

ANALYZING EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CAPITALIZATION AND PUNCTUATION ACCURACY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Writing is a crucial skill in English that requires accuracy in using capitalization and punctuation to convey meaning effectively. This study aims to analyze EFL university students' capitalization and punctuation accuracy in academic writing. The research employed a qualitative descriptive method. The data were collected from the academic writing of first semester students at Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia Medan and analyzed using an error analysis approach. The findings indicate that students still experience difficulties in applying appropriate rules. The highest correct usage was found in periods (80 occurrences) and commas (73 occurrences), while the use of exclamation marks (4 occurrences) and question marks (3 occurrences) was relatively low. Errors were also frequently identified in the capitalization of proper nouns (18 occurrences) and sentence beginnings (87 occurrences). In addition, students tended to rely on simple sentence structures, which limited the variety of punctuation used. Overall, students' accuracy is categorized at a moderate level. Therefore, more focused instruction and practice are recommended to improve students' academic writing skills.

Keywords: academic writing, punctuation errors, capitalization errors, error analysis, EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a fundamental skill in English language teaching and has consistently been an essential component of most English courses. According to

Mayers (2005), writing is a way to produce language that occurs naturally, similar to speaking. However, writing is a more complex process, as it involves organizing ideas, expressing thoughts, and revising them into meaningful written texts. It is also a form of communication with others in a written mode, requiring accuracy and clarity to convey meaning effectively.

In academic contexts, writing requires not only the development of ideas but also the correct use of language conventions, particularly punctuation and capitalization. These elements play a crucial role in ensuring that sentences are clear, well-structured, and easy to understand. In Basic Writing courses, students are expected to apply appropriate punctuation and capitalization to produce coherent and grammatically correct texts.

However, in practice, many students still face difficulties in using punctuation and capitalization correctly. Although these aspects have been taught, students frequently misuse them due to a lack of attention, understanding, or practice. As a result, their writing often becomes unclear and less effective. This indicates that there is a gap between students' knowledge of writing rules and their actual performance in writing tasks.

This study found a problem namely students have often been taught about the use of punctuation and capitalization in their writing, but they consistently misuse them due to a lack of attention or focus on the subject. However, this time, we will teach students how to use both types of writing effectively and understand them.

Previous studies have examined punctuation and capitalization separately. For instance, research shows that students frequently make errors in punctuation, particularly in the use of commas and full stops, which affects clarity and coherence in writing (Elfa et al., 2022; Putri et al., 2024). Similarly, other studies have found that punctuation and capitalization are among the most common errors in EFL writing, indicating that students still struggle with writing accuracy and language conventions (Azizah, 2025; Ishtiaq, 2025).

Punctuation is used to create clarity, structure, and emphasis in sentences, helping writers organize ideas and convey meaning effectively (Reid, 1989). Similarly, capitalization functions to distinguish specific and important elements, such as proper nouns and sentence beginnings. Both aspects are essential in academic writing because they influence readability and meaning.

Nevertheless, many students tend to underestimate their importance, assuming that they are minor aspects of writing. In fact, incorrect use of punctuation and capitalization can significantly affect the quality of writing, especially in academic contexts such as thesis writing.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

In writing courses, the use of punctuation and capitalization is essential for producing clear, accurate, and effective texts. Punctuation plays a significant role in supporting readers' comprehension and preventing ambiguity in meaning. It enables writers to organize ideas and convey messages more precisely (Evans, 1986). In addition, punctuation marks are not merely decorative elements but integral components of written language that contribute to clarity and coherence (Rook, 1990). Therefore, mastery of punctuation is crucial in developing writing skills.

Punctuation

Punctuation refers to a system of symbols used to structure sentences and clarify meaning in written texts. According to Reid (1989), punctuation helps create sense, clarity, and emphasis in sentences, allowing writers to organize

Therefore, this study aims to analyze students' accuracy in using capitalization and punctuation in academic writing. By identifying common errors and patterns, this study is expected to contribute to improving students' writing skills and provide useful insights for teaching practices.

their ideas effectively. Without appropriate punctuation, sentences may become confusing and difficult to interpret.

There are several types of punctuation marks in English, including periods, commas, question marks, exclamation marks, colons, semicolons, quotation marks, apostrophes, and others. Each type has a specific function in structuring sentences and expressing meaning. For example, periods are used to end declarative sentences, commas separate elements within a sentence, and question marks indicate interrogative forms. These punctuation marks guide readers in understanding pauses, emphasis, and relationships between ideas.

Furthermore, punctuation also reflects the logical structure of a text. Proper use of punctuation enables readers to interpret meaning accurately, while

incorrect usage may lead to misunderstanding. Therefore, understanding punctuation rules is essential for effective academic writing.

Capitalization

Capitalization refers to the use of uppercase letters in specific contexts within a sentence. It is an important aspect of writing that helps identify sentence boundaries and distinguish proper nouns. Capitalization is commonly used at the beginning of sentences, in names of people, places, institutions, and titles of works (Swan, 2005; Harmer, 2004).

