

Analysing Difficulties Faced by Iraqi Students  
of English in Using Non-Ending Punctuation  
Marks

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## **Analysing Difficulties Faced by Iraqi Students of English in Using Non-Ending Punctuation Marks**

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In speaking, the message meant can be made clear by changing the tone of the voice, by pausing, or by gestures. Speaking for three minutes, for instance, without pausing or changing tone will make the message understandable. Also, in writing putting words all together without ever indicating where pauses should be, makes expressing thoughts impossible. Thus, it is necessary to use signs and symbols to make meanings clear. These symbols, commonly, called *punctuation marks*. These marks are essential, since they supplement the meanings of words. Every punctuation mark used means something. Some of the symbols indicate that the end of a sentence is reached; others separate one part of a sentence from the next part. Quirk et al (1987: 1610) state the punctuation system serves two broad purposes: separation and specification. The former, means that punctuation marks separate units that are in simple linear relation to each other (units in series); for example, a space separates two successive words or sentences, or it indicates the beginning or the end of an included unit, a unit which is inserted within some larger units; for example

### **1. He is, *I think*, a teacher. (ibid)**

The latter means that punctuation system specifies a grammatical, semantic or pragmatic function to the sentence in addition to the marking of separation. So the apostrophe in *the reader's* specifies the ending as genitive in contrast to the identical plural in *the readers*.

Punctuation marks in English can be divided into three groups. Ending, non-ending, and inclosing punctuation marks. It is assumed that Iraqi students of English often face difficulties in using punctuation marks. However, this paper will exclusively focus on non-ending punctuation marks. The paper will focus on analysing students' answers in that area (non-ending punctuation marks) in

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monthly and final exams in English comprehension and composition, as a natural sample.

### 1. Non-Ending Punctuation Marks

This group includes marks that come within the sentence without giving a sense of being ended, i.e., separating one part of a sentence from the next part. This group includes the comma (,), the semicolon (;), the colon (:), and the dash (-) Soles(2005: 110).

#### The Comma

It is the most frequently used of all punctuation marks in English composition, due to its flexibility. The comma indicates a short pause being used to make written sentences clearer and more effective (being equal to pauses and variations of voice pitch in speaking)(Sw annel, 1993:1282). However, placing the comma in the sentence is quite meaningful. Consider the following:

2. When the lightning struck, John Smith scared.
3. When the lightning struck John , Smith scared. (ibid)

It is clear that placing the comma in different positions changes the meaning of the sentences. Sentence (1) can be rewritten as:

- a. John Smith scared when the lightning struck. But sentence (b) has completely different meaning:
- b. Smith scared when the lightning struck John.

Quirk et al (1987: 1611) and Soles (2005:111) have presented four major uses for the comma.

A. The comma comes before a coordinating conjunction in a compound sentence. For example:

4. The topic sentence should contain the main ideas of the paragraph, and the other sentences should develop the main idea.(Soles, 2005:111).

B. It separates a non-restrictive word, phrase, or clause from the rest of the sentence(a non-restrictive element is the one that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence).

5. John Mckay, who lives across the street, is the local pharmacist. (Shaw , 1986:154).

C. It separates two or more adjectives when they equally modify the same noun, for example:

6. I bought an old, dilapidated chair and a new , ugly, badly faded rug.(ibid).

D. The comma can be used to separate words, phrases, or clauses, in a series:

7. In this chapter, we are learning the uses of the full stop, the comma, the semi-colon, the colon, and the dash. (Soles,2005:113)

#### The Semi-colon

The semi-colon is a mark of separation, or division. It is never used to introduce, enclose, or end a statement. It is considered a stronger mark than the comma, indicating a greater break or longer pause between sentence elements (Shaw, 1986: 142). Quirk et al (1987:1622) and Soles (2005: 114) specified two uses for the semi-colon.

