



Effects of the Misuse of Punctuation by EFL Learners in English-Arabic Translation

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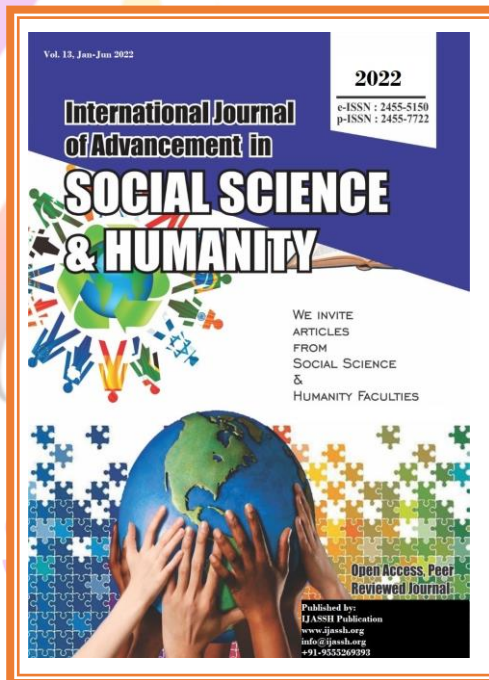
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ABSTRACT

Punctuation is a system of symbols or signs used to separate sentences or clauses to make the meaning clear, to show readers where sentences start and end, and whether used properly to make writing effective, comprehensive, and understandable. Punctuation is critical to good communication; it becomes confusing and tricky when misused. Though some of us almost know how to use it intuitively, many EFL students still have problems with it, as in writing and translation. They make mistakes in using a comma, for instance, instead of a full stop, a colon instead of a semicolon, or a question instead of exclamation mark...etc.

Applying right punctuations is very important in students' writing. EFL students sometimes think they are little elements, never deserve their attention, but actually they have great effects to writing thus translating. If punctuating errors occurred, they will confuse text readers; they won't be able to perceive the text goals. Using correct punctuation assists to understand what and how have been written. Teaching punctuation in writing and translation classes is part of teaching process to be considered by EFL teachers, though, sometimes, is neglected, but actually it has a big effect influencing a written and translated work quality.

Thus, it is assumed this paper investigates the effects of most commonly used punctuations misuse by EFL learners; a comma, full stop, colon, semicolon, question and exclamation marks, and capitalization due to the different functions they perform in a variety of texts and contexts, and the differences between English and Arabic punctuation systems. This in turn affects the meaning, then translating texts from English into Arabic. Then the paper raises some recommendations employed and presented in both writing and translation classes.

Keywords: *Punctuation, Functions, EFL Learners, Problems, Translation, Recommendations*

INTRODUCTION

Punctuation is the use of spacing, conventional signs, and certain typographical devices as aids to the understanding and correct reading of handwritten and printed texts. It is the practice, action, or system of inserting points or other small marks into texts in order to aid interpretation, division of a text into sentences, clauses, etc. by means

of such marks. In other words, Punctuation is "a system of signs or symbols given to a reader to show how sentences are constructed and how they should be read". Thus, sentences, as complete statements, are the building blocks to construct written texts. Punctuation shows how these sentences should be read to make the meaning clear (Jasim, 2013).

Similarly, punctuations are used in writing as an imitation of speech. Voice inflections, stops, pauses, and body language are often used by students after speech to indicate their meaning. So their voices rise at the end of a sentence to produce a vocal question mark, and drop at the end of a sentence to produce a vocal full stop. When they verbally list items they pause after each item to produce a vocal comma (Nunberg, 1990 cit. in Samhon, 2016: 2).

Punctuation is also a visual cue in our language tells readers not only *what* a writer is saying, but *how* is saying it. It creates an interesting and dynamic writing. Meantime, it affects meaning and clarity when haphazardly used, for the different functions it performs in a text in various degrees. Hence comes its importance in English-Arabic translation in particular. Though both English and Arabic share many of the basic functions of punctuation marks such as the period, comma, question and exclamation marks ... etc., each has its own methods and conventions that are not firmly determined by the same rules (Jasim, 2013).