The primary function of capitalization is to highlight and differentiate specific or unique elements from general ones. For instance, proper nouns such as names of people, locations, and organizations must be capitalized to indicate their specificity. In addition,

capitalization is used in titles of books, films, and other works to emphasize their importance (Oshima & Hogue, 2007).

In academic writing, consistent use of capitalization contributes to clarity and readability. Incorrect capitalization, such as failing to capitalize sentence beginnings or proper nouns, can reduce the quality of writing and cause confusion for readers. Therefore, understanding and applying capitalization rules is essential for producing well-structured and meaningful texts.

Overall, both punctuation and capitalization are fundamental components of writing that support clarity, organization, and meaning. Their correct use is particularly important in academic contexts, where precision and accuracy are required.

.METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze students' ability in using capitalization and punctuation in academic writing. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study as it aims to describe and interpret phenomena in their natural context (Sugiyono, 2008; Creswell, 2014).

This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of students' writing performance, particularly in relation to punctuation and capitalization usage.

The participants of this study were first-semester students at Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia, Medan. These participants were selected as they

were enrolled in a Basic Writing course, where punctuation and capitalization are essential components of writing instruction.

The instruments used in this study included observation, interview, and documentation. Observation was conducted using a non-participant approach, in which the researcher observed students' writing activities without direct involvement. This method was chosen to obtain natural and authentic data (Sugiyono, 2008). In addition, structured interviews were conducted to gather students' perspectives regarding their understanding and difficulties in using punctuation and capitalization. Documentation was used to collect students' written texts, which served as the primary data for analysis (Arikunto, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study analyzed the ability of the first-semester students at Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia, Medan, in using punctuation and capitalization in writing. The results are presented based on two main aspects;

Data collection was carried out in several steps. First, students' written works were collected as the main source of data. Second, classroom observation was conducted to understand students' writing behavior. Third, interviews were conducted to support and clarify the findings from observation and documentation.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1992), which consists of four main steps: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and focusing on relevant data related to punctuation and capitalization errors. Data display was conducted by organizing the data into categories based on types of errors. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the patterns and findings identified during the analysis process.

they are the use of punctuation and the use of capitalization.

Use of Punctuation

Based on the analysis, out of 15 types of punctuation, only 7 types were found in students' writing. The most frequently used punctuation mark was the

full stop, with 80 occurrences. This indicates that students are familiar with ending sentences correctly. For example, in the sentence: “*Aisyah woke up early because she had an important presentation at her university. She prepared her slides carefully.*” the use of full stops shows students’ understanding of sentence boundaries. However, some misuse was still identified, such as placing a period after a phrase like “*Last Month.*”, which does not form a complete sentence.

The second most frequently used punctuation was the comma, with 73 occurrences. Students generally used commas to separate clauses or elements in a sentence. For instance, in the sentence: “*In the end, the lecturer said, ‘Excellent job, Aisyah!’*”, the comma is used appropriately to separate introductory elements. This indicates that students have a basic understanding of comma usage, although errors may still occur in more complex structures.

The use of exclamation marks was very limited, with only 4 occurrences. For example: “*He felt confident; his knowledge, perseverance, and curiosity had tested his limits!*” shows that students are able to use

exclamation marks to express strong emotions, although their usage remains minimal.

Similarly, question marks appeared only 3 times. An example such as “*Hi, what are you doing?*” demonstrates that students understand the function of question marks in interrogative sentences, but rarely apply them in their writing.

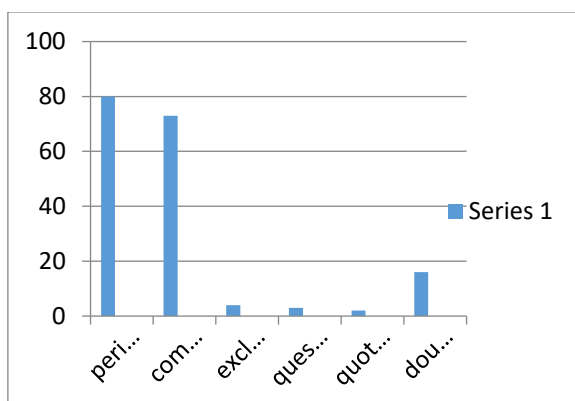
Quotation marks were also rarely used, with only 2 occurrences. For example: “*I must do my best today,*” she said confidently. indicates that students are able to represent direct speech, although this feature is not widely used. Double quotation marks were found 16 times, suggesting that some students attempted to include dialogue, although inconsistencies were still observed in formatting.

The use of semicolons was also limited, with only 3 occurrences. For example: “*He felt confident; his knowledge, perseverance, and curiosity would guide him into the future.*” This shows that students have some awareness of more advanced punctuation, but their usage is still minimal.

Overall, these findings indicate that students tend to rely on basic punctuation marks, particularly full stops and commas, while rarely using more complex punctuation. This suggests that students prefer simple sentence structures and may lack confidence in constructing more varied and complex sentences.

The distribution of punctuation usage can also be seen in Diagram 1 below.

Diagram 1. Use of Punctuation in Writing



The diagram shows that periods account for approximately 80% of usage, followed by commas (73%), while other punctuation marks are significