in Postgraduate Studies: For Iraqi students aspiring to pursue postgraduate studies, especially PhD or Master's programs, thesis and dissertation writing are central to academic success. Proficiency tests are used to screen candidates for their readiness to handle the complex writing demands of postgraduate research. A weak performance in the writing component can signal a student's inability to meet the rigorous demands of academic research and publishing.

On the other hand, English proficiency impact on Professional Opportunities for instance, English is becoming the language of business in Iraq, particularly in sectors such as oil and gas, technology, education, and international trade. Many employers in these fields use English proficiency tests as part of their recruitment process. Strong writing skills, as reflected in test results, demonstrate a candidate's ability to draft reports, create proposals, and communicate with international stakeholders. Weak writing skills may hinder career growth, as many companies prioritize candidates who can communicate effectively in written English. Moreover, In multinational companies operating in Iraq, employees are often

required to communicate with colleagues, partners, or clients from other countries. Writing proficiency is crucial for email correspondence, writing formal reports, and preparing presentations. Therefore, proficiency test scores that reflect poor writing skills can limit job prospects or advancement in such environments. The present study intended to find the punctuation and spelling errors EFL learners face in their academic writing as part of English proficiency tests.

## 2. Review of Literature

EFL learners mainly struggle with writing in foreign languages due to several factors, such as lack of reading, first language transfer, and low writing practice. To address these challenges, paying attention to these sources is crucial to improving students' essay-writing skills (Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017).

Different studies have been conducted to analyse and find the issues facing learners in English essay writing. For instance, The study conducted by Ahmed (2019) highlighted that EFL learners at the university level face challenges in mastering essay writing skills, with major difficulties in grammar, organising ideas, punctuation, and vocabulary. The research results emphasised the importance of teachers addressing these writing challenges through additional writing sessions.

Furthermore, Listyani and Thren (2023) focused on Indonesian EFL students and their struggles with idiomatic expressions in writing. The study revealed that students often make errors due to L1 interference, insufficient linguistic and grammatical knowledge, a lack of lexical knowledge, and a failure to consider cultural aspects in their writing and translating.

In addition, Ahmed (2018) discussed the challenges faced by Bangladeshi university students in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing. The study highlighted common errors in writing, such as grammatical mistakes, sentence structure issues, and word choice errors. The research emphasized the need for effective pedagogy in teaching writing to non-native English speakers.

In line with Marita (2020), the cohesion errors in English essays were classified into grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion, with the most common errors being grammatical cohesion errors. The study recommended that English writing lecturers pay more attention to discussing and analysing these errors to improve students' writing skills in English essays. Similarly, Saputra, 2023 highlighted the importance of identifying and addressing errors in English essay writing to enhance students' writing abilities. Rajagukguk (2023) focused on the dominant errors made by first-semester students in using appropriate tenses in writing short essays. The study identified misformation as the most prevalent error and attributed the errors to interlingual and intralingual transfers. This research emphasised the need to address word structure errors to enhance students' writing skills.

Some studies were specifically conducted to find the punctuation and spelling errors in EFL writing. Ahamed, Y. E. F. (2016) examines common writing errors among students at the College of Science & Arts in Tanumah, King Khalid University. The study identifies frequent issues with grammar, spelling, and punctuation, attributing these errors to factors such as insufficient English exposure, limited writing practice, and interference from the students' native Arabic language. It recommends enhancing the EFL curriculum with a stronger focus on these areas, alongside increased writing practice and exposure to well-written English, to improve students' writing proficiency.

Shweba & Mujiyanto (2017) investigates the common writing errors related to spelling, capitalization, and punctuation among first-year students at Al-Merghib University in Libya.

The study identifies frequent mistakes, such as incorrect spelling, improper use of capital letters, and misuse of punctuation marks, attributing these errors to factors like inadequate instruction, lack of practice, and interference from the students' native Arabic language. It underscores the need for targeted interventions in the EFL curriculum to address these specific areas, aiming to improve students' writing accuracy and overall language proficiency.

Al-Saudi (2013) focuses on analyzing the spelling errors made by EFL learners at Tafila Technical University in Jordan. The research identifies common spelling mistakes and categorizes them based on their frequency and types, such as phonological errors, morphological errors, and confusion between similar-sounding words. The study attributes these errors to factors like inadequate exposure to English spelling rules, interference from the Arabic language, and insufficient practice. The study emphasizes the importance of incorporating more spelling-focused activities and corrective feedback in the EFL curriculum to enhance students' spelling accuracy and overall writing skills.

Ahmed (2017) investigates the spelling errors commonly made by Kurdish learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The study categorizes these errors into types such as phonological, morphological, and orthographic errors, with frequent issues including incorrect vowel usage, consonant doubling, and confusion between similar-sounding words. The study identifies the primary causes of these errors as the influence of the Kurdish language, insufficient exposure to English spelling rules, and gaps in the teaching of English orthography. The researcher emphasizes the need for targeted instructional strategies to address these specific spelling challenges, aiming to enhance Kurdish EFL learners' overall writing skills.

Mahmoud (2013) conducted a study examining the spelling errors made by Arab EFL learners, using a two-way analysis to categorize the errors. The study found that most mistakes were phonological, where learners applied Arabic spelling patterns to English words, leading to errors such as the omission or addition of vowels. Mahmoud identified that the lack of one-to-one correspondence between English sounds and letters created confusion, particularly with vowel digraphs and silent letters. The study classified errors into interlingual (due to language transfer from Arabic) and intralingual (due to the complexities of English itself). He concluded that targeted spelling instruction and increased awareness of English orthographic rules are essential to improve EFL learners' spelling accuracy.

Altamimi et al (2018) conducted a comprehensive review of spelling errors in both Arabic and non-Arabic contexts, focusing on challenges faced by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The study highlighted that spelling errors in Arabic-speaking learners often stem from differences between Arabic's phonetic structure and English's complex orthographic system, particularly with vowel representation and silent letters. Errors were categorized into phonological, morphological, and orthographic types, with phonological errors being the most common due to the inconsistency between English spelling and pronunciation. The review also found that learners from non-Arabic contexts face similar challenges, particularly with English's irregular spellings, but their errors were less influenced by phonetic transfer from their native language. The authors emphasized that Arabic-speaking learners tend to over-rely on the phonetic nature of their native script, leading to systematic spelling mistakes when writing in English. Additionally, the review suggested that spelling instruction in EFL should be more context-specific, addressing the linguistic backgrounds of the learners. The study concluded that improving spelling accuracy requires a balanced focus on both the phonological rules of English and the influence of learners' native languages.

Nasim and Mujeeba (2024) explored the perceptions of both Arab EFL students and their

instructors regarding errors in mechanics, such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, in paragraph writing. The study revealed a discrepancy between students' and instructors' views, with students often underestimating the impact of mechanical errors on their overall writing quality, while instructors viewed these errors as significant impediments to clarity and professionalism. The study identified common issues such as misuse of commas, inconsistent capitalization, and frequent misspellings, often influenced by Arabic's different punctuation rules and phonetic script. Errors were categorized based on their frequency and the severity of their impact on meaning. The study also found that both students and instructors agreed on the need for more explicit teaching of mechanics, as these errors were seen as avoidable with proper instruction. They concluded that a more collaborative approach between students and instructors, focusing on mechanical accuracy in writing, could improve the overall quality of Arab EFL learners' written English.

Ahmed (2020) explored the role of feedback in EFL writing within Arab world contexts, identifying key issues and challenges faced by both learners and educators. The study emphasized that feedback, particularly on writing mechanics such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling, is crucial for improving learners' written English but is often underutilized in Arab EFL classrooms. Teachers commonly focus on surface-level errors without addressing deeper issues related to content and structure, limiting the effectiveness of feedback in fostering overall writing development. Ahmed also highlighted that cultural factors, including reliance on teacher authority and limited peer feedback, contribute to a passive learning approach, where students seldom engage critically with feedback. Additionally, many students expressed a lack of confidence in revising their work independently, often feeling overwhelmed by extensive corrections. The study identified time constraints and large class sizes as further barriers to providing detailed, personalized feedback. To address these challenges, the author recommended a more process-oriented approach to writing instruction, encouraging iterative drafts and active student involvement in the feedback process. The study concluded that fostering a feedback-rich environment, along with training teachers on delivering more balanced and constructive feedback, could significantly enhance EFL writing outcomes in the Arab world.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The present study aims to find the punctuation and spelling errors in essay writing in the English proficiency test. In Iraq, there are a set of requirements if someone wants to apply for postgraduate studies, one of which is the English proficiency test certificate. Every candidate must be admitted to a computer-based exam at any governmental university in Iraq. The English proficiency test consists of 40 multiple choice questions: 10 questions related to English grammar, 10 for comprehension, 10 about language function, 10 for conversation, and writing an essay about a given topic.

Before the test, all the participants must take a five-day course to study different subjects (Basic English grammar, reading comprehension, conversation, and composition). The teachers who teach the candidates have good teaching experience and are either associate professors or professors from the Department of English.

The present study is concerned with punctuation and spelling errors in essay writing. For this, 117 written samples were collected. The first step after collecting the data is coding the personal information. The written texts were then carefully examined to detect punctuation and spelling errors. These errors made by selected samples were classified and analysed statistically as shown in the part of findings and discussion. The participants were 82 females and 35 males. The average age is 23 to 37 years. All the participants are from different

departments and studied English as part of their graduation studies.

#### 4. Findings

Iraqi EFL learners face several challenges in academic writing, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and word order. During data collection, researchers observed that students frequently made errors, which highlighted consistent issues in every test attempt. Most written paragraphs were poorly structured and lacked unity and coherence, and many participants struggled significantly, with some writing only one sentence or not writing at all. Out of the total participants, 20 wrote only one sentence, 13 did not write anything, and 17 produced random, unrecognizable words, indicating a serious lack of writing skills. Additionally, 9 participants wrote paragraphs on completely different topics, and 6 repeated the main question, further suggesting confusion and a lack of understanding of English writing.

##### 4.1. Punctuation Errors

Katiya et al. (2015) indicated that punctuation is a crucial aspect of writing, often overlooked in favour of grammar, especially for ESL and EFL learners. While mastering grammar is essential, punctuation deserves equal attention as a fundamental building block of clear and effective writing. As Harmer (2004) rightly points out, punctuation is not just a cosmetic accessory; it is a vital tool that shapes the meaning and flow of our sentences. Unfortunately, in many countries where English is a second language, punctuation instruction often takes a backseat to grammar, potentially hindering learners' ability to grasp written communication's nuances fully.

The study focused on two types of errors: punctuation and spelling mistakes. The following sections discuss the detailed findings related to these specific issues.

Table 1.

*The most common errors using punctuation marks*

Punctuation mark	Frequency	Percentage
Capitalisation	223	54.72%
Period	83	19.58%
Comma	109	25.71%
Total	424	100%

Punctuation was a key area where Iraqi EFL learners struggled, reflecting findings from Katiya et al. (2015), who emphasized the importance of punctuation in writing. As seen in Table 1, **capitalization** was the most frequent punctuation error, accounting for 54.72% of all errors, followed by issues with the **comma** (25.71%) and the **period** (19.58%). These findings align with previous studies (Awad, 2012; Shweba & Mujiyanto, 2017), suggesting that Arabic-speaking learners often overlook or misuse capitalization, particularly in the first word of sentences and proper nouns, due to the lack of capitalization rules in Arabic.

Examples of these errors include the misuse of capital letters: “he went to London” instead of “He went to London,” or improper placement of periods: “They went to the market” (without a period). Learners also tended to omit periods at the end of complete sentences, rendering sentences ambiguous or incomplete, such as “She went to the park and” instead of “She went to the park.”

Misuse of commas was another common issue. Students either omitted commas where necessary or inserted them inappropriately. For instance, students often wrote, “She bought

apples oranges bananas,” without inserting commas between items in a list, or “The teacher, is talking,” incorrectly placing a comma after the subject.

The difficulties in punctuation, especially with periods and commas, can be attributed to the structural differences between English and Arabic. As Harmer (2004) and Awad (2012) indicated, the reliance on **verb conjugations** in Arabic to indicate the end of sentences contrasts with the need for punctuation in English to organize and clarify sentence structure.

