



## UNDERGRADUATE STUDY PROJECT

### *Punctuation Errors: An Analytic Study among EFL Learners*

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts at Salahaddin University, College of Education -  
English Department

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## Certification

I certify that this study was prepared by a student (**Israa Hashim Abdulrahman**) under my supervision at College of Education/ Salahaddin University- Erbil in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor in English Language.

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Signature

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### **Abstract**

Punctuation is one of the important parts of writing. Therefore, it is important to investigate the errors that EFL learners usually make. Learners usually face challenges when they write if they do not know where to use the right marks. This study attempts to investigate the impact of punctuation while writing paragraphs or essays. Moreover, a survey has been used among EFL learners to find out the impacts of punctuation on writing tasks. The participants of the current study were Kurdish EFL learners in all the four stages in three different colleges. After the data analysis process, the results showed that some of the learners have problem with using the proper punctuation marks because they usually have problem where to use that specific punctuation mark such period, comma, colon, or semicolon. Furthermore, the results have several pedagogical implications for both teachers and students which were presented in the discussion and results sections.

***Keywords:*** *Punctuation errors, EFL learners, punctuation marks, writing skills*

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1. Background**

Communication has some skills, and it is a mixture of words. Therefore, many factors such as speaking skills, body languages and correct punctuation form a crucial part of this process. In general, language consists of spoken forms and written forms. For instance, in a spoken form, body language is an empowering tool for speaking than words, but when it comes to writing skills, although words can be marvelous for expressions, punctuation helps in showing the tone, pause and interrogation. The use of punctuation marks incorrectly changes the meaning of the written structures. Hence, punctuation plays an essential role in conveying the written work. There are 13 punctuation marks that are commonly used in English grammar. They are the period (.), question mark (?), exclamation point (!), comma (,), semicolon (;), colon (:), dash (--), hyphen (-), parentheses (()), square brackets ([]), apostrophe ('), quotation marks (") and ellipsis (...). Following their correct usages will make your writing easier to read and more appealing (Straus, Kaufman & Stern, 2014). Although there are two other writing devices that needed to be mentioned here, since some of the scholars list them with punctuation marks and others considered them as related to punctuation, those devices are spacing and capitalization (Jawad, 2020). Take the following sentences as an example:

- “Woman without her man is nothing”(A plain text without punctuation appears ambiguous)
- “Woman without her man, is nothing.”(Meaning that men are important to women)
- “Woman, without her, man is nothing.”(Meaning that women are important to men)

The above mentioned illustration simply helps to know that punctuation can help to differentiate meanings from words joined together to make sentences. Without punctuation, you won't know exactly what the statement is talking about (Jacobs, 2019).

### **1.2. The Scope of the Study**

The purpose of the current study is to analyze the punctuation marks and investigate the role of punctuation marks in writing tasks. The population sample is Kurdish EFL university learners. This project was conducted during the learners last year of studies (i.e., bachelor's

degree lasts for four years). The data were collected at College of Education, the English Department at Salahaddin University.

### **1.3. The Problem**

Although most learners do their best to avoid making errors in their writing, still there are punctuation errors, not much less than grammar mistakes. Analyzing the above examples in the introduction (i.e., the background) shows how important punctuation is, while learners still make mistakes in their writing.

### **1.4. The Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study was to investigate and highlight the punctuation errors among Kurdish EFL learners while writing their assignments. Thus, the following study questions were being addressed:

1. To what extent do Kurdish EFL learners know the usages of punctuation marks?
2. To what extent do Kurdish EFL learners use the punctuation marks in their writing tasks?

### **1.5. The Significance of the Study**

Learning a second language (L2) is challenging for most learners while they are trying to master the four main skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Study shows that writing skill is one of the difficult tasks to acquire (Mahmood, 2021). Therefore, it is essential for learners to improve the subsections of writing skill (i.e., punctuation, spelling, and grammar). One of the crucial portions in writing is punctuation. Hence, this study provides comprehensive information about punctuation that helps learners to fully understand the importance and the usages of punctuation in writing tasks.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1. Background

Despite of being one of the four major language skills, writing is one of the communication tools and a medium of sharing information. Someone can express their ideas, thoughts, and feeling through writing.

