

## تعزيز مهارات الترقيم لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للأكراد من خلال الألعاب والألغاز

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**الكلمات المفتاحية:** علامات الترقيم، طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، خطأ في علامات الترقيم، ألعاب، ألغاز.

### كيفية اقتباس البحث

زهاوي ، قسمت محمد، تعزيز مهارات الترقيم لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للأكراد من خلال الألعاب والألغاز، مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، كانون الثاني 2026، المجلد: 16، العدد: 1.

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## Reinforcing Kurdish EFL Students' Punctuation through Games and Puzzles

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**Keywords :** Punctuation, EFL Students, Punctuation Errors, Games, Puzzles .

### How To Cite This Article

Zahawi, Qismat M , Reinforcing Kurdish EFL Students' Punctuation through Games and Puzzles ,Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, January 2026,Volume:16,Issue 1.



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### المخلص

يُعد الاستخدام الصحيح لعلامات الترقيم أمرًا بالغ الأهمية لإيصال رسائل واضحة ومعبرة لا لبس فيها. يؤدي استخدام علامات الترقيم غير المناسبة إلى الارتباك وسوء الفهم. يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحديد سوء استخدام طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الأكراد لعلامات الترقيم، بالإضافة إلى محاولة تحسين مهاراتهم في الترقيم من خلال استخدام الألعاب والألغاز. تكونت العينة من 72 طالبًا من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية الأساسية/الفصول المسائية في الفصل الدراسي الأول للعام الدراسي 2024-2025.

خلص البحث إلى أن طلاب الأكراد الدارسون للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يعانون من ضعف في استخدام علامات الترقيم. كان استخدام الألعاب والألغاز لتطوير مهارات الطلاب في علامات الترقيم فعالاً، إذ مكّنهم من كتابة جمل أكثر دقة من حيث استخدامها. إضافةً إلى ذلك، أظهرت المقارنات قبل الاختبار وبعده تحسّنات ذات دلالة إحصائية، مما يدعم القيمة التربوية

لاستخدام الأساليب التفاعلية في تدريس علامات الترقيم في سياقات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

### Abstract

The proper use of punctuation marks is essential to convey clear, expressive, and unmistakable messages. Using inappropriate punctuation marks results in confusion and misapprehension. This research aims at identifying Kurdish EFL students' misuse of punctuation marks. Besides, it tries to improve their punctuation skills through the use of games and puzzles. The sample consisted of 72 students from the English Department in College of Basic Education/ evening classes in the first course of the academic year 2024-2025.

The main conclusion of the research revealed that Kurdish EFL students suffer from shortcoming in their use of punctuations. Using games and puzzles to develop students' punctuation skill was effective that made them write more accurate sentences in terms of punctuation use. In addition, pre and post-test comparisons demonstrated statistically significant improvements, supporting the pedagogical value of using interactive methods in teaching punctuations in EFL contexts.

### 1.Introduction

Writing comprises a mixture of abilities including spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, writing mechanics, eloquence, etc. Good writing requires the use of basic forms and formatting rules as a convention. Hence, this necessitates compelling a strict prerequisite on students' writing standards in order to develop their academic writing accuracy (Zhu, 2003). Punctuation marks are effectual components in developing writing skills and they are as important as the words themselves (Murthy, 2007). Thereby, punctuation marks play a prime role in delivering the intended meaning. If used appropriately, understanding the text becomes smooth-sailing for the reader. Writing standards encompass diversified aspects, like capitalization, indentation, spacing, punctuation, etc.

One way to improve students' punctuation skills is through the use of convenient games and puzzles. Hadfield (1990) defines a game as an activity with three main components: basic rules, a definite goal, and a fun factor. COBUILD Collins New Students' Dictionary (2002) defines a puzzle as a game or a question that requires students to think carefully in order to assemble it properly or answer correctly.

Avinash and Samson (2016) contend that language games and puzzles are viewed as effective and fruitful in teaching English and the abundant bulk of literature on this topic serves as evidence in favour of this fact. Aligning with this, Vaishnav (2015) asserts that utilising games and





puzzles is not new to the learning scene. He proceeds by saying that learning games are two-fold: they provide fun and maintain patience on one hand; on the other hand, they promote logical thinking and decoding techniques. He further maintains “games are very potent tools rotating on the axis of fun and amusement and of course revolving around learning” (p.551). this is why Gozcu (2016) proposes placing games and puzzles at the center of foreign language teaching rather than considering it a secondary part in the program.

