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### An Investigation into Punctuation and Capitalization Errors Made by Hebron University EFL Students

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## An Investigation into Punctuation and Capitalization Errors Made by Hebron University EFL Students

### Cover Page Footnote

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## An Investigation into Punctuation and Capitalization Errors Made by Hebron University EFL Students

الأخطاء الأكثر شيوعاً في الترقيم والكتابة بالحروف الكبيرة لدى الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية  
في جامعة الخليل

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### Abstract:

*This study aims to investigate the most frequent punctuation and capitalization errors made by EFL learners and to find out whether there were significant differences in the frequency of such errors due to the learners' academic level, major, and / or gender. The sample consisted of 157 students from the English Department of Hebron University/ Palestine in the academic year 2014/2015. Specially designed test was administered whereby the students were asked to fill in necessary punctuation marks and to correct capitalization errors. The results revealed that the most frequent errors were made in capitalization, comma, semicolon, period, quotation, hyphen, apostrophe, and the question mark respectively from the highest to the lowest occurrence. Unexpectedly, there were no significant differences in the frequency of the punctuation and capitalization errors made by the students due to their academic level, major, or gender.*

**Key words:** writing, punctuation, transfer, interlingual, intralingual, error analysis

### الملخص :

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في الأخطاء الأكثر شيوعاً في الترقيم والحروف الكبيرة التي يقع فيها الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وإلى معرفة ما إذا كانت هناك اختلافات ذات دلالة إحصائية في تكرار مثل هذه الأخطاء تعزى إلى المستوى الأكاديمي للدارسين، أو تخصصاتهم، أو جنسهم. وتكونت العينة من 157 طالباً من قسم اللغة الانجليزية في جامعة الخليل/ فلسطين في العام الدراسي 2014/2015. استخدمت الدراسة اختباراً صمم خصيصاً لتحقيق أهدافها، حيث طلب من المشاركين إضافة علامات الترقيم اللازمة وتصحيح أية أخطاء تتعلق باستخدام الحروف الكبيرة.

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أظهرت النتائج أن الأخطاء الأكثر شيوعاً في استخدام علامات الترقيم تمثلت في الحروف الكبيرة، والفاصلة، والفاصلة المنقوطة، والنقطة، وعلامة الاقتباس، والواصلة، والفاصلة المرفوعة، وعلامة الاستفهام على التوالي من الأعلى إلى الأدنى حدوثاً. وخلافاً للمتوقع، فقد كشفت النتائج عدم وجود فوارق دالة إحصائية في تكرار حدوث أخطاء الترقيم والحروف الكبيرة تعزى إلى المستوى الأكاديمي للدارسين، أو تخصصاتهم، أو جنسهم .

## 1. Introduction

Writing is an essential skill for EFL learners because it is a means through which they develop their critical thinking and enhance their creativity. Specifically, it is crucial for university students as it helps them to excel in their academic courses due to its interdisciplinary nature (Zahida, Farrah, & Zaru, 2014). For example, it enables them to write their essays, answer questions, prepare their reports, write their research papers, and other writing assignments.

An EFL academic writing environment seems abound in subtle and insidious challenges for both teachers and learners. One of these challenges is orthographic errors made by learners of English as a foreign language. Such errors can sometimes be relatively harmful, undermine the credibility of any piece of writing, and even raise questions related to the writer's basic literacy skills. This is why analyzing learners' errors has attracted the attention of many theoreticians and practitioners in the field of education. Such analysis, if properly carried out, is believed to enhance students' performance in any EFL writing classroom; it should provide teachers with the required information about their students' performance in general and linguistic weaknesses, which hinder their improvement, in particular.

The general consensus in the education field is that errors are inevitable, i.e. errors cannot be avoided in the sense that they are an inseparable part of the language learning process. Hence, eliminating or rather reducing the frequency of errors made by learners in an EFL writing classroom is largely associated with analyzing types and causes of such errors, among other factors. There are various types of orthographical errors, such as errors associated with spelling, capitalization, punctuation, word emphasis, etc. The present study is restricted to two types of orthographic errors, namely punctuation and

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capitalization. It may prove fruitful to identify, discuss, and attempt a solution to these errors in the present study, as they are frequently made and commonly observed in EFL students' writings at Hebron University.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem:**

Writing is considered an important skill and probably the most difficult to master. It is central to the fulfillment of various writing assignments/projects in varied fields of human endeavors. EFL students of Hebron University encounter numerous problems in writing. One of the most common problems, which are not taken seriously by most learners and many instructors, is the proper production of punctuation and capitalization. This is a phenomenon that is clearly observed in almost all students' assignments and exams. Therefore, the present paper aims to explore the frequency of punctuation errors, to investigate the correlation between these errors and the academic level, major, and gender, to identify the reasons behind them, and to suggest some practical recommendations.