In dealing with writing, people should make the best use of sentences to convey the messages. The text tends to be easy to read and to comprehend. As a result, the reader can understand the message intended by the writer easily. Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis which focuses on the errors made by learners (Atmowardoyo, 2018). Recently, it has been realized that a true understanding of written language will be impossible if punctuation marks are not taken into consideration (Bayraktar, Say & Akman, 1998). Many linguists try to define punctuation marks and its relationships with grammar and syntax (Salman, Estefan & Yaseen, 2017). Punctuation is considered as some specific marks which are used to separate sentences, clauses, and to clarify meanings (Abdulkhaleq, 2019). In addition to that punctuation marks are symbols that are used to aid the clarity and comprehension of written language. Errors could be the result of overusing and misusing some of these marks, especially when it comes to writing (Al Murshidi, 2014).

According to Awad (2012), punctuation has three important functions which are Phonetic Function, Grammatical Function and Semantic Function. Writing is a difficult skill for native speakers as well as non-native speakers because professional writers should master different conventions of writing such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, and mechanics such as capitalization and punctuation (Mohammed, 2018).

As discussed above, in the English language, there are symbols and signs known as punctuation marks; like other skills of English language, it is very necessary for a writer to learn about these punctuation marks for creative writing (Khan& Khan, 2016).

## 2.2. Punctuation Marks

In every language, there are punctuation rules in their writing system, and the same thing is true for English. The followings are the most common punctuation marks in the English language (Straus et al., 2014).

### 2.2.1. *Period (.)*

Period is used with complete sentences and with the abbreviations at the end of the sentences.

Examples:

I am waiting for the day you will be back.

I was living in L.A.

### 2.2.2. *Comma (,)*

Comma can be used in many situations, it can be used to separate two adjective when the adjectives are interchangeable. It can also be used when a dependent clause is followed by an independent clause.

Examples:

She is a clever, wealthy woman.

When you are walking to the dance, be careful not to break your high heels!

Comma can also be used after certain words that introduce a sentence, such as *well, yes, why, hello, hey*, etc.

Example:

Yes, I am realistic.

### 2.2.3. *Semicolons (;)*

Use a semicolon before such words and terms as *namely, however, therefore, that is, i.e., for example, e.g., for instance*, etc., when they introduce a complete sentence. It is also preferable to use a comma after these words and terms.

Example:

I had a huge meal; however, I am already hungry again.

#### **2.2.4. Colons (:)**

A colon may be used between two independent clauses when the second sentence explains, illustrates, paraphrases, or expands on the first sentence.

Example:

His ambition is clear: he wants to be number one in his field.

#### **2.2.5. Question mark (?)**

A question mark can be used only after a direct question.

Examples:

Where are you right now? (Direct question)

He is asking who she is. (Indirect question)

#### **2.2.6. Exclamation mark (!)**

An exclamation point is used to show emotion, emphasis, or surprise.

Example:

What a good idea!

#### **2.2.7. Quotation mark (“ ”) (‘ ’)**

Double quotation marks are often used with technical terms, terms used in an unusual way, or other expressions that vary from standard usage.

Example:

“Men” is an example of word with unusual plural.

Single quotation marks used for quotations within quotations.

Example:

She said, “Clara cried, ‘Do not treat me that way.’”

### 2.2.8. *Apostrophe (')*

To show possession using an apostrophe, add 's for individuals and just the apostrophe after the s for plurals.

Examples:

Tom's cat                   (singular noun possession)

Learners' grade           (plural noun possession)

Apostrophe is used for contracting. Apostrophe is placed where a letter or letters have been removed.

Example:

It is so hot today – It's so hot today.

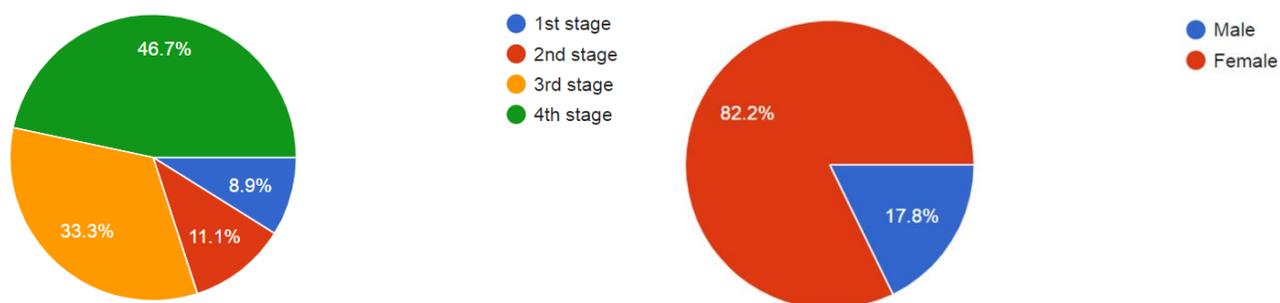
## Chapter Three: Methods

### 3.1. Context

The study has been carried out In Kurdistan region/ Iraq at Salahaddin University, College of Education, English Department, through the academic year of 2021-2022. The main reason behind making this survey questionnaire is to investigate to what extent Kurdish EFL learners know the usages of punctuation marks and use them while doing their writing tasks.

### 3.2. Participants

The participants for this study were chosen from three different colleges of Salahaddin University: College of Education, College of Basic Education and College of Languages. They were all Kurdish learners in Iraqi Kurdistan. 45 learners responded to the questionnaire: 8 male and 37 female. They were between 18-22 years.



### 3.3. Instrument/Tool

This study used quantitative data. The data were collected through an online form of survey questionnaire, which were two sections. In the first section, the respondents were asked to choose the year of study, gender, college as well as the age. The second section consisted of 15 questions regarding the punctuation marks and their usages, they were close ended questions. Respondents were obliged to answer the whole questions otherwise they could not submit it.

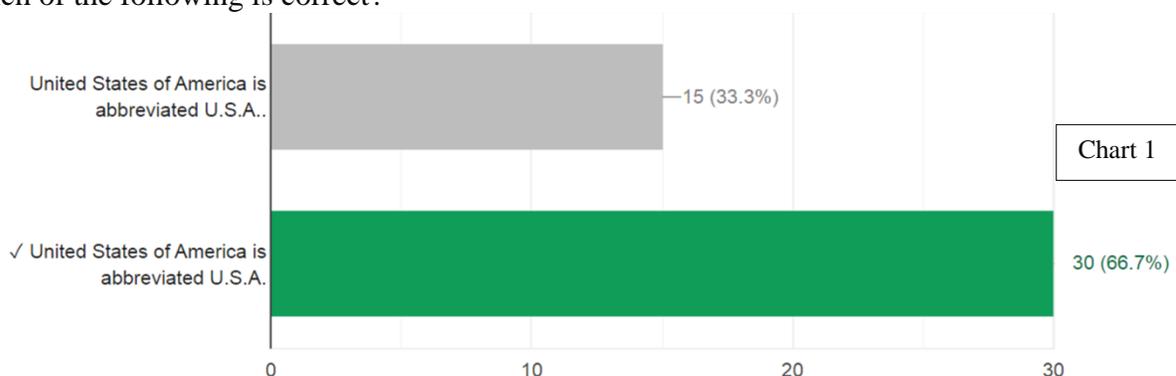
## Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Results

By using an online survey questionnaire the valid and reliable data have been collected. In this section, the responses are discussed. Moreover, only the important findings are presented. Furthermore, the correct answers of the online survey questionnaire are colored with "**Green**".

### 4.1. Period

The participants were asked to choose the right sentence with the right punctuating mark for abbreviations.

Which of the following is correct?

