

## CHALLENGES IN PUNCTUATION USAGE AMONG LIBYAN EFL SECONDARY STUDENTS

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APA Citation: Alruwani, M. M. A., Senowarsito., & Susanto, D. A. (2025). Challenges in punctuation usage among Libyan EFL secondary students. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 13(1), 397-300. <https://doi.org/10.25134/erjee.v13i1.11649>

Received: 17-09-2024

Accepted: 18-12-2024

Published: 28-02-2025

**Abstract:** This study investigates the challenges in punctuation usage among Libyan EFL secondary students, with the primary objective of identifying specific types and underlying causes of punctuation errors in their writing. A qualitative descriptive methodology was employed, involving a sample of 20 first-year secondary students at Zlitan Central School who participated in narrative writing tests. These tests were specifically designed to identify and categorize punctuation errors. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four experienced English language teachers from the same school to gain deeper insights into instructional practices and their perceptions regarding students' punctuation difficulties. Data analysis included thematic analysis techniques, resulting in the identification of three main categories of punctuation errors: omission, misinformation, and addition. Among these categories, omission errors, particularly the omission of commas, were most prevalent, reflecting significant gaps in students' punctuation understanding and application. Interviews revealed critical contributing factors, including linguistic interference from the students' first language (Arabic), insufficient explicit instruction regarding punctuation rules, limited practical writing exercises, and a general lack of awareness of punctuation's role in effective written communication. This study highlights the necessity of targeted instructional strategies and curriculum improvements aimed at addressing these challenges. Recommendations include integrating explicit punctuation instruction into the Libyan EFL curriculum, employing error analysis techniques in classroom activities, and enhancing practical writing exercises and feedback mechanisms. By focusing on these pedagogical interventions, educators can significantly improve students' punctuation proficiency, thereby enhancing their overall writing skills and academic performance.

**Keywords:** *EFL learners; error analysis; instructional strategies; Libyan secondary students; punctuation errors; qualitative descriptive research.*

### INTRODUCTION

Writing is a critical language skill that significantly contributes to students' overall proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Proper punctuation is essential for enhancing clarity, coherence, and effective communication (Rahmawati, 2020; Dewi, 2022; Pratiwi & Ramalia, 2022; Ali et al., 2020; Kandy, 2024). However, EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties correctly employing punctuation marks, resulting in ambiguity and reduced readability (Gezmiş, 2023; Aburawi et al., 2024;

Maroua, 2023; Ghallab, 2024; Raheem & Ghafar, 2024). Punctuation errors in narrative writing, particularly, profoundly impact the intended meaning and coherence of the text (Rahmawati, 2020; Dewi, 2022; Pratiwi & Ramalia, 2022; Ali et al., 2020; Raheem & Ghafar, 2024).

Previous studies have consistently highlighted punctuation as a challenging area for EFL students across diverse educational contexts. Rahmawati (2020) identified punctuation errors primarily in omission and misinformation, noting their adverse effects on students' intended meanings. Similarly,

Dewi (2022) observed prevalent errors in punctuation, emphasizing the omission of commas as a widespread issue among Indonesian students. Consistent findings were also reported by Pratiwi and Ramalia (2022), indicating a high incidence of punctuation omission in students' recount texts, suggesting insufficient practice and unclear instructional methods. Research by Ali et al. (2020) further supported these findings, pointing out frequent punctuation errors, notably in comma usage, apostrophes, and capitalization, among Pakistani university students. Additionally, Kandy (2024) identified significant grammatical, spelling, and punctuation deficiencies among Saudi undergraduate students, linking these challenges to limited instructional focus and insufficient writing practice.

Additional research by Ikram and Manal (2024) emphasized the pivotal role of direct written corrective feedback (DWCF) in enhancing students' punctuation proficiency. Their findings suggest that students often benefit from immediate and explicit feedback that draws attention to specific punctuation errors, allowing for both recognition and internalization of the correct forms. DWCF helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application by offering learners targeted revisions on their actual writing. This feedback mechanism fosters greater metalinguistic awareness and encourages learners to be more attentive to mechanical accuracy in future writing tasks. In alignment with these findings, Apuhin and Montecastro (2023) demonstrated that structured feedback combined with self-correction strategies not only improves punctuation accuracy but also cultivates learner autonomy. By engaging students in identifying and correcting their own errors, these methods promote active learning and critical reflection, which are essential for long-term writing development.