### **1.2 Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study stems from the importance of proper orthography in writing. This study can be considered valuable for both instructors and learners since it aims to improve teaching and learning of the writing skill in English. It does so by giving instructors some insights into the most frequent punctuation and capitalization errors in writing among EFL learners. Such understanding helps instructors adjust their teaching methods according to the most frequent errors made by learners and to adopt appropriate strategies to minimize the occurrence of such errors. The findings of this study can guide instructors to develop proper writing practices for EFL learners, which may help them become better writers. Additionally, this paper is also expected to highlight punctuation and capitalization errors in order to help EFL learners to avoid committing such errors. Therefore, this study will be of interest to both instructors and EFL learners.

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### 1.3 Questions of the Study

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most frequent punctuation errors made by EFL Hebron University students, namely English Language and Literature major students (henceforth ELs), TEFL Major students (henceforth TEFLs), and MA English Language and TEFL students (henceforth MAs)?
2. Are there statistically significant differences in the frequency of the punctuation errors due to the academic level, major, and gender of the participants?
3. What are the plausible reasons behind making such errors in writing?

## 2. Review of Related Literature

Punctuation is often essential to convey meaning. Poor punctuation contributes to unorganized writing and confuses readers. Coherence and structure in any piece of text are influenced by punctuation marks (Gamaroff, 2000; Shaughnessy, 1977) As the common example of An English professor who asked his/her student to punctuate the following sentence:

*A woman without her man is nothing.*

The males punctuated the sentence as: "*A woman, without her man, is nothing.*" However, the females punctuated it differently: "*A woman: without her, man is nothing.*" This above example demonstrates the power of punctuation and its role in resolving ambiguity.

According to Carroll and Wilson (1993: 191) learners "encounter punctuation problems as there are no universal rules of punctuation." Similarly, Byrne (1988) said punctuation is very problematic as it has never been standard. Shokouhi and Zadeh-Dabbagh (2009) believe that learners are inconsistent in utilizing commas and periods.

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A review of the related literature on punctuation and capitalization errors indicates that it is important for EFL learners to understand the significance and function of punctuation marks. Carey (1978: 15) indicates that the purpose of punctuation is to eliminate vagueness and make clear relationship between words. Accordingly, ambiguity can result from incongruous use of punctuation marks (Connelly, 2009). In addition, Truss (2003) states appropriate meaning can be conveyed through proper punctuation. Moreover, Dawkins (1995: 422) believes that the punctuation of a good writer is "meaning-dependent, not grammar-dependent." Furthermore, Dawkins (1995) quoted Summey (1949) saying "skillful writers have learned that they must make alert and successful choices between periods and semicolons, semicolons and commas, and commas and dashes, dashes and parentheses, according to meaning and intended emphasis" (Dawkins 1995: 4). Moreover, he recommends educators to encourage "students to clarify the meaning of sentences and to gain intended emphasis."

Mann (2003) claims that there is a difficulty in learning punctuation marks. For example, Awad (2012) investigated the most frequent punctuation errors among An-Najah National University TEFL and English major students. He found that participants face difficulty in using punctuation marks, and they use them inappropriately replacing one mark with another such as using commas in place of full-stops. Similarly, Adas and Bakir (2013) and Gomez (2010) report that some Arab ESL learners struggle in their writing and particularly in punctuation. Gomez (2010) explains that this is due to the fact that Arabic has fewer limitations in the use of commas and periods than English. According to her, several Arab learners use infinite number of commas in their English run-on sentences.

Atashparvar (1982) is in favor of using punctuation marks that may assist readers to understand unstated ideas in a text. To him, punctuation is very necessary just like telescopic insects that may sometimes threaten health, but other times it protects people from passing away.