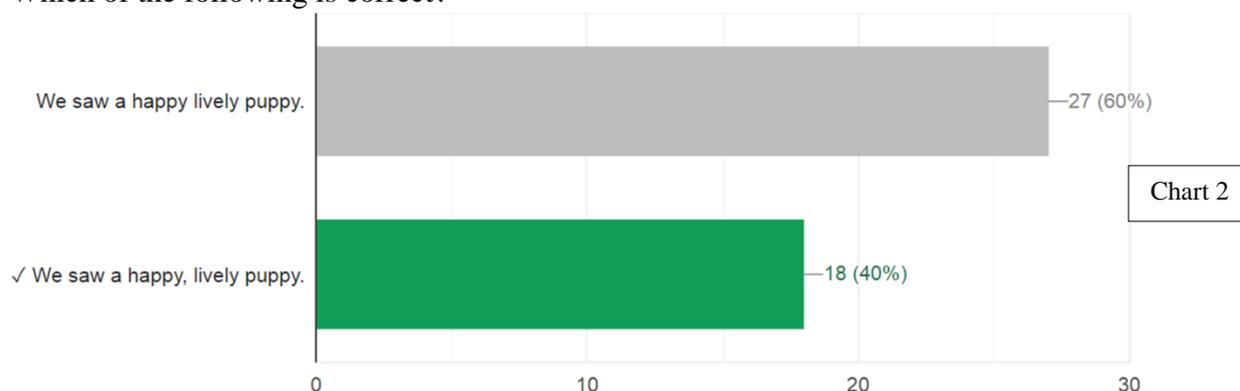


According to chart 1, 33.3% of the participants indicated that "*United States of America is abbreviated U.S.A..*" was the right answer. While 66.7% agreed with the statement that "*United States of America is abbreviated U.S.A.*" is the right one. Thus, as we can see the correct one is displayed in green color. This outcome shows that Kurdish EFL learners have a good understanding of using period when it comes to correct punctuation.

### 4.2. Comma

In this test the participants were required to choose where to use comma in a sentence which has two interchangeable adjectives.

Which of the following is correct?

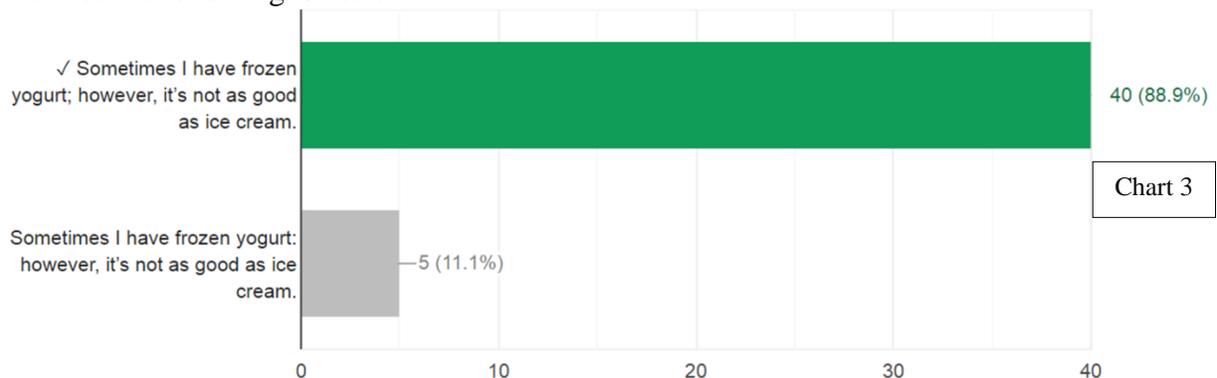


According to chart 2, 60% of the participants selected the wrong choice which was "We saw a happy lively puppy.", and 40% of the participants chose the right option which was "We saw a happy, lively puppy." This result suggests that EFL learners had to work harder in learning how to use punctuation marks correctly.