Building on this foundation, Raheem and Ghafar (2024) conducted a comprehensive analysis of punctuation and spelling errors in academic texts produced by Iraqi EFL learners. Their study revealed that punctuation errors are pervasive and often result from insufficient practice, limited instruction, and a lack of clear pedagogical emphasis on writing mechanics. They argue that regular and deliberate practice—paired with explicit instruction—is essential to reduce such errors. Without structured opportunities to apply punctuation rules in context, students continue to rely on incorrect habits or arbitrary usage. Similarly, Amin (2020) emphasized the role of contextual training and classroom environment in

shaping students' writing skills. His study of Pakistani university students pointed to the absence of effective corrective feedback mechanisms and contextual writing exercises as significant contributors to the persistence of punctuation errors. These findings underline the importance of not just teaching rules in isolation but embedding them meaningfully within authentic writing activities.

Gezmiş (2023) extended the discussion by examining punctuation difficulties among Turkish EFL students. The study revealed that interlingual (first-language-related) and intralingual (second-language-specific) interference play a substantial role in shaping learners' punctuation behavior. This interference manifests in the misapplication of punctuation conventions due to cross-linguistic differences, such as divergent comma and period usage norms between Turkish and English. The research highlighted the importance of addressing these influences through contrastive analysis and targeted instruction that helps learners understand the structural differences between their native and target languages. Complementing these findings, Maroua (2023) investigated similar patterns among Algerian students and reported that improper punctuation usage was exacerbated by a lack of motivation and minimal explicit instruction in classrooms. The study emphasized that when punctuation is not presented as an essential component of meaning-making in writing, students tend to disregard its rules, focusing instead on vocabulary or content. This lack of balanced instruction ultimately undermines writing clarity and coherence.

Taken together, these studies converge on the idea that effective punctuation instruction must go beyond rule memorization. It should incorporate context, continuous feedback, and awareness of cross-linguistic influences. When these elements are absent—as in many EFL settings including Libya—students are likely to repeat errors and view punctuation as secondary to content. The reviewed literature provides a strong rationale for conducting focused research in underexplored contexts such as Libyan secondary schools, where similar linguistic and instructional challenges are likely to occur, yet have not been sufficiently documented.

Fatma (2019) conducted pivotal research within an Arabic EFL context, emphasizing the critical role that punctuation plays in fostering both academic and professional communication competence. Her findings underscored a paradox in which students acknowledged the theoretical

importance of punctuation but consistently failed to apply it effectively in practice. This was largely attributed to insufficient instructional attention and a lack of opportunities for practical engagement with punctuation rules during writing tasks. Such gaps suggest a disconnect between curriculum content and the pedagogical strategies needed to support learners' writing development, thereby reinforcing the urgency for targeted and context-sensitive instructional interventions that go beyond grammar drills to include functional use in authentic writing scenarios.

Moreover, research conducted in Arabic-speaking regions by scholars such as Gezmiş (2023), Aburawi et al. (2024), and Maroua (2023) further substantiates the widespread nature of punctuation challenges in EFL settings. These studies identified frequent punctuation errors stemming from linguistic interference, particularly where Arabic punctuation norms conflict with English conventions. Arabic, for instance, utilizes a different system of pause markers and sentence boundary indicators, which can lead learners to transfer incorrect habits into their English writing. This type of cross-linguistic interference has been shown to result in systematic omission, addition, and misuse of punctuation marks. In response, researchers have advocated for the incorporation of tailored pedagogical approaches that explicitly address such interlingual errors, suggesting the use of contrastive analysis, bilingual examples, and contextualized writing exercises as potentially effective solutions. Additionally, studies like those by Maroua (2023) and Gezmiş (2023) pointed out that student disengagement and a general lack of metalinguistic awareness further exacerbate the problem. Learners not only struggle with rules but also often fail to recognize punctuation's communicative value in enhancing clarity, tone, and cohesion—key aspects of effective written discourse.