Al-Qinai (2013:2) explained that, "punctuation is one of the paralinguistic graphological properties of a text which helps, the same

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way as suprasegmental features, to read a text in a coherent way and understand its rhythm and tempo." He also emphasized that "the proper use of punctuation marks not only helps readers to understand how phrases, sentences and paragraphs are coherently connected, but also helps them to mark discourse features such as intonational contours, pauses and emphasis."

Similarly, Solomon (1990) and Zolfaghari (1999) believe that punctuation conveys pauses, stresses, intonations that help readers comprehend any piece of text. Moreover, they claim that punctuation splits sentences into clauses and makes clear the logical relations between the parts of a sentence. For example, they mention that a full-stop indicates stopping and finishing a sentence, a comma decreases the reader's reading speed, and a question sign changes intonation.

Shokouhi and Zadeh-Dabbagh (2009) investigated punctuation problems in Iranian Learners' writing. They classified errors according to their causes and frequency counts. They reported that the participants committed high degree of errors in capitalization and commas due the fact their mother tongue doesn't have capitalization and commas are used a lot within sentences joining complete thoughts.

In addition to punctuation, another factor which may affect readability and mutual intelligibility is capitalization. Batista (2011: 2) says that "besides improving human readability, punctuation marks and capitalization provide important information for Parsing, Machine Translation (MT), Information Extraction, Summarization, Named Entity Recognition (NER), and other downstream tasks that are usually also applied to written corpora."

Studies in general attributed the causes of punctuation and capitalization errors mostly to two factors, namely: interlingual (L1 interference) and intralingual (developmental or lack of competence). The term interlingual was first introduced by Selinker (1972). According to Richards (1971) intralingual errors occur during the learning process of the second language at a stage when the learners have not really acquired the knowledge.



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On the one hand, some searchers dealing with second language acquisition (Corder, 1974, Scovel, 2001) attributed the major causes of errors to language transfer. Accordingly, some studies found that the causes of punctuation and capitalization errors were interlingual mainly (Liu, Sung, and Chien, 1998; Ridha, 2012; and Almukhaizeem, 2013). For example, Liu, Sung, and Chien (1998) found that the less English proficiency learners possess, the more L1 interference was found in their English writings. Almukhaizeem (2013) stated that language interference has a mainly negative impact on students' writing mechanics. Almarwany (2008) also found that students' first language causes many writing problems including problems in capitalization and punctuation.

On the other hand, other studies attributed the causes of punctuation and capitalization errors to intralingual factors mainly. For instance, AbiSamra (2003) found that two-third of the second language learner' writing errors, including punctuation and capitalization, are attributed to intralingual factors. This result is similar to other studies she cited in her study such as George (1972) and Brudhiprabha (1972). Kim (2001: 157) analyzed errors in college students' writing samples to examine L1 interference phenomenon. The findings showed that "most of the errors were intralingual and only in a few cases can be attributed to L1 interference". Kim suggested that L2 learners follow similar developmental patterns to those found in children's L1 acquisition. Kaweera (2013: 16) claimed that "It is clearly seen that writing errors are assumed as being not only a result of the first language interference habits to the learning of L2, but also inadequate acquisition of the target language." He opined that intralingual errors are caused by the influence of the target language than language transfer. He also explained that the complexity of certain rules in the target language was difficult to understand and some exceptions were difficult to memorize, which makes it confusing to writers. These studies and others support the assumption that second language learning goes through various developmental stages governed by similar universal innate principles although the grammar of L2 is not completely acquired due to nonlinguistic factors as proposed by Chomsky (Fromkin et al, 2011).

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### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The subjects of the study were randomly selected from all EFL Hebron University undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in the second semester of the academic year 2014/2015 in the English Department. In particular, three categories with a total of 157 subjects: 61 sophomores, 73 seniors, and 23 MAs served as the subjects of the present study. The MA students were included to check whether longer exposure to English reduces punctuation problems. There were 136 females and 20 males, a sample which more or less mirrors the percentage of females to males in the study population. One participant did not indicate his/her gender. 83 participants were from the Teaching Methods Program and 73 were from the English Literature. One participant did not indicate his/her major. The subjects were expected to be quite familiar with the topic under examination as ELs and TEFLs are supposed, by the end of the second year of their study, to have taken at least three writing-centered courses (English II, Writing I, Writing II) as part of the department requirements of their study plans.