However, Daniel (2004) shows that, the uses of punctuation marks are not the same in different contexts and the improper use of them would change the meaning of sentences.

Example 1: Did you know the answer?

هل تعلم الجواب؟

Example 2: Did you know the answer!

تعلم الجواب!

The first example is a 'yes' or 'no' question; while the second supposes doubt in knowing the answer. Both opinions

above confirm that punctuation errors occur through incorrect uses of punctuation, unless identified in the context of use, the sentence structure and meaning would be affected. All linguists mainly don't differ in their views about the correct uses of punctuation significance, keeping clear writing, understood by readers (Samhon, 2016:11).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studying punctuation has a special consideration in Linguistic and Translation studies for their role in good writing. Hansen (1998:109), for instance defines punctuations as "little things, but are essential to good composition as nails are to a carpenter". In written English, punctuation is vital to disambiguate meaning of sentences when making *sense* or *nonsense* of our writing without which sentences are mere jumbles of words, as example; "A woman, without her man, is nothing" (emphasizing the importance of men), and "a woman, without her man is nothing" (emphasizing the importance of women), have different meanings (Samhon, 2016:1).

Pagel and Norstrom (2011:166), on the other hand, views the importance of punctuation marks like traffic signals. They tell the reader when to stop, slow down, or proceed. To him, they are divided into *Terminal* (ending) punctuation marks appear at the end of a sentence and tell the reader to stop as a period, and *Internal* (within or inside) punctuation marks tell the reader when to pause and help the reader to interpret the sentence as intended by the writer like a comma (Pagel and Norstrom 2011:166 cit in Jasim, 2013:618).

Vickers (2013:4 cit in Jasim, 2013:619) also clarifies the correct use of punctuations makes written texts easier to read. It is true, in the sense of easily recognizing the words being used and understanding which words relate to others. Punctuation is used to clarify the meaning of written or printed language. Well-planned word order requires minimum of punctuation. The trend toward less punctuation calls for skillful phrasing to avoid ambiguity and ensure exact interpretation. The adopted style, thus must be consistent, based on sentence structure.

Moreover, Singh (2010:123-24 cit in Jasim, 2013:619) holds that punctuation is chiefly used to create the grammatical connection among the parts of a composition, but not the actual pauses made in speaking. Very often the points used to denote the delivery of a passage differ from those used when the passage is written. Nevertheless, several of the punctuation marks serve to bring out the rhetorical force of expression. Poor punctuation gives the reader a bad impression of the writer who has to care much about the material being written.

Ganeri (2012:6-9 cit in Jasim, 2013: 619), thus shares the same view. To him punctuation is used to break up words and sentences to makes writing clearer and easier to understand. In speech, people can change the way their words sounds to show what they mean. In writing, punctuation helps to do this job. Thousands of years ago, people did not leave gaps between words. Later, they started leaving spaces and using punctuation marks.

However, this paper describes the function of the basic signs of punctuation and the effects of the erroneous use of these signs by EFL learners on the meaning and construction of sentences which in turn effects their translation from English into Arabic. This is due to the relative differences between punctuation system and their conventions of both languages.

THE BASIC SIGNS OF PUNCTUATION AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

To Kirkman (2006), Punctuations are integral parts of writing. They do mainly two functions; one is grammatical and the other is rhetorical.

a. Grammatical: They show where the boundaries are meant to be between segments of larger statements, and how segments of a text are meant to relate to each other.

Example: "Executors delay giving information about substantial deviations from agreed dates. Because of this, action cannot be taken in time."

يؤخر المسؤولون تقديم المعلومات بشأن التجاوزات الخطيرة في المواعيد المتفق عليها، وبسبب هذا التأخير لا يمكن اتخاذ اجراء في الوقت الراهن.

The above example shows the boundary-marking role. First, the sentence is misread realizing "*Because of this action*" as a group, while in the second reading, it was intended to be just "*Because of this*" by supplying the comma at the meaning-boundary between "*this*" and "*action*", the meaning would be changed which in turn is considered in translation.