### 4.3. Semicolon

In this question, the participants were asked to choose whether to use a *semicolon* or a *colon* before the words like *however*, *therefore*, *for example*, when they introduce clauses; dependent and independent together.

Which of the following is correct?

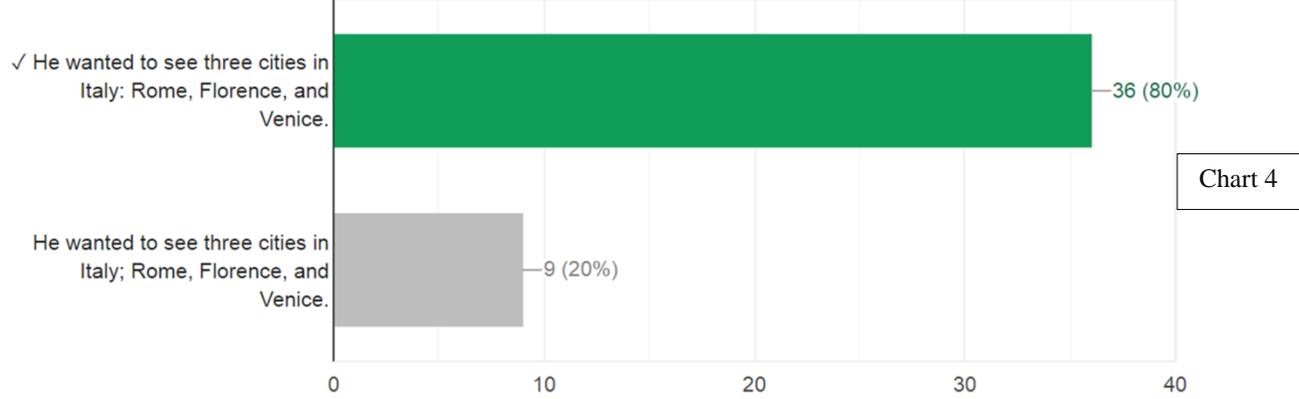


According to chart 3, 88.9% of the participants agreed with that "Sometimes I have frozen yogurt; however, it's not as good as ice cream." which was the correct answer. Moreover, 11.1% of the participants chose "Sometimes I have frozen yogurt: however, it's not as good as ice cream." as the right one, which was the wrong choice.

### 4.4. Colon

In this question, the participants were asked to choose the right punctuation mark when two independent clauses joined together, and the second clause illustrates and explains the first one.

Which of the following is correct?

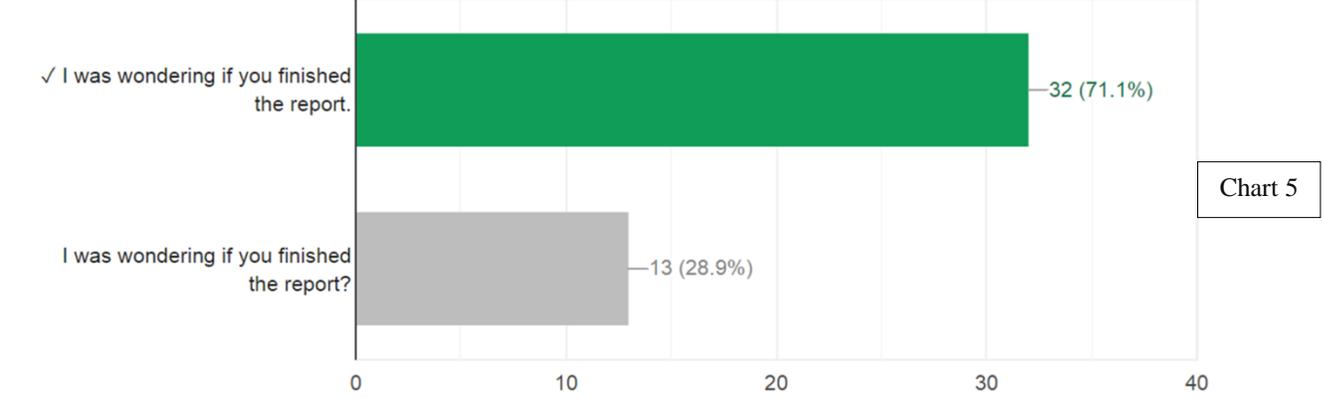


According to chart 4, 80% of the participants said that "He wanted to see three cities in Italy: Rome, Florence, and Venice." is the correct answer. Furthermore, 20% of the participants said that "He wanted to see three cities in Italy; Rome, Florence, and Venice." is the correct one.