#### 3.2 Instrumentations

To achieve the objectives of the study, a specially designed test was administered by the researchers (see Appendix). To avoid artificiality, the test is originally an authentic essay taken from Langan's College Writing Skills with Readings (2005). It was adapted to suit the purpose of the study, and it comprised a total of 30 test items. Specifically, there was 24 punctuation *fill-in-the-blank* and 6 capitalization *error identification* items which were supposed to be answered by the students.

#### 3.3 Administration of the Test and Analysis of the Results

The test was administered by the end of the second semester of the academic year 2014/2015. The participants were given clear instructions and allowed for about 20 minutes to complete the test. The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 22 package.

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Descriptive statistics, t-tests, and ANCOVA are used to analyze the results. ANCOVA was used because the groups were not academically equivalent.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the results of the study. First, the findings related to the questions of the study are going to be presented, and then a discussion of the findings will follow.

### 4.1. What are the most frequent punctuation errors made by EFL Hebron University students?

Table 1 and Figure 1 show the results of the frequency of errors committed by students majoring in English Language and Literature, TEFL, and the MA students at Hebron University.

**Table 1: Means and SDs for Punctuation Errors**

	Number	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. D
<b>Capital</b>	157	.00	11.00	2.1975	1.88
<b>Comma</b>	157	.00	8.00	1.9172	1.40
<b>Semicolon</b>	157	.00	4.00	1.2930	.86
<b>Period</b>	157	.00	4.00	1.1720	1.166
<b>Additional marks</b>	157	.00	4.00	1.1720	.84
<b>Quotation</b>	157	.00	4.00	1.1529	1.01
<b>Hyphen</b>	157	.00	1.00	.7325	.44
<b>Apostrophe</b>	157	.00	2.00	.2229	.43
<b>Question Mark</b>	157	.00	2.00	.1656	.42
<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	157				

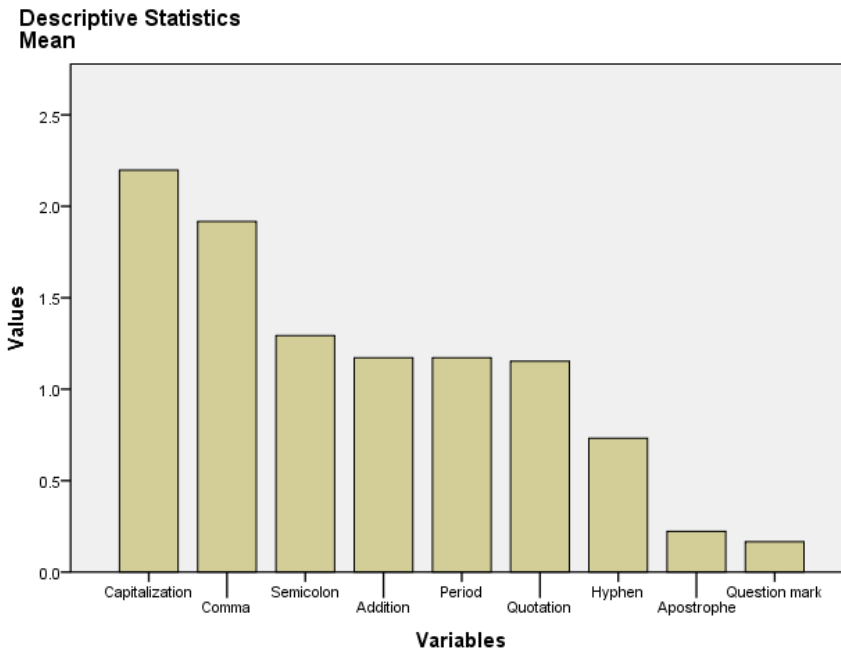
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Figure (1): Means for punctuation errors

In Table 1 and Figure 1, errors are arranged according to the frequency of their recurrence from the highest to the lowest: capitalization, comma, semicolon, period, quotation, hyphen, apostrophe, and the question mark. This finding is in agreement with Alamin and Ahmed (2012) who found that capitalization, comma and semicolon were the most common punctuation errors. In addition, this finding is somehow in agreement with Awad (2012) who reported that the most common mistakes were comma, capitalization, period, the quotation mark, and semicolon respectively.