A. It is used to separate two complete but related sentences. For example:

8. On one side of the street were protesters who wanted the child returned to his father in Cuba; on the other side were protesters who insisted the child be allowed to stay in the country. (Soles,2005:114)

B. It is used to separate phrases or clauses in a series when there are commas within those phrases or clauses. In the following sentence, two of the *you want* clauses contain commas, which is why the clauses are separated from each other by semi-colon:

9. You want your essay to be well organized; you want your sentences within your paragraphs and your paragraphs with the essay to be logically connected, in other words, to cohere; you want your diction to be accurate and appropriate; you want to avoid errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation; and you want your prose to be concise. (ibid)

#### The Colon

The colon indicates a longer pause in comparison with the comma and semi-colon. Shaw (1986: 145) asserts that the main purpose of the colon is to tell the reader to notice what is coming. It signals that the next group of words will provide a further explanation or illustration of what has been said:

10. Brighton is a long way away: 184 kilometres to be exact. (Soles,2005: 114).

In addition, the colon can be used to precede a formal list of items, often preceded by its verbal equivalents *for example, namely*. For example:

- I. birth certificate
- II. passport
- III. correct fee (Quirk, 1987:1621).

#### 1.4 The Dash

The dash is most often used to indicate a sudden interruption in thought. It gives a certain sense of surprise or emotional tone in written English (Shaw, 1986:148).

11. Students can also pay for a database search-if they want to waste their time and money. (shift in thought) (Soles, 2005:116)

Soles (ibid) states that the dash is mainly used to enclose a non-restrictive word group that contains commas:

12. She eats something from each group-protein, dairy, fruits and vegetables, and grains-at every meal. (ibid)

Furthermore, Shaw (1986:149) recognizes two more uses for the dash:

a. The dash is used to introduce a word or words wished to be emphasized (as in 13). Either a colon or a comma can be used in such constructions, but the dash adds emphasis.

13. There is only one thing he needs for his complete happiness- love.

b. It can be used to indicate omission of letters and words and to connect combinations of letters and figures (as in 14). However, a hyphen can be used instead in typing or handwriting.

14. Representative B--w as an excellent orator. (ibid)

## 2. Source of Errors

The data analysed in the paper is all taken from monthly and final exams of Iraqi students of English on composition and comprehension topic. (department of English, College of Education, University of Kerbala, for the academic year 2006/ 2007)

Students' level selected is first year, because in that level Iraqi students are supposed to get the largest amount of knowledge concerning punctuation marks in English.

## 3. Errors Analysis

Brown (2000:216) states that human learning is essentially a process that involves the making of errors. Misjudgements and erroneous assumptions form an important aspect of learning in any target language.

Ellis (1999:68) asserts that investigating learners' errors serves two major purposes:

1. It provides data from which inferences about the nature of language learning process can be made.
2. It indicates to teachers and curriculum developers which part of the target language learners find difficult to produce correctly.

S. P. Corder(1967:160) states that there is a difference between *mistakes* and *errors*. Mistakes are slips of the tongue and are not systematic because they are performance failures done by all speakers.

Errors on the other hand, are systematic which reflect the learners' competence.

Generally, Brown (2000:224) asserts that all studies of error analysis identify three principal causes for errors.

1. Interlingual transfer: this class of errors is known also as errors of negative transfer from the mother-tongue.
2. Intralingual transfer: overgeneralization of the rules of the target language, i.e., the errors that result from the learning process.
3. Context of learning: this class of errors is assigned to faulty teaching techniques or materials.

### Errors interpretation

After identifying and categorizing students' errors, a description of the possible factors that caused them could be presented. Errors identified within this area ( non-ending punctuation marks) can be classified into interlingual and errors related to the context of learning. Intralingual errors cannot be traced within this area.

### Interlingual Transfer

Interlingual transfer is a significant source of error for all learners, specially in early stages of learning a foreign language. In this stage, learners have the native language as the only linguistic system which they make use of in learning and practicing the target language( *ibid*). However, transferring linguistic knowledge from the mother-tongue to the target language is not always useful, due to the similarities and differences they exist among languages. Similar aspects between languages will positively affect learning, and this is called as *positive transfer*, while different aspects will cause difficulty to learners and this is called *negative transfer*.