Despite the breadth of scholarship examining punctuation challenges among Arabic-speaking EFL learners, there remains a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the Libyan educational context, particularly at the secondary school level. Most existing studies focus on university students or broader regional patterns, leaving the specific experiences of Libyan high school learners underexplored. This gap is significant given Libya's unique socio-political and educational landscape, which has undergone various reforms and disruptions over recent decades. Factors such as centralized curricula, teacher preparedness, resource limitations, and policy-level neglect of

writing instruction contribute to systemic weaknesses in students' writing proficiency. As such, this study seeks to address this oversight by focusing on first-year secondary students at Zlitan Central School. Through its localized lens, the research not only documents the types and frequencies of punctuation errors but also uncovers the contextual factors—ranging from curriculum design to teacher training and classroom practices—that shape students' ability to use punctuation accurately and meaningfully. In doing so, the study provides empirically grounded recommendations aimed at enhancing both instructional methods and curriculum content within Libyan EFL education, with broader implications for similar contexts across the Arab world.

Given this context, this study formulates the following research questions: (1) What are the common punctuation errors made by first-year students at Zlitan Secondary School in writing short stories? (2) What are the primary factors contributing to punctuation errors among first-year students at Zlitan Secondary School in writing short stories? (3) How can instructional materials and teaching practices reduce students' punctuation errors in writing short stories?

This research provides a novel and much-needed perspective by centering its investigation specifically on Libyan secondary school students—an EFL learner population whose punctuation challenges remain largely underrepresented in the existing body of literature. While previous studies have widely examined punctuation issues among university students and in other Arabic-speaking contexts, very few have focused on the Libyan secondary education sector, particularly at the first-year level. This localized focus is significant because it recognizes the unique socio-linguistic, curricular, and pedagogical environment of Libya, which shapes learners' writing development in distinctive ways. By narrowing its scope to Zlitan Central School, the study captures context-specific challenges and instructional gaps that may not be visible in broader, cross-national research.

The novelty of this study is twofold. First, it employs a mixed-method qualitative descriptive approach, integrating empirical data from student writing samples with rich insights derived from semi-structured interviews with experienced English language teachers. This dual-method design enhances the depth and validity of the findings by triangulating students' actual punctuation performance with educators' first-hand

observations of classroom dynamics and curriculum limitations. Second, the study disaggregates punctuation errors into three major categories—omission, addition, and misinformation—offering a clear and detailed typology that can guide future pedagogical interventions and curriculum reforms. Unlike generic error analyses, this study's classification system is specifically tailored to the linguistic and instructional realities faced by Libyan learners, allowing for more precise and relevant instructional solutions.

The significance of the study lies not only in its documentation of error types but also in its actionable implications for the enhancement of English language instruction in Libyan schools. By uncovering the root causes of punctuation errors—such as mother-tongue interference, inadequate classroom time, rigid curricula, and lack of teacher training—the study provides grounded, evidence-based recommendations that can inform both micro-level classroom strategies and macro-level policy adjustments. Furthermore, it advocates for curriculum development that places greater emphasis on writing mechanics, practical punctuation exercises, and contextualized feedback mechanisms. Such recommendations are crucial for addressing long-standing gaps in EFL instruction and for raising the overall communicative competence of Libyan students in academic and real-world writing contexts. In doing so, the study not only contributes to the field of second language writing but also aligns with broader educational goals of improving literacy and linguistic accuracy among EFL learners in North Africa and the MENA region more broadly.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to comprehensively investigate punctuation errors among Libyan EFL secondary students at Zlitan Central School. Qualitative descriptive research was chosen due to its efficacy in providing detailed insights into the nature of educational issues, particularly in language teaching and error analysis contexts (Rizal et al., 2024; Ivanova et al., 2022; Saputro, 2023).

The study involved 20 first-year secondary school students selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that participants met specific criteria relevant to the study objectives. Purposive sampling is highly suitable in qualitative studies aiming for depth and detailed understanding rather than generalizability (Gildore et al., 2023; Wati, 2021; Arisman, 2023). Additionally, four English

language teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, chosen based on their direct involvement and experience teaching punctuation and writing skills at the targeted school.