4.2. *Are there any statistically significant differences in the frequency of the punctuation errors due to the academic level, major, and gender of the participants?*

In order to examine whether there are statistically significant differences in the frequency of the punctuation errors due to the academic level, major, and gender of the participants, a number of statistical tests were conducted as follows:

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First, descriptive statistics and ANCOVA were carried out to examine whether there were statistically significant differences in the frequency of the punctuation errors due to the academic level of the participants as shown in tables 2 and 3. As mentioned before ANCOVA was used because the groups were not academically equivalent.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Frequency of Punctuation Errors due to Academic Level**

	Number	Mean	Std. D	St. error
<b>Sophomore</b>	61	9.75	3.35	.43
<b>Senior</b>	73	10.40	4.52	.53
<b>MA</b>	23	9.60	2.85	.59
<b>Total</b>	157	10.02	3.87	.30

**Table 3: ANCOVA Results for Frequency of Punctuation Errors due to Academic Level**

	Sum of squares	d.f	Mean Square	F	Sig
<b>Between Groups</b>	19.455	2	9.727	.645	.526
<b>Within Groups</b>	2322.443	154	15		
<b>Total</b>	2341	156			

Tables 2 and 3 show that there are no statistically significant differences in the use of punctuation marks due to the participants' academic level at the level of  $P \leq 0.05$ . This result was against the researchers' expectations and it was inconsistent with what Awad (2012) concluded in his study. This variation possibly appears because the participants in Awad's study were all at the undergraduate level including freshman students which definitely creates a difference between a freshman student and a senior one who has already received more linguistic input, practice, and more exposure to L2. On the other hand, the participants of the present study are sophomore students and above including MA students, which makes the differences due to the

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students' academic level less significant than those in Awad's (2012) study. Although significant differences were expected to appear between MA participants and undergraduates, such differences did not appear probably for three reasons;

- (1) the number of the MA students was relatively small (23);
- (2) the MA students might not have taken the test seriously;
- (3) the MA students might not have sufficient linguistic competence in punctuation marks;
- (4) the punctuation errors might have been fossilized.

Second, a t-test was carried out to examine whether there were statistically significant differences in the frequency of the punctuation errors due to the major of the participants. The results are shown in tables 4 and 5.

**Table 4: T-test Results for Major**

Major	Number	Mean	Std. D	Sig.
Teaching Methods	83	10.5783	3.66300	.073
Literature	73	9.4658	4.02797	

**Table 5: T-test Results for Equality of Means for Major**

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Major	Teaching Methods	1.807	154	0.073
	Literature	1.796	146.689	0.075

Tables 4 and 5 show that there are no statistically significant differences in the use of punctuation marks due to the participants' major at the level of  $P \leq 0.05$ .

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Finally, another t-test was carried out to examine whether there were statistically significant differences in the frequency of the punctuation errors due to the gender of the participants. Tables 6 and 7 display the results.

**Table 6: T-test Results for Gender**

Gender	Number	Mean	Std. D	Sig.
Male	20	8.9000	3.97227	.710
Female	136	10.1618	3.84750	

**Table 7: T-test for Equality of Means for Gender**

Gender		t-test for Equality of Means		
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	Equal variances assumed	-1.364-	<b>154</b>	<b>0.175</b>
	Equal variances not assumed	-1.332-	<b>24.539</b>	<b>0.195</b>

Tables 6 and 7 show that there are no statistically significant differences in the use of punctuation marks due to gender at the level of  $P \leq 0.05$ . This finding is in line with what Awad (2012) found in his study.

#### 4.3. *What are the plausible reasons behind making such errors in writing?*

As mentioned above, errors in punctuation and capitalization might be attributed to interlingual (L1 interference) and intralingual (developmental or lack of competence) sources Brown (2000: 224). Having thoroughly examined the errors made by the participants in this study, the researchers believe that most of these errors are intralingual rather than interlingual. For example, the most frequent error in this study is capitalization, which can't be attributed to L1

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interference only. It is true that Arabic does not make a distinction between uppercase and lowercase characters, but this is not the only source of capitalization errors owing to capitalizing some common nouns. For instance, some students capitalized the common nouns *president*, *head*, and *company* which are used in the text as common nouns (see Appendix). This indicates that although learners have studied various writing and grammar courses, they have not mastered the rules of capitalization in English during their years of study probably due to *inadequate teaching techniques*, *lack of the linguistic input provided for the learners* or *insufficient practice*.