### 4.5. Question Mark

To evaluate the participants' ability to use the question mark correctly, they were asked to choose whether to write a period or a question mark at the end of an indirect question.

Which of the following is correct?

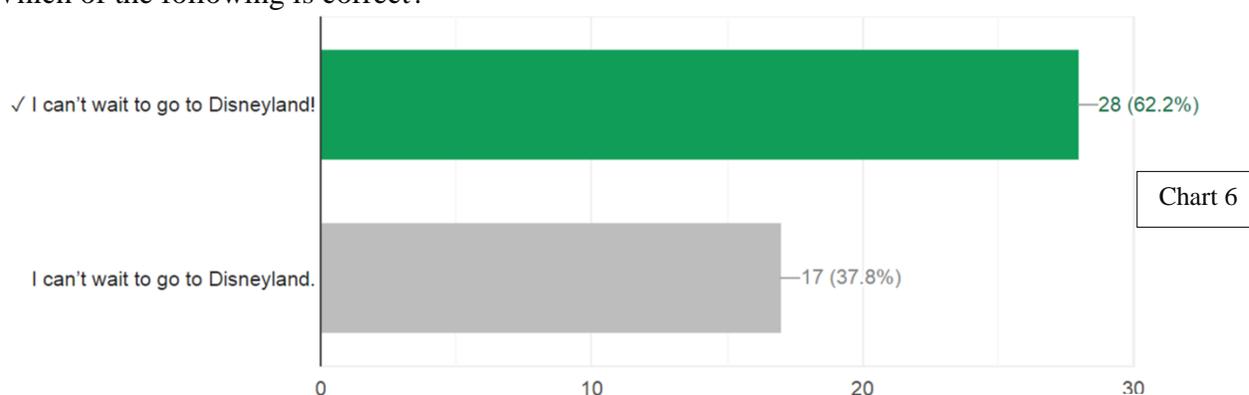


According to chart 5, 71.1% of the participants were agreed with that the right answer is *"I was wondering if you finished the report."*, while the rest of the participants chose *"I was wondering if you finished the report?"* as the right one.

#### 4.6. Exclamation Mark

To assess the participants' ability in using the exclamation mark, they were asked to choose whether an exclamation mark or a period is correct when an emotion or surprise was shown.

Which of the following is correct?

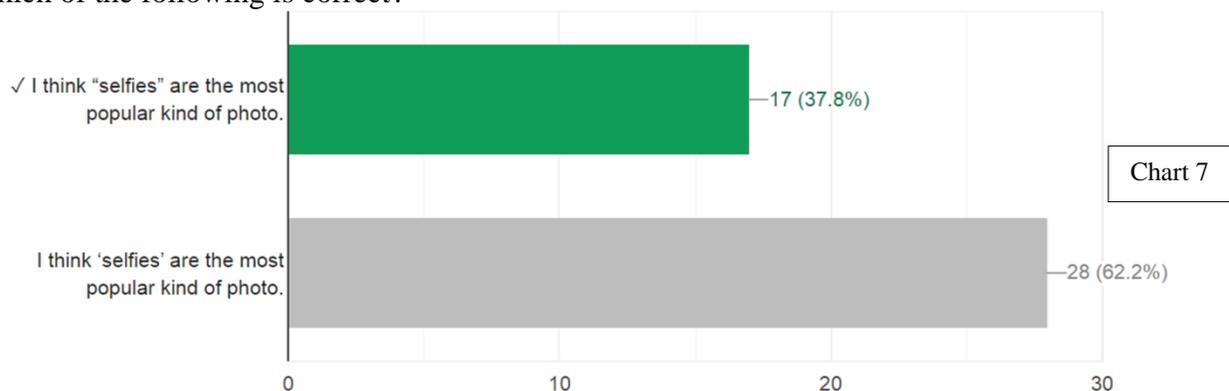


According to chart 6, 62.2% of the participants selected *"I can't wait to go to Disneyland!"* While 37.8% of said the right answer is *"I can't wait to go to Disneyland."*