Within the area of punctuation marks, particularly non-ending ones, errors associated with the use of the comma, the semi-colon, and the dash are all Interlingual.

#### 1.3.1.1 The Comma:

its use in English is almost different from its use in students' mother-tongue(Arabic). In Arabic it is used to serve two purposes,1) separating two

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small sentences related in meaning, and in the vocative( see kitbul emlaá, issued by the Iraqi Ministry of Education, for the intermediate stage, published in 2003). Furthermore, as far as shape is concerned, the comma is written differently(in comparison with English). In English it is written this way (,), while in Arabic ( ,).

#### 1.3.1.2 The semi-colon:

This mark is less problematic than the comma, since it may resemble the semi-colon in students' mother-tongue(Arabic). In Arabic, the semi-colon serves one major use; it separates between two but related sentences. However, it differs in two aspects. In English, the semi-colon also separates between phrases or clauses in a series, where commas are also used(see Soles p.114). In addition, the semi-colon differs also in shape in the two languages. In English it is (;), while in Arabic it is ( ;).

#### 1.3.1.3 The dash:

According to the analysis made, the dash is the most problematic mark. Iraqi students are not aware of the use of that mark in English, but they use their knowledge acquired from the mother-tongue in dealing with it. Particularly, in numbering,( between the number and the item numbered).

#### 1.3.1.4 The colon:

Although this mark is similar in both languages in shape, it may cause difficulty to students, due to the differences in use. In Arabic, it is mainly used to separate between the saying and the person who said that in writing a conversation , and in separating parts of a sentence in order to be made clear. Students' negative effect of the mother-tongue is clear dealing with the colon, since they use it with speeches or sayings instead of using the quotation marks.

### 2.3 Context of Learning

Brown (2000:226) states that this type of error refers to the classroom situation with (the teacher and materials). In a classroom context, the teacher or the textbook can lead the learner to make faulty hypotheses about the language. Students often make errors because of misleading explanation from the teacher, faulty presentation of a structure or word in a textbook.

So, as far as non-ending punctuation marks is concerned, the classroom situation is a vital factor. Most of the Iraqi intermediate schools pay less attention to the rules of punctuation in Arabic, and how it is similar or different from other languages like English. Furthermore, in the university level, Punctuation marks, particularly, non-ending ones, are not given much attention. Teachers often concentrate on the ending ones rather than the non-ending, as being more important.

In addition, English syllabuses pay less attention to punctuation marks in their courses of study. Iraqi students often study these marks thoroughly in first year only unseparately; being accompanied with comprehension course. While the comprehension course is given for two years (first and second year), the composition course is limited for one year.

#### 4. Conclusions

To sum up, punctuation marks are essential to make written texts understandable. Punctuation marks in English can be divided into three groups. ending, non-ending, and inclosing punctuation marks. However, this paper has focused on non-ending ones for limitation. English has four non-ending punctuation mark, namely, the comma, the semi-colon, the colon, and the dash. After specifying Iraqi students' errors in that area, the following percentages are calculated in relation to each mark: the dash (72%), the comma (63%), the semi-colon (55%), and the colon (50%).

The errors committed in this area, can be classified into interlingual (the negative transfer of students' mother-tongue on learning the target language), and teaching-related errors (faulty teaching techniques or materials). Finally, this area requires more attention from both teachers, syllabuses designers, and students.

#### 5. Recommendations

1. Punctuation marks in English should be given more attention from both textbooks and teachers at the university level.

2. Non-ending punctuation marks should be given more attention when teaching English composition by shedding some light on its characteristics and use.

3. A contrastive analysis can be made in relation to punctuation marks in English and Arabic, to point out the similarities and differences in that exist between the two languages.

4. An error analysis should be made in relation to other types of punctuation marks on Iraqi students of English.

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