#### 4.2. Spelling Mistakes

Spelling mistakes were another major issue, with the learners making various types of errors categorized by Cook's (1999) typology: **substitution**, **omission**, **insertion**, and **transposition** (see Table 2). Omission errors were the most frequent, accounting for 40.9% of all spelling mistakes, followed by substitution (30.5%), transposition (15.0%), and insertion (13.6%).

Table 2.

*Most common mistakes of spelling*

Error type	Frequency	Percentage
Substitution	197	30.5%
Omission	264	40.9%
Insertion	88	13.6%
Transposition	97	15.0
Total	646	100%

Examples of omission errors include “lit” for “light” and “brek” for “break,” where learners omitted key letters. In substitution errors, students replaced the correct letters with incorrect ones, such as “there” for “their” or “belive” for “believe.” Insertion errors occurred when students added unnecessary letters to words, like writing “read” instead of “red,” while transposition errors involved reversing the order of letters, such as writing “fromation” instead of “formation.”

The frequency of omission errors suggests that learners lack sufficient knowledge of English spelling patterns, especially regarding vowel sounds, which are used differently in Arabic. Substitution errors further indicate that learners struggle with the sound-symbol relationship in English, which is less predictable than in Arabic. Insertion and transposition errors also reflect confusion caused by the differences between Arabic's **sound-to-symbol consistency** and the less consistent nature of English spelling.

#### 5. Discussion

The results of the present study reveal significant challenges faced by Iraqi EFL learners in mastering punctuation and spelling, which are vital for effective written communication. The findings, particularly regarding **capitalization** and **period errors**, are consistent with previous studies, such as those by Awad (2012) and Pathan (2021), which suggest that Arabic-speaking learners struggle with applying English capitalization rules due to the absence of capitalization in Arabic writing.

The frequent misuse of periods, such as their omission or incorrect placement, further highlights the influence of Arabic sentence structure on learners' writing. In Arabic, verbs and verb endings often signal the end of a thought, while in English, punctuation plays a key role in organizing written text. As a result, Arab learners tend to omit periods or place them incorrectly, disrupting sentence clarity. This interference from the first language (L1) is also

reflected in the improper use of commas, as noted by Awad (2012), with learners either omitting or overusing commas due to confusion over English punctuation rules.

The high rate of **spelling errors**, particularly omission and substitution, can be attributed to the complex relationship between English sounds and their written forms. Arabic is a phonetic language with more consistent sound-symbol correspondence, whereas English has irregularities in spelling, especially with vowels. This contrast creates confusion for Arabic-speaking learners, who often omit or substitute letters when they are unsure of English spelling patterns. The results align with Al-Zuoud's (2013) findings, which indicated that Arab EFL learners omit letters because they lack confidence in spelling words accurately.

Moreover, **insertion** and **transposition errors** are likely influenced by the differences in orthographic systems between Arabic and English. Arabic script is written from right to left, with different rules governing the sequence and structure of letters, which may lead to unintentional switching or insertion of letters when learners write in English.

These results suggest a need for **pedagogical interventions** that address the specific difficulties Arabic-speaking EFL learners face with punctuation and spelling. Explicit teaching of punctuation rules, spelling patterns, and common error types, along with ample writing practice, could help mitigate these issues. Additionally, more focus should be placed on addressing L1 interference and providing students with strategies to overcome these challenges.

## 6. Conclusion

The study of punctuation and spelling errors in academic writing among EFL learners underscores the critical need to address specific challenges in English language teaching and learning. Identifying the difficulties that learners face, particularly with punctuation and spelling, is essential for developing more effective instructional strategies. The findings reveal that EFL learners frequently struggle with the correct use of punctuation marks, especially capital letters, commas, and periods. Additionally, spelling errors are prevalent, with omission mistakes being the most common, followed by substitution, transposition, and insertion errors. These results highlight the importance of targeted interventions in EFL instruction, particularly in contexts like Iraq, where such errors can significantly hinder students' writing proficiency. To enhance teaching methodologies, educators and curriculum developers should focus on providing more explicit instruction in punctuation rules and spelling patterns, incorporating practice activities that address these specific areas, and offering corrective feedback that helps learners internalize correct usage. By doing so, EFL programs can better equip students with the writing skills necessary for academic success.

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