#### 4.7. Quotation Mark

In this question, learners were asked about the usages of quotation mark, and whether to use a single quotation mark or double quotation mark when they talk about something which is vary from standards.

Which of the following is correct?



According to chart 7, 37.8% of the participants agreed with the first option and said that *"I think 'selfies' are the most popular kind of photo."* Although most of them, 62.2%, agreed with that *"I think 'selfies' are the most popular kind of photo."*

#### 4.8. Apostrophe

The participants were asked about how to use apostrophe for using the correct form of (-s) possessive when the noun is plural.

Which of the following is correct?

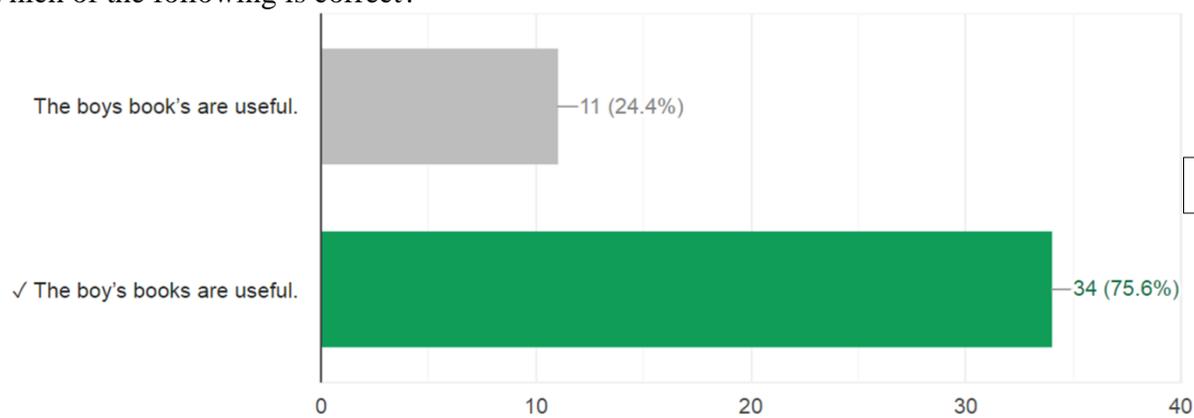


Chart 8

Based on chart 8, 75.6% of the participants selected the correct answer of using the apostrophe when the noun is plural which was *"The boy's books are useful."*, and this percentage indicates that the participants had a good command of using the correct punctuation mark. Though 24.4% of the participants chose *"The boys book's are useful."*

## Chapter Five: Discussion

After the collecting data and the process of analyzing it, the results are discussed within this section. Based on the analyzed data, 66.7% of the participants could use "period" in a correct way. This result is parallel with the findings in the study by Salman et al. (2017). Although the participants showed a good ability in using "period" correctly, only 40% were able to use "comma" correctly, and 60% of them chose the wrong answer in the survey questionnaire. This result indicates that the participants have a general understanding of using "comma", but when it comes to specific choices, they need to improve more. Similarly, Bayraktar et al. (1998) stated the same results in their research.

In addition to the mentioned punctuation marks above, semicolon and colon were two other target punctuation marks that we wanted to examine among Kurdish EFL learners; the results showed that most of the participants used these marks correctly (88.9% and 80%) respectively. This result is parallel with the findings in the study by Khan and Khan (2016).