The comma ranks as the second most frequent error followed by the period in the third place. Despite the fact that part of the linguistic knowledge of the learner is to know where a sentence begins and where it ends, the above two punctuation marks were substituted one in place of the other by learners. Moreover this substitution might be because Arabic and English languages differ in terms of sentence construction and what constitutes a statement. For example, in Arabic, the use of a comma to end a statement is acceptable; however, in English a statement ends with a full stop. This may cause a negative transfer stimulating Arab learners of English to use commas instead of full stops. Both English and Arabic share the property of having these two marks, but with some differences in usage. For instance, the comma is used in both languages to separate phrases and clauses, but in Arabic, lexical insertion (*wa*) may replace the comma, which means either a comma or a lexical word may be used. The period is also used in both languages to end complete meaningful sentences while in Arabic commas may sometimes replace periods throughout a whole paragraph with only one period at the end of the paragraph. This is not a crucial difference, but it presents a stylistic variation between both languages, which shows more flexibility in using these two punctuation marks in Arabic. This lends support to the assumption that the main source of errors is again intralingual rather than interlingual since the underlying structure of both languages is approximately the same (Chomsky, 1965). Therefore, the errors may be attributed to lack of linguistic competence related to nonlinguistic factors affecting the adequate development of such knowledge such as inappropriate teaching strategies, unqualified teachers, lack of motivation, and ill-designed teaching materials.



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The results of the present study provide evidence to support this viewpoint since most of the comma errors occurred because of misusing, omitting, and substituting the comma for a semicolon or a period. This contradicts with the results of some previous studies which related most of the comma errors to the overuse of the comma replacing commas for periods. In Arabic writing this is a stylistic variation on which firm and generalized results could not be built while in English it is not. However, the results of the present study are in line with the results of some other studies. For example, Abdel-Latif (2007) suggested that non-native speakers of English commit writing errors because of the lack of knowledge of the foreign language structure. Similarly, Hammad (2012) traced the errors committed by English writing learners to the lack of adequate exposure to English language input. Likewise, another study conducted by Mourtaga (2010) attributes the main cause of errors committed by second or foreign language learners to their lack of practice in English writing.

The least frequent errors committed by the participants in this study were the apostrophe and the question mark (see Table 1). As for the question mark, very few errors were committed by the participants. This is possible because the interrogative forms provided in the text start with question words which makes it easy for students to add a question mark at the end of a question. The second least problematic mark was the apostrophe though it is not used in Arabic. This adds support to what has been concluded above that L1 transfer is not the main source of errors (Kim, 2001; Kaweera, 2013) because if it is so, then the use of apostrophe should be on top of the list of the most frequent errors since it represents a total difference between L1 and L2.

## 5. Recommendations and Pedagogical Implications

Based on the results of the study and the findings of other related studies, the following suggestions and ideas may help in overcoming or reducing punctuation and capitalization errors for EFL learners.

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Firstly, students should be adequately exposed to the rules of punctuation and capitalization of the target language at an early stage of learning.

Secondly, there is a need for writing practice and sufficient exposure to English language input to develop learners' writing skills.

Thirdly, instructors need to probably reconsider their teaching techniques and strategies. They need to continue focusing on capitalization and punctuation in classroom activities as well as in exams. In other words, instructors need to give more weight to the punctuation and capitalization errors whether the course is a writing one or not.

Finally, instructors need to be able to draw the attention of their students to areas of similarities or differences between the mother tongue and the target language to help them avoid interference. As illustrated previously in this study, in Arabic, for instance, lexical insertion (*wa*) may replace the comma, which means either a comma or a lexical word may be used. This is due to the similarity between Arabic and English in terms of the punctuation marks used in both languages and their functions.

## **6. Conclusion**

Since the accurate and proper use of punctuation marks provides access to text intelligibility and readability, this study has highlighted the most frequent punctuation and capitalization errors committed by EFL learners. The present study found that the most frequent errors were made in capitalization, comma, semicolon, period, quotation, hyphen, apostrophe, and the question mark respectively from the highest to the lowest occurrence. Moreover, no statistically significant differences were found in the use of punctuation marks in relation to the academic level, major and gender of the participants. Furthermore, it was found that L1 negative transfer was not the main source of punctuation and capitalization errors. In fact, most of these errors probably occurred because of inadequate teaching techniques, lack of the linguistic input provided for the learners or insufficient practice.

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