Barreto (2022) classifies educational games into memory games, puzzle games, and physical games. It is worth noting that the type of games and puzzles used in the current study conform to the first and second type of this classification, i.e., physical games are not involved.

### 1.2Punctuation Marks

Tracing the term punctuation historically, Houston (2015) argues that its emergence and development dates back to the sixth century. They have been used since then up to the present time as a mechanism to make writing look neat and meaningful. Otherwise, paragraphs would only seem like piles of words (Hussein and Aziz, 2019).

Jones (1994) considers punctuation as the basic part of non-lexical orthography. They clarify ideas and shows us where to pause. Kane (1998) contends that punctuation marks are powerful enough to add beauty and absurdity to a sentence meaning Lukeman (2006) considers punctuation marks as indispensable to good writing as nails are to a carpenter. According to Huang and Liao (2002), punctuation marks are essential supplementary symbols that help to organise written messages. Punctuation marks have been viewed in two different angles: linguistic and pedagogic.

Cambridge Dictionary (2022) defines punctuation as "the use of special symbols that you add to writing to separate phrases and sentences to show that something is a question, etc". Punctuation marks cater realization and provide meaning to the structure of a sentence (Fayyaz et al, 2022).

A very striking and peculiar definition is provided by Lauchman (2010) “a bunch of impossible-to-figure out marks, invented by the devil to give writers a foretaste of hell, taught in a hundred confusing and contradictory ways” (p. 17). He accentuates the fact that through a smart use of punctuation marks, one can make the written communication very effective without the help of vocal tone or facial cues.

As for Hamadi and Khalaf (2020), punctuation marks act as visual clues for readers that serve text coherence and have a key role in clarifying and disambiguating a written text.

According to Khan and Khan (2016) punctuation marks are used in writing to indicate a pause, interrogation, exclamation, and emphasis. They replace pause, raising intonation, falling intonation, and stress that are used in speaking for the same purpose. Given this, Sánchez (2015) believes that punctuations present syntactic as well as prosodic features. As for Kirkman (2012) punctuation marks have two functions: one is related to grammar and the other is rhetorical.

Linguistically, punctuation is decisive in breaking up and specifying sentences, clauses, and words (Quirk et al., 1985). Connelly (2005) likens punctuation marks to traffic lights which tell us to slow down and stop. The improper use of punctuation marks indicates indeterminacy and vagueness in texts. Pedagogically, the use of punctuation is a criterion for indicating students' writing level (Tse, 2015). Using punctuation marks potently in the productive skills reveals students' mastery of that language (Husada et al, 2018).

Jacobs (2019) regards punctuation errors as a part of grammatical errors. He proceeds "English grammar is not complete without punctuation marks" (p.49). Readers break down sentences into chunks to comprehend and interpret what they read and they mentally ascribe units meaning to the text. All of this happens with the aid of punctuation and grammar (Downing, 2015). The haphazard use of punctuations by EFL students results in misunderstanding English texts, which in turn, is considered as the main cause of their weaknesses in writing and translation (Al-Khalil, 2022).

As for punctuation types, there are sixteen punctuation marks used in writing (Straus et al 2014 and Albajigni, 2022). They are listed as follows: "the full stop (.), the comma (,), the colon(:), the semi-colon( ;), the question mark(?), the exclamation mark(!), the en (-), the em dash( \_ ), the hyphen( / ), the parentheses( ( ) ), the brackets( [ ] ), the braces( { } ), apostrophe ( ' ), single quotation marks ( ' ), quotation marks ( ' ' ), and ellipsis( ...)". These are further sub-categorised into four types: ending, non-ending, separating, and enclosing.

The punctuation marks mentioned above have three important functions (Rumki, 2005):

1. **Phonetic Function:** Through demonstrating the rhythm and pauses in a text; a written document has a tone, which in turn makes clear thought.
2. **Grammatical Function:** Punctuation is used to show different grammatical structures and functions.
3. **Semantic Function:** Punctuation assists learners understand the meaning of particular words/phrases by marking/highlighting them.





### **1.3The Problem**

Hirvela et al (2012) describes punctuation marks as “underexplored area of second language writing and learning”. The dearth of researches on punctuation urges to look at ways to teach punctuation effectively. This is further attested by Sánchez (2015), who maintains that in spite of the significance of punctuation marks in effective communication, students are indifferent and ignore the use of even the most basic forms. This assertion, which can be counted on as a rational basis for further research in punctuation, lacks empirical support.