Two other important punctuation marks were targeted to be assessed which were question mark and exclamation mark. Interestingly, the results showed more than half of the participants can use them correctly (71.1 % and 62.2%) respectively. Almost the same idea highlighted in Jawad's (2020) study.

Finally, apostrophe and quotation marks were given to the participants to examine their abilities in using them. The analyzed data showed that (75.6% and 62.2 %) of the participants used both marks correctly. Although, according to AbdulKhaleq (2019), a lower percentage of participants have reached the right answer.

## Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigated the punctuation errors among Kurdish EFL learners and their problems during writing tasks. The results showed that most of the learners have problems with using punctuation marks correctly. After the collecting and analyzing the data, the following conclusions have been reached and addressed:

1. Although the participants showed having knowledge on some punctuation marks, they were not fully able to use them correctly.
2. The participants were able to use some punctuation marks properly, but most of them could not differentiate between using the two types of quotation marks (i.e., " ", and ' ').

Hence, the answer for the first research question was that Kurdish EFL learners have knowledge on punctuation marks to an extent, but they need more practical activities and training. Secondly, the results showed that Kurdish EFL learners use some punctuation marks such as comma, question marks, and period more than some other marks such as semicolon and quotation marks.

Finally, the following recommendations can be followed for future research. A future study might be conducted on a longitudinal period that is, applying the punctuation marks during a writing course from the beginning of the semester to the end of it. The future researcher can collect more tangible data such as collecting learners' writing samples and analyzing the used amount of punctuation marks in their writing tasks.

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**Appendix** (questionnaire and formal arrangement)

**Punctuation Errors: An Analytic Study among EFL Learners**

Dear responders:

This survey is conducted by College of Education/English Department of the University of Salahaddin, Kurdistan Region, to make writing more understandable by using right punctuation. This questionnaire consists of 10 questions. Please read each instruction and tick the write answer. This is not a test so there is no “right” or “wrong” answers and you do not even have to write your name on it. The results of this survey will be used only for research purpose so please give your answers sincerely. Thank you very much for your help!

***Section One: Background information***

\* Gender:

Male

Female

\* Year of study:

1<sup>st</sup> stage

2<sup>nd</sup> stage

3<sup>rd</sup> stage

4<sup>th</sup> stage

\* College:

College of Education

College of Basic Education

College of Languages

\* Age: .....

**Section Two: Usages of punctuation marks**

1. Which of the following is correct?

Why, I can't believe this!

Why I can't believe this!

2. Which of the following is correct?

If you go to the dance, don't forget to bring your cellphone.

If you go to the dance don't forget to bring your cellphone.

3. Which of the following is correct?

We saw a happy lively puppy.

We saw a happy, lively puppy.

4. Which of the following is correct?

School starts in September.

School starts in September

5. Which of the following is correct?

United States of America is abbreviated U.S.A..

United States of America is abbreviated U.S.A.

6. Which of the following is correct?

Sometimes I have frozen yogurt; however, it's not as good as ice cream.

Sometimes I have frozen yogurt: however, it's not as good as ice cream.

7. Which of the following is correct?

He wanted to see three cities in Italy: Rome, Florence, and Venice.

He wanted to see three cities in Italy; Rome, Florence, and Venice.

8. Which of the following is correct?

I was wondering if you finished the report.

I was wondering if you finished the report?

9. Which of the following is correct?

Can we meet on Monday?

Can we meet on Monday.

10. Which of the following is correct?

I can't wait to go to Disneyland!

I can't wait to go to Disneyland.

11. Which of the following is correct?

I think "selfies" are the most popular kind of photo.

I think 'selfies' are the most popular kind of photo.

12. Which of the following is correct?

My mother said, "The baby started talking today. The baby said, 'Mama.' "

My mother said, 'The baby started talking today. The baby said, 'Mama.' '

13. Which of the following is correct?

I can't believe its' snowing again.

I can't believe it's snowing again.

14. Which of the following is correct?

The doctors' patients.

The doctors's patients.

15. Which of the following is correct?

The boys book's are useful.

The boy's books are useful.