Data collection involved two primary instruments: a writing test and semi-structured interviews. The writing test required students to compose narrative paragraphs, facilitating an accurate identification and categorization of punctuation errors into omission, misinformation, and addition types. The test approach aligns with previous studies emphasizing the practical evaluation of students' punctuation and writing skills (Gezmiş, 2023; Aprianto, 2023; Pravitasari, 2022).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore deeper insights into the reasons behind students' punctuation errors and teachers' perspectives on effective instructional methods. Semi-structured interviews are effective in capturing in-depth, context-specific data, enabling researchers to explore underlying issues and perspectives comprehensively (Raheem & Ghafar, 2024; Khan, 2023; Apuhin et al., 2023).

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis framework, involving systematic coding and categorization of data gathered from both the writing tests and interviews. This analysis method facilitated the identification of prominent themes regarding punctuation errors, instructional challenges, and pedagogical recommendations. Thematic analysis is widely recognized for its clarity and efficacy in qualitative education research, especially in exploring linguistic and pedagogical phenomena (Gayed et al., 2022; Rizal et al., 2024; Ivanova et al., 2022).

This methodological approach, encompassing both practical assessment and qualitative exploration, allowed for a detailed understanding of the punctuation challenges faced by Libyan EFL learners and provided a solid foundation for targeted pedagogical recommendations.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The omission of punctuation marks represents a critical challenge for Libyan EFL secondary students, with a total of 110 omission errors identified in the students' writing samples. The most prevalent error was the omission of commas, totaling 64 instances and comprising 58.18% of all omission errors. This significant percentage suggests that students have a limited understanding of the rules governing comma usage, such as separating items in a list, setting off introductory phrases, and distinguishing clauses. The frequent

omission of commas affects the fluency, structure, and interpretability of student writing, often leading to misreading or ambiguous sentence boundaries.

The second most common error type was the omission of full stops, accounting for 35 errors or 31.82% of the total. This indicates that many students struggle with identifying the end of a complete thought, leading to run-on sentences or overly long statements without proper segmentation. Such issues disrupt the logical flow and readability of the text, making it difficult for readers to grasp the intended message. This finding reflects a broader issue related to sentence boundary recognition, a skill often underemphasized in writing instruction.

Other omission errors, while less frequent, still point to important instructional gaps. Apostrophes were omitted in 6 cases (5.45%), suggesting difficulty with possessive forms and contractions—elements essential for grammatical accuracy and conciseness in English. Capitalization errors occurred in 4 cases (3.64%), indicating that students may lack awareness of basic writing conventions, such as capitalizing the first word of a sentence or proper nouns. Lastly, there was 1 omission of a semicolon (0.91%), which, although minimal, highlights a potential unfamiliarity with advanced punctuation used to join closely related independent clauses.

In summary, the data reveals that comma and full stop omissions together represent nearly 90% of all punctuation omission errors. This highlights the urgent need for focused instruction on basic punctuation rules, particularly concerning sentence boundaries and internal sentence structuring. Improving punctuation accuracy, especially in these foundational areas, will enhance overall writing quality, clarity, and coherence for Libyan EFL learners.

Table 1. *The total number of punctuation omission error made by student*

Errors Type	(N)	(P) %
Omission Of Comma	64	58.18 %
Omission Of Full Stop	35	31.82 %
Omission Of Apostrophe	6	5.45 %
Omission Of Capitalization	4	3.64 %
Omission Of Semi Colon	1	0.91 %
Total	110	100 %

Table 2. *The total number of punctuation misinformation error made by student*

Errors Type	(N)	(P) %
Misinformation Of Full Stop	6	19.35 %

Misinformation Of Question Mark	1	3.23 %
Misinformation Of Semi Colon	2	6.45 %
Misinformation Of Exclamation Mark	2	6.45 %
Misinformation Of Comma	19	61.29 %
Misinformation Of Colon	1	3.23 %
Total	31	100 %

The misinformation errors category reflects instances where students used incorrect punctuation marks in place of the appropriate ones. In the data, 31 total misinformation errors were identified, with the misuse of commas emerging as the most dominant issue. Out of the total, 19 errors (61.29%) involved incorrect comma usage, indicating that while students may attempt to use commas, they often do so inaccurately—such as placing them at the wrong point in a sentence or using them when unnecessary. This suggests a superficial or incomplete understanding of comma rules, which affects sentence rhythm, clause separation, and meaning.