Generally speaking, teaching punctuation marks has been ignored in many pedagogical systems, i.e., it has not received sufficient recognition. No specific teaching sessions are allocated for English punctuation. (Lv, 2006). Consequently, EFL students find themselves in a real predicament. In this regard, Raheem and Ghafar (2024) assert that different studies have been conducted to analyse writing challenges. Specifically, it has been reported that EFL learners at the university level face challenges in their writing skills. Their major difficulties lie in grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary. They accentuated the significance of addressing these writing challenges by teachers so as to bridge their students' gap in this area.

This is truly the case with Kurdish EFL students. Researches have demonstrated that Kurdish EFL students encounter difficulty in using punctuation marks and suffer from lack of knowledge of punctuation marks and the appropriate use of them as tools to introduce their ideas in writings (Ahmed, 2019; Haji, 2022; Omar and Barzani, 2022; and Ali, 2024). It is worth mentioning that the aforementioned researches were concerned with writing errors (not concerned specifically with punctuation errors), and punctuation errors were only a subsidiary part of their work. As Hirvela et al (2012) affirm that only few researches can be found that probe into punctuation as a stand-alone subject without referring to the “parental framing: grammar” (p.12). As illustrated above, only a handful of studies have examined the use of punctuation marks implicitly within writing errors.

Kurdish EFL students are not adept in using punctuation marks in spite of the fact that they need to use them frequently when they write in English. They either fail to select the correct use and position of the punctuation marks or they skip using them. This can be partially attributed to the fact that it does not hold up a secure place in courses and writing teachers tend to lay more emphasis on the skill itself rather than writing mechanics and

the unfitting style of writing. In other words, teaching punctuation occurs implicitly. Hence, it is necessary for EFL teachers to burden the responsibility of helping their students to overcome language hurdles, punctuation use being one of these problematic areas. As Nouri and Marzban (2018) maintain, in the contemporary world, we need to educate qualified autonomous writers who can “articulate their own writings with more accurate punctuations than before” (p.35). Another global challenge for punctuation is the rapid progress in technology that nowadays has its negative impact on learners’ writing skills since they can get readymade assignments anytime and anywhere.

#### **1.4 The Aims**

This study aims to investigate:

1. The types of punctuation misuses made by Kurdish EFL students
2. The frequency of punctuation misuse made by Kurdish EFL students?
3. The effectiveness of using games and puzzles in improving Kurdish EFL students’ use of punctuation marks

#### **1.5 Research Questions**

In order to accomplish the aforementioned aims, the study will try to answer the following questions:

1. What are the types of punctuation misuses made by Kurdish EFL students?
2. Which type of punctuation misuse is frequently made by Kurdish EFL students?
3. Is using games and puzzles effective in improving Kurdish EFL students’ use of punctuation marks?

#### **2. Methodology**

##### **2.1 The Participants**

The participants taking part in this research were comprised of 72 second grade EFL students in College of Basic Education/ evening classes at Salahaddin University. They were divided into two groups: control and experimental, each containing 36 students.

Prior to the experiment and for preliminary investigation, the researcher developed a diagnostic test of punctuation marks in writing. Seventy-two Kurdish EFL student took part in the test in which they were required to rewrite the sentences by putting the correct punctuations. The results of the diagnostic test demonstrated their misuse of punctuations, which revealed that Kurdish EFL students face problem in using punctuation marks (as mentioned earlier in the problem). Secondly, the same test was used to distribute the students over the control and experimental groups so as to guarantee groups homogeneity and equality. Then, they took the





pre and post-test (they were given a non-punctuated paragraph and were asked to punctuate it).

### 2.2 Research Design and Procedure

This study aimed to identify Kurdish EFL students' misuse of punctuation marks, and to improve their punctuation skills through the use of games and puzzles. The researcher has the conviction that an experimental design is adequate for achieving the purpose of the current study. To this end, the researcher followed the following steps:

- Giving a diagnostic test of punctuation marks in writing to evaluate students' competence in punctuation use.
- Dividing the sample into two groups: control and experimental
- Giving the pre-test to both groups
- Teaching the control group traditionally; the experimental group received an extensive instruction on the basis of extra activities and drills in punctuation marks
- Starting the 10-week experiment with the experimental group
- Allocating 10 minutes of each lecture (experimental group) for reviewing the punctuation discussed in the previous lecture and ask for exemplification.
- Providing feedback to students on their use of punctuations
- Giving the post-test to both groups
- Pre and post-tests results were compared both qualitatively and quantitatively

It is worth mentioning that at the present time, amazing web tools are available that enhance students' punctuation use. The researcher drew on the following sites for the quizzes and activities utilised in the experiment: Punctuation Puzzler Series, GrammarBook.com, and Grammar Monster. Besides, she used many printable worksheets for adults and fun learning worksheets. They provide puzzles and games with a variety of multiple choice and true or false questions. Specifically, the following exercises were employed:

- Punctuation checker activities
- Provide missing punctuation
- Correct sentence punctuation
- Expand sentences
- Writing prompt pictures
- Punctuation maze





### 2.3 The Researcher's Reflection on the Experiment

The researcher did her best to make games educational and useful in the classroom. The chosen games were adapted to students' needs and level. Besides, meeting the learning objectives and curriculum were also taken into consideration when designing the games.

It is worth-mentioning that the interactive nature of the puzzles and games directly contributed in improving students' ability to recognise and correct their punctuation misuses. The immediate feedback loops allowed students to instantly see the consequences of incorrect punctuation choices and understand the correct application in context.

Yet, implementing and monitoring the games was not without challenge. While the researcher witnessed the validity and successfulness of game-based learning, there remained many challenges to tackle, among which are the following:

- Creating a gaming atmosphere that is adapted to all the learners' ability
- Being time-consuming that resulted in difficulty in continuing with the study plan,
- Transcending the cultural barrier associated with using games (the underestimation connected with games is not easy to overcome in an educational setting where students are deemed to be academically accountable).
- Considering games as a source of distraction on the part of introvert students
- On the part of the teaching staff, it needs a thorough systematic training that enables the teacher to understand how the game works and how they can engage students and get every student on board.
- Developing an effective game necessitates sufficient proficiency so as to meet the needs of different students

### 2.4 Data Analysis

This study aimed at investigating the punctuation errors made by Kurdish EFL students in College of Basic Education at Salahaddin University. To consider the first question of the current study, the findings revealed that the students made divergent types of errors in this regard. One of these types of

The current study highlighted the most frequent punctuation errors committed by Kurdish EFL students. It has been found out that the most frequent errors were made in the use of period 443 **36.07 %**, comma 412 **33.55 %**, quotation marks 105 **8.55 %**, semicolon 89 **7.24 %**, apostrophe 64 **5.21 %**, question mark 43 **3.50 %**, hyphen 39 **3.17 %**, and colon 33



**2.68 %** respectively from the highest to the lowest frequency as is shown in the table below:

**Table (2) Frequency of Errors in Punctuation in the Pretest**

Punctuation	Frequency	Percentage
Period	443	36.07 %
Comma	412	33.55 %
Quotation mark	105	8.55 %
Semicolon	89	7.24 %
Apostrophe	64	5.21 %
Question mark	43	3.50 %
Hyphen	39	3.17 %
Colon	33	2.68 %
Total	1228	100 %

As for the third research question, the researcher started with comparing the mean scores of students' results on the pre-post administration of the punctuation test to explore students' improvement in using punctuation marks of both groups. She first used the dependent t-test to discern the difference in improvement for both groups. The results are presented respectively in two tables below:

**Table (3) Dependent Paired Sample Statistics of the Control Group**

Paired Samples Statistics-Control					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test	p-value
Pre- control	36	38.42	8.27	2.015	0.052 Non-sig.
Post- control	36	37.50	8.12		

Table (4) Dependent Paired Sample Statistics of the Experimental Group

Paired Samples Statistics-Experimental					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test	p-value
Pre	36	37.67	8.14	8.328	0.000*
Post	36	42.11	7.74		

\* Significant at level ( $p < 0.01$ )

As illustrated in table (3), the p-value of comparing the pre-post-test of the control group is (0.052), which indicates a non-significant difference in students' improvement in using the punctuation marks. While, table (4) shows a significant difference in students' improvement in using the punctuation marks of the experimental group with the p-value (0.000). This result constitutes a strong argument in favour of using games and puzzles in enhancing students' use of punctuation marks in the experimental group.