Meantime, the reader should note how punctuations signal the relations between segments of a text. For example:

- Take no action as the camera operates automatically ...
تعمل الكاميرات تلقائيا
لاتفعل شيئا عندما

(The as ... group tells us *when*)

- Take no action, as the camera operates automatically ...
لاتفعل شيئا ، فالكاميرات تعمل
تلقائيا

(The as ... group tells us *why*)

The words in the two statements above are exactly the same, but the relations between the words change in accordance with whether a comma is present or absent.

b. Rhetorical: They show the *emphasis* or *tone* the writer wants to give to a word or word-group which also affects its translation into Arabic. 'Old medicine' is emphasized below.

Example: " This is known as exact replacement of *the old medicine*."
(Mogahed, 2012:4).

معروف هذا بأنه بديل فعلي تماما للدواء القديم

c. Semantic: Punctuation marks facilitate reading whereby readers could comprehend exactly the transmitted meaning intended by the writer and understand the significance of particular words/phrases as shown in the examples below (Mogahed, 2012:4) :

Example 1: The man did not do well.
مالحسن الرجل .

Example 2: How handsome the man is!
مالحسن الرجل !

Example 3: What did the man do well?
مالحسن الرجل ؟

The appropriate use of punctuations in the above examples determine the exact meaning of texts; the first sentence is a statement, the second an exclamation and the third a question. Thus, a punctuation mark makes a difference to meaning in the target and source languages.

The Period, Full Stop (.)

The period is used to mark a sentence end as a complete statement; indicating that a point has been made and the writer is about to move on to a further explanations or a related point.

Example: We went to the market and bought some clothes. We had lunch over there. Then we paid a visit to a friend lives near the market. We really enjoyed the shopping although (but) we came back home late.

ذهبنا الى السوق واشترينا بعض الملابس وتناولنا الغداء هناك وقمنا بزيارة احد الاصدقاء الذي يسكن بالقرب من السوق واستمتعنا كثيرا بالتسوق لكننا رجعنا الى البيت في وقت متاخر.

In translating from English into Arabic and vice versa, a translator may add or delete the period depending on the sentence length. A lengthy Arabic sentence may be broken into two, three or more short English sentences ending with a period. In the above Arabic translation, periods are not separating the various statements; instead, the conjunction 'and' (و) is used, which is not acceptable in English style. For English uses short sentences. Other conjunctions can be used such as, *next, then, although, etc.*

A comma is also used in some abbreviations of commonly used words as in: B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) ,W.B.C. (white blood cells)

دورة (water closet) , W. C. (خلايا الدم البيضاء المياة) (Alabbasi, 2009:70).

The Question Mark (?)

It signals *direct* question, but not *indirect*, and ends interrogative sentences, as in: “*Have you had lunch?*”. It is also used in parentheses to explain part of a sentence that cannot be verified. According to Bram (1995:93), the functional uses of a question mark is to signal a message or an utterance in a direct question form, as in the example:

Example: What do you think about the term ‘love at the first sight’?

The above is a direct statement requires a question mark (?) in the end of a sentence to emphasize that the statement is a direct question form. Another function of a question mark, though rarely, it can also be used as a doubt, to show something we are unsure about, as:

Example: In December 1980 (?), John Lennon was dead.

Obviously, the writer here is uncertain about the information contained. He is doubt with the time when John Lennon was dead, so he put a question mark in the bracket (?) to show his doubt, which is rarely used, unless an additional information added (Samhon: 2016: 32).

The Exclamation Mark (!)

It ends an imperative sentence that gives a strong feeling. To Willinson, (1955), is called an exclamation point in the USA instead of interjection or exclamation. It indicates strong feeling or high volume (shouting), often marks the end of an

imperative sentence that gives a strong feeling.

Example: What an adorable baby!

Ebbitt and Ebbitt (1982) agreed with Willinson (1955) added astonishment and surprise. Therefore, teachers of English need to focus on exclamation point to avoid students' errors. By providing this sign students will be able and easily use it in writing which provide readers to understand the meaning of the text being punctuated (Samhon 2016: 33).

The Comma (,)

The comma is the most frequent and multifunctional device that exhibits more variations and differences than any other punctuation mark in different English and Arabic contexts. In written English, it is very significant to readers; without it, sentence parts can collide into one another causing misreading (Alabbasi, 2009:72).

1-The comma usually separates coordinate sentences, clauses, phrases or items in a series of three or more items. English uses a comma to separate items in a list

Example: "The Solar system is composed of a star, nine planets and several satellites."

يتكون النظام الشمسي من نجم وتسعة كواكب
وعدة اقمار

Arabic translation is done by dropping the comma, replacing it with the conjunction (و).

2-English places commas between adjectives of equal weight; while Arabic uses zero punctuation or an optional (و).

Example: My father is gentle, generous, kind-hearted, and wise. ابي رقيق وكريم وطيب القلب

The Semi-Colon (;)

The semicolon has medium pause duration between that of a comma and a period. It identifies the coordinate parts of a complex sentence or is used to separate independent but related clauses in a list that are not joined by a conjunction. It is also used with a series that has internal commas or that might be confusing when only commas are used.

Example 1: I have taken several science courses this year; my favorite was neuroscience.

Example 2: I have taken several science courses this year, but my favorite was neuroscience.

In Example 1, the semicolon is used primarily to join two closely related independent clauses in a single sentence. While in Example 2, the two clauses are joined with the conjunction *but*, that changes the meaning slightly from example 1 which emphasizes the contrast between the group of courses in the first clause and the single course in the second clause. Thus, the change in meaning, will affect the Arabic translation (Mogahed, 2012:3):

مقرر علم المخ والاعصاب . العلمية ، وكان افضلها المقررات ، العديد من مثال 1 : لقد درست ، على مدار هذا العام

مثال 2 : لقد درست ، على مدار هذا العام ، العديد من المقررات العلمية ، ولن افضلها مقرر علم المخ والاعصاب .

The Colon (:)

The colon (:) often introduces an explanation or series of examples usually in a list of entry fields e.g. 'Names:', as with the semicolon, the colon is inserted before a sentence which elaborates a preceding one. The 'topic', a clause or a sentence frequently includes a word such as 'the following', 'there are', 'means' or an expression of quality while 'the compliment' provides comment on the preceding topic. (Newmark 1984:174)

Example: "Luckily, the Supreme Court gave its ruling just in time: the candidate is acquitted and he can run for the Mayor's election."

ولحسن الحظ فقد اصدرت المحكمة العليا حكما في الوقت المناسب حيث نصت على تبرئة المرشح وتمكنه من التقدم لانتخابات العمدة.

In translation the colon may either be retained or replaced by a semantically equivalent phrase *الا وهو* [that is/which is] or *حيث نص على* [as it stipulated].

Capitalization

Capitalization is the use of capital letters to signal proper names, abbreviations, paragraphs, geographical names and emphasis in newspaper headlines. Arabic alphabet system is different from English; it lacks capitalization, no distinction is made between upper and lower cases. While English sentence starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, exclamation, or question mark; it indicates a sentence completion. So, in writing paragraphs, sentences should be well constructed; easy to read, this involves, good sentence structure, using punctuation to clarify meaning and well organized paragraphs (Al-Hassan, 2013).

THE IMPORTANCE OF USING PUNCTUATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Reading is an important skill in EFL learning. It is the most important activity as a source of information in language class, and not merely reading words and grammar (Rivers, 198: 259). Reading is an interactive process of communicating information and ideas of a written text between the writer and reader. Mentally, it integrates with other language skills as listening, speaking and writing providing a base to language study; vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and the way they construct sentences, paragraphs and texts (Harmer, 1998: 68 cit. in Suliman & Ahmeida & Mahalla, 2019).