The second most frequent misinformation error involved the full stop, misused in 6 instances (19.35%). This type of error may include placing a period within dependent clauses or at inappropriate points in a sentence, disrupting the structure and coherence of the paragraph. Such mistakes reflect confusion regarding sentence boundaries and the role of full stops in signaling the end of complete thoughts.

Less frequent but still notable were errors in the use of the semi-colon (2 errors, 6.45%), exclamation mark (2 errors, 6.45%), question mark (1 error, 3.23%), and colon (1 error, 3.23%). These punctuation marks typically involve more advanced rules, and their incorrect usage shows that students are either overgeneralizing rules or lack the nuanced knowledge required to use them appropriately. For instance, the misuse of a semi-colon might involve replacing it with a comma between two independent clauses, while exclamation marks may be used in declarative or non-exclamatory contexts, diminishing their rhetorical effect.

Collectively, these errors reveal that students not only struggle with recognizing when punctuation is needed (as seen in omission errors) but also with knowing which punctuation mark is appropriate for a given syntactic or rhetorical function. These findings underscore the importance of teaching context-sensitive punctuation usage and providing explicit feedback on punctuation choices in writing tasks.

Table 3. *The total number of punctuation addition*

*error made by student*

Errors Type	(N)	(P) %
Addition Of Comma	32	84.21 %
Addition Of Full Stop	4	10.53 %
Addition Of Parentheses	2	5.26 %
Total	38	100 %

The addition errors category refers to instances where students inserted punctuation marks unnecessarily, which can distort the intended meaning or disrupt the flow of writing. A total of 38 addition errors were identified, with the overwhelming majority involving the comma, recorded at 32 instances or 84.21% of all addition errors. This indicates that while students may be aware that commas are important, they often overuse them or place them in inappropriate positions, such as between a subject and a verb or before conjunctions in compound predicates. Such excessive or misplaced commas can create sentence fragmentation, interrupt natural phrasing, and confuse the reader.

The full stop was the second most frequently added punctuation mark in error, appearing 4 times (10.53%). These errors likely stem from students misidentifying sentence boundaries and placing full stops where clauses are not independent or complete. This disrupts the coherence of ideas, often resulting in choppy or incomplete sentences that affect the readability and unity of the writing.

The least frequent addition error involved parentheses, which occurred 2 times (5.26%). Although this is a relatively small proportion, it suggests occasional misuse of punctuation that requires specific contexts—such as inserting side information or clarifying phrases. Students may not fully grasp the rhetorical function of parentheses, leading them to add these marks where they are not needed or where other punctuation (like commas or dashes) would be more appropriate.

Overall, the data reflect a tendency among students to overcompensate in their punctuation usage, possibly in an attempt to demonstrate grammatical correctness without fully understanding the functional rules behind each punctuation mark. This highlights the need for instruction that not only explains when punctuation is necessary but also when it is not, emphasizing restraint, appropriateness, and context-awareness in punctuation use.

An analysis of punctuation issues among first-year secondary students at Zliten Central School revealed a total of 179 errors, with omission errors accounting for 61.67% of the total. These findings correspond with other studies conducted in diverse

EFL contexts, where the omission of punctuation, especially commas and periods, has been identified as a common error among learners. Ghallab (2024) and Aburawi (2024) have recorded similar error patterns, suggesting that these challenges are widespread across the entire area. Recent studies corroborate these findings, demonstrating that EFL learners in Arabic contexts often encounter challenges with punctuation due to L1 interference and inadequate teaching approaches.