Table (5) The independent samples T-test of the two groups

Independent Samples Test					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test	p-value
Post- control	36	37.50	8.12	2.466	0.016*
Post-experimental	36	42.11	7.74		

\* Significant at level ( $p < 0.05$ )

The post-test administered to both groups (control and experimental) after implementing the intervention. The control group was taught traditionally, while the experimental group received a game-based instruction that encompassed a variety of educational games and puzzles in order to enhance punctuation rules in interactive and engaging formats. As shown in table (5), the experimental group achieved a higher mean score ( $M=42.11$ ,  $SD=7.74$ ) than the control group ( $M=37.50$ ,  $SD=8.12$ ). The results of the independent samples t-test indicated a statistically significant difference between the two groups ( $t=2.466$ ,  $p=0.016$ ). This suggests that the intervention had a significant positive effect on students' performance. The figure below shows this difference:

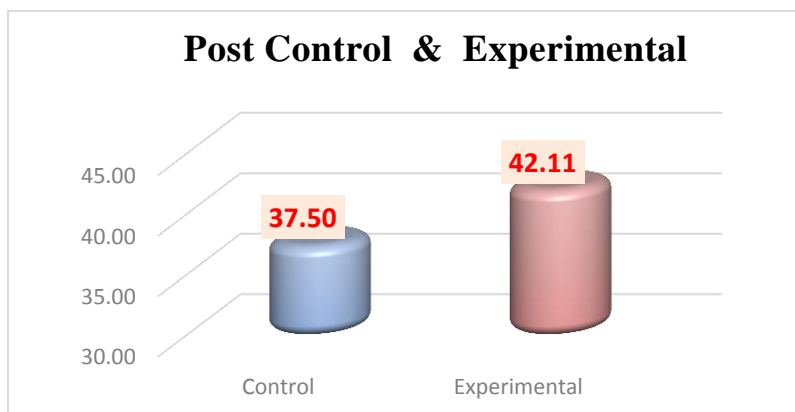


Figure (1) Control and Experimental Post-test Comparison

### 2.4 Discussion

In this study, the researcher used both qualitative and quantitative data through the pre-test and post-test. The collected data was analyzed through using descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies, percentages and the mean was used to analyze the quantitative data.

The findings indicate that Kurdish EFL students commit a wide range of punctuation misuses. These recurrent misuses demonstrate a misunderstanding of sentence structure, cohesion, and writing mechanics. This result accords with Abdullah (2020) who contends that Kurdish students encounter considerable difficulty in utilizing the appropriate forms of mechanics of writing and more specifically in the appropriate use of punctuation.

Tracing the punctuation errors committed by Kurdish EFL students uncovered the fact that the period 443 **36.07 %** ranked as the first most common punctuation error followed by the comma 412 **33.55 %** in the second place. This result reveals the students' lack of awareness of sentence boundary. This is in alignment with Alker (2000), who is of the belief that omission or inappropriate use of punctuation results from students' poor understanding of a sentence structure. Students who have difficulty in building a sentence are will not able to pinpoint the right place to put comma in sentences. Within a sentence, the most frequently used mark is the comma; therefore, students misuse or omit the comma. This result also accords with Awad (2012), who concluded that the most common errors was excessive use of commas instead of periods.

It is worth mentioning that these two punctuation marks were more or less omitted or substituted one in place of the other; although the students were supposed to have acquired the linguistic knowledge to know where a sentence starts and where it ends.

Omitting the period means that a complete thought of a sentence was brought to an end without a period. Logically speaking, the absence of period at the end of a sentence leads to misunderstanding.

In the third place, quotation marks errors appeared with frequency 105 **8.55 %**. It seems that the students encounter difficulty in utilising quotation marks successfully in their writing. This result is in congruence with Rahmawati (2014), who found out that error of quotation mark was the most prevalent errors made by EFL students. Besides, he maintained that showed little understanding of using this punctuation properly since they had lack of accuracy of how to use comma before quotation. Similarly, Samhon and Abdallah (2016) consider the use of comma and quotation mark as the most challenging among all punctuation marks

In the fourth place, semicolon error appeared with frequency 89 **7.24 %**, which means that the students find it difficult to some extent. Then, apostrophe 64 **5.21 %** and question mark 43 **3.50 %** followed semicolon in their error frequency.

The apostrophe and the question mark appeared with less frequency of errors made by Kurdish EFL students. Concerning the question mark, the number of errors were few. This can be probably attributed to the fact that interrogative sentences, in most cases, begin with question words which are good indications of interrogation. The second least complicated mark was the apostrophe. An interesting relevant fact is that apostrophe has no existence in Kurdish, i.e. it is not utilised in Kurdish. This substantiates what has been asserted by (Farrah et al, 2016) above that most punctuation errors are intralingual, i.e. punctuation errors do not usually originate from L1 transfer. If it is so, then using apostrophe should be among the most common errors because there is a complete difference in its use in L1 and L2.

Farrah et al (2016) discovered that most of these punctuation errors were intralingual rather than interlingual, and they occurred due to lack of linguistic competence, inadequate teaching techniques, poorly designed materials, and insufficient practice.

The last two punctuations were hyphen 39 **3.17 %**, and colon 33 **2.68 %**, which are regarded as the least problematic punctuations on the scale.

The results of this study suggests that Kurdish EFL students misuse punctuations due to the cross-linguistic differences between English and Kurdish in the use of punctuation marks. This is further affirmed by Qadir and Padar (2022), in their contrastive study of English and Kurdish punctuations, who concluded that English and Kurdish languages “show similarities and differences in the manifestation and employment of punctuation marks”.





Moreover, some Kurdish EFL students feel that the content of a paragraph is first and foremost in their writing that should be prioritised, and they neglect the proper use of punctuation marks and consider it as peripheral. This inattention to punctuations might originate from their teachers, who mostly pay heed to the content than the necessary mechanics of writing. Besides, they probably make punctuation errors because of the lack of knowledge of the structure of English sentences, insufficient exposure to English language input, or lack of practice in English writing.

Overall, these errors can be interpreted as a consequence of the students' partial knowledge toward writing mechanics rules. Hence, this is a good indication of Kurdish students' need to explicitly study these rules in order to learn and practice elements of writing mechanics so as to improve their writing skills. Al Murshidi (2014) puts it clearly and states "teaching punctuation rules for students should be signified to avoid its errors initially" (p.46).

As for the pre-post test results, they confirm that puzzle and game based learning are effective strategies for teaching punctuations to Kurdish EFL students. This result provides support for the findings of Choo and Razemi (2016), who asserted that using games and songs improve students' understanding in using punctuation marks suitably and flawlessly.

The substantial improvement in the scores of the experimental group implies that game-based learning provided a more effective pathway to learning and applying punctuation rules in comparison to the traditional teaching method. The quantitative data provides robust empirical evidence for the efficacy of the new pedagogical approach.

Beyond the measurable gains in test scores, the researcher witnessed several pedagogical benefits associated with educational games throughout the intervention. The students who participated in game-based learning activities showed greater engagement, unlike the potentially passive nature of traditional teaching, as the games and puzzles infused elements of competition, cooperation, challenge, and immediate gratification. This active participation resulted in a more dynamic and enjoyable learning environment. The researcher noticed that the students were motivated to participate, ask questions, and keep on through challenging tasks when presented in game format, transforming what is often perceived as boring and tedious punctuation rules into exciting learning experiences.



### 3. Conclusion

Due to the pivotal role that the proper use of punctuations plays in text intelligibility and readability, the current study has underlined the most common punctuation errors made by Kurdish EFL students, and revealed the reason behind such errors.

Taking a cue from the findings above, the researcher is led to the fact that Kurdish EFL students suffer from shortcoming in their use of punctuations. The results revealed that the period **36.07%** ranked as the first most common punctuation error and the comma **33.55%** came in the second place. Moreover, using games and puzzles with the intention of developing students' punctuation skill had a profound effect in making students write more accurate sentences in terms of punctuation use even without the direct help of teacher.

Besides, the study has found that the use of educational games and language puzzles significantly improved Kurdish EFL students' punctuation skills. Students who participated in puzzle and game-based activities showed improved error recognition, better retention of the correct use of punctuations, and greater engagement. Pre and post-test comparisons demonstrated statistically significant improvements, supporting the pedagogical value of using interactive methods in teaching punctuations in EFL contexts.

### 4. Recommendation

Due to the outsized amount of punctuation errors in Kurdish EFL students' writing, this research recommends that:

1. The results provide robust support for the pedagogical value of integrating interactive and student centered methods, specifically educational games and language puzzles into EFL classes. By shifting from teacher-centered and rule-driven approach to a more dynamic and enjoyable environment, teachers can address the inherent challenges of teaching rigid punctuation rules to EFL students. Gaming should be integrated as an integral part of the curriculum but not as a supplemental tool.
2. Teachers should outweigh the significance of punctuations in their teaching instruction as well as in exams. Punctuation errors need to be emphasised whether the course is a writing one or not.
3. Teachers should allocate a place in their course schedules for teaching punctuation explicitly.
4. Teachers need to run crash courses on the most problematic punctuation marks in order to eliminate punctuation errors in students' writing.



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