Writing, likewise, is a most complex skill than reading to EFL Learning. It is a mental representation of human knowledge and experiences that can be expressed through correct writing using different vocabulary, grammar and punctuations (Jozsef, 2001). To Graham & Berin (2007:23), it embraces subskills as handwriting, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, capitalization, word usage, grammar, and the use of strategies; planning, evaluating, and revising text. Danielson (2000) referred to mechanics of "standard writing conventions such as spelling, punctuations, capitalization, and sentence structure skills" as essential components of good writing through correct use of punctuations, that could be meaningless and confused if poorly used (Suliman & Ahmeida & Mahalla, 2019).

However, reading and writing are complimentary and so closely related language skills. To (Graham & Perin, 2007: p.7), writing is a 'flip side' of

reading; good writers are good readers. Both rely on similar cognitive mechanisms allowing simultaneous growth and knowledge transfer by using writing symbols, as punctuations, by text readers, as an essential tool to convey the SL message and disambiguate meaning to its readers. Allen (2002) identifies the main punctuation function as to clarify text meaning and make it easy to read; the well punctuated, the strongest a text is. However, while body language is used in human speech; pauses and gestures to clarify the message, punctuations assist interpreting these speaking clues indicating place emphasis, pauses, and show the relationship between text elements (Suliman & Ahmeida & Mahalla, 2019).

Moreover, translating punctuation, in particular, receives a special attention in translation studies, as part of EFL learning. The previous studies adopted a didactic approach centered on students' translation or a contrastive linguistic approach based on following methods where by students are trained to translate punctuations in relation to the grammatical systems from a functional perspectives and the differences between the source and target languages. However, currently, the new trends in translating punctuations are towards focusing on the cognitive nature of them and their reflections in translated texts, and examining whether text meaning is kept or changed in the target language (Awad, Murad, Elamll, 2019:1084).

PROBLEMS OF PUNCTUATION BY EFL LEARNERS AND ITS IMPACT ON ENGLISH - ARABIC TRANSLATION

Punctuation is a significant element of good writing that integrates a text meaning. According to EFL teachers' observations, punctuation is likely to be a neglected area in the study of foreign languages. And the errors made by EFL students in writing thus translating are due to either the misapplying, or omission and unawareness of using appropriate punctuation when composing. This asserts their weaknesses in both writing and translation classes which are briefly discussed below (Garavelli, 2003 cit. in Samhon, 2016:1).

a. Misplacement of Punctuations

Punctuation marks are equally important in both English and Arabic, for they have similar functions and meanings. Yet unfortunately, they have been ignored by EFL students for no good reasons, especially in Arabic writing which affect their translation into Arabic. Misplacement or omission of setting punctuation is the most errors EFL students commit while writing that leads to the ambiguity in understanding by text readers. To Quirk (1985), the use of punctuations is an integral part of writing as very important to build up connected sentences, understand, and disambiguate the meaning of the text by its readers. Missing out punctuations makes the text becomes difficult to read as the sentences run out thus the meaning would be destroyed, this in turn affects its translation into Arabic (Quirk,1985)

Example 1: Eat children. كل / كلوا الاطفال

Example 2: Eat, children. يا اطفال كلوا

The two above sentences are correct, since they are command. But the meaning is different when the second sentence is punctuated with a comma and the first is not. The first becomes correct in a society where people eat human flesh and unless it is identified by the context of the text. Whereas the second suggests an advice to children to eat (Samhon, 2016:2).

Many of the previous studies proved EFL teachers' complain of their students' ignorance to insert punctuations to their writings due to the latest' carelessness, indifference and the lack of concentration (Darus & Ching, 2009 cit. Samhon, 2016:14). Richards (1970) also, identified four types of punctuation errors students commit in writing; overgeneralization, ignorance of rules, incomplete application of rules and semantic errors, which are all related to the lack of their teachers' motivation in acquiring the target language, the need to motivate students to the significance of correct writing, hence the effect of their local Arabic on the language they translate from (Samhon, 2016:14).

b. The (Erroneous) Misuse of Punctuations

Another difficulty EFL students encounter in writing tasks is the misuse of punctuation. The correct uses of punctuation is indispensable for accurate writing. Misused punctuations, using a question mark for instance, instead of a full stop at the end of a sentence may convey different meaning. Due to the erroneous rules of Punctuation provided by teachers, it seems boring and arbitrary,

students do not know how to apply them properly in writing which affects the meaning of texts. Consequently, this, is reflected in their inaccurate translation as well (Angelillo, 2002 cit in Samhon, 2016:14).