*Factors contributing to punctuation errors among Libyan EFL students*

The frequent punctuation errors committed by first-year Libyan EFL students stem from a combination of linguistic, instructional, and systemic challenges. A major factor is the influence of the students' first language (Arabic), which differs significantly from English in terms of punctuation usage and syntactic structure. This L1 interference causes confusion, particularly in the use of commas, full stops, and apostrophes. Similar findings were documented by Gezmiş (2023) and Al-Khalil (2022), who found that interlingual errors were prevalent among Arabic-speaking EFL students, especially when transitioning between Arabic and English writing norms. These difficulties are compounded by limited exposure to formal English writing and a lack of consistent instruction in punctuation rules during secondary education. As Raheem and Ghafar (2024) pointed out, insufficient emphasis on writing mechanics in school curricula significantly impacts EFL learners' accuracy in academic writing.

Another contributing factor is the inadequacy of instructional time and resources. Libyan English teachers are often bound by rigid curricula and limited teaching hours, which restrict their ability to focus on foundational writing skills like punctuation. Wati (2021) and Aprianto (2023) noted similar issues in their studies, highlighting that structural constraints in lesson delivery prevent teachers from reinforcing punctuation rules. The lack of writing-focused activities further limits students' opportunities to practice and internalize proper punctuation. Additionally, Ulhaq et al. (2022) observed that students who rarely engage in extensive or reflective writing tend to demonstrate more morpho-syntactic and punctuation errors, suggesting that writing development is deeply linked to practice and instruction.

Digital communication habits also appear to negatively influence punctuation accuracy. With

the rise of texting, instant messaging, and autocorrect tools, students tend to adopt informal styles and neglect punctuation norms. This aligns with the findings of Apuhin et al. (2023), who argued that reliance on autocorrection weakens learners' independent grammatical control. Furthermore, students' failure to link punctuation with clarity and reader comprehension indicates a conceptual misunderstanding of its function in academic texts. As supported by Ivanova et al. (2022) and Gayed et al. (2022), the absence of explicit and contextualized punctuation instruction results in persistent writing errors even among university-level learners.

Teacher interviews reinforce the idea that limited awareness of punctuation's communicative purpose leads students to treat punctuation as optional or decorative. Sudilah (2022) and Nurlaily (2022) both found that learners often used punctuation arbitrarily when not guided by formal instruction, particularly in contexts where the curriculum fails to integrate writing mechanics meaningfully. Moreover, Budiyo and Fadhy (2023) emphasize that the lack of meta-awareness about academic writing conventions—especially among EFL learners—can hinder students from understanding punctuation's rhetorical and grammatical roles.

Lastly, the absence of collaborative writing practices and feedback mechanisms also contributes to persistent punctuation errors. Research by Taufiqulloh, Fadhy, and Rosdiana (2024) demonstrated that collaborative assessment and structured peer review significantly enhance writing accuracy, including mechanics like punctuation. Without such opportunities in the classroom, students are less likely to reflect on their writing and internalize the importance of punctuation for meaning-making and structure. As a result, instructional materials and practices must be realigned to emphasize writing as a process, not merely a product, to help students develop punctuation mastery over time.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the punctuation challenges faced by first-year Libyan EFL secondary students and identified three major categories of errors: omission, misinformation, and addition. The results showed that omission errors were the most dominant, particularly in the use of commas and full stops. This pattern suggests that students have difficulty identifying where punctuation is needed to clearly separate ideas and maintain sentence boundaries.

The analysis also revealed a consistent misunderstanding of the appropriate application of punctuation marks, where students either misused punctuation in the wrong context or added it unnecessarily. These issues not only reflect a lack of technical knowledge but also a deeper confusion about the communicative purpose of punctuation in written English.

Several contributing factors were identified, including the influence of the students' first language, limited instructional time, lack of explicit teaching on punctuation, and minimal opportunities for practical writing. Additionally, students often showed limited awareness of punctuation as a tool for clarity and effective communication, treating it instead as an optional or decorative element in their writing.

To address these challenges, the study recommends integrating more structured and explicit punctuation instruction into the English language curriculum, enhancing student writing practice with regular feedback, and fostering greater awareness of the role punctuation plays in meaning-making. Equipping teachers with targeted strategies and dedicating classroom time for writing development will ultimately strengthen students' writing accuracy and overall language proficiency.

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