هل لزینب اصدقاء بالمراسلة؟ Example 1:
Zeinab has two pen-friends? (question, surprised)

Example 2:
Zeinab has two pen- friends. (statement)

The meanings in the above examples are different. Since the first ends with a question mark, it means the sentence emphasizes a question, whereas the second ends with a full stop, emphasizes the sentence is a statement. This means that punctuation has a semantic value in writing that affects its translation into the TL. Therefore, teachers are required to signify the importance of punctuation in conveying the meaning for good writing and accurate translating alike. This is done by providing students with practical examples and exercises of the righteous usage of punctuation marks, rather than giving only rules or letters and words to convey meaning (Samhon, 2016:14).

However, while punctuations are used systematically and emphatically in English writing as a part and parcel of the structure and meaning, in Arabic are considered as one word ornamentation, that is sometimes completely disregarded (Ghzala, 2006:256).

Example 1: "The earth, the air, and the water, teem with delighted existence", is translated (commas are dropped) into Arabic as follows:

Example 2: "Goodness is a virtuous planet; it flourish in good soil" is translated into Arabic (no punctuations are used) الخیر نبات طیب یزدهر فی التربة الطيبة as follows:

To confirm, a quick look at the classical book, *A Handbook of Rhetoric* (1995:32) about Arabic traditional poetry, punctuation is marginalized through the whole book and poorly or haphazardly used, by way of decoration, or rather, misused completely. Full stops, commas, and exclamation marks in particular are badly used as an indication of their insignificance in Arabic, which is certainly not the case with English (Ghzala, 2006:254).

c. Capitalization Errors. These occur when the uppercase style is adopted. For Arabic has no capital 'upper' case letters for initial words, proper names and abbreviations. Instead, round brackets, parentheses and quote marks are sometimes used as a device to overcome the absence of capital letters in Arabic script. The function of capitalization in English is to emphasize words or to show their importance. In addition, writers capitalize the first word of a sentence, because it marks the beginning of a new idea and indicates its importance too (Suliman & Ahmeida & Mahalla: 2019).

Example: The foreign secretary, Mrs. Clinton, traveled to Tokyo and Jerusalem.

سافرت وزيرة الخارجية السيدة كلنتن الى طوكيو والقدس.

[the foreign secretary mrs. clinton, traveled to tokyo and jerusalem]

When capital letters are used for emphasis, as in headlines, Arabic uses

boldface or a different font color:
Example GREAT SATAN SITS DOWN
WITH THE AXIS OF EVIL

الشیطان الاکبری جمع مع محور الشر

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

After discussing the effects of the misuse of punctuations by EFL learners on meaning and their impacts on translating texts from English into Arabic, we conclude referring to the importance of the proper use of punctuation by text writers and their vital role in interpreting the SL texts accurately by readers. So using it haphazardly by EFL students' leads to misunderstanding SL texts, which traditionally is the reasons for their weaknesses in writing and consequently in translation. Thus due to the various differences between punctuation systems and their functions in both English and Arabic, students commit errors in properly inserting punctuations when writing which affect their translating as well.

Accordingly, some recommendations are suggested and considered for further research:

- 1- EFL students should pay more attention to the proper use of punctuations in their writing which secures accurate translating texts especially from English into Arabic, our concern.
- 2- The overstress of EFL instructors in teaching punctuations and their functions by raising their students' awareness of the importance of applying them, rather than merely memorizing rules, in both writing and translation classes.

3. More punctuation assignments of unpunctuated sentences/texts must be introduced and included by syllabus designers as part of improving students writing and translating skills.
4. Conducting more experimental researches on translating punctuation embracing other subskills to EFL learning as; reading, spelling, listening and speaking, in writing and translation classes to increase students' creativity in writing and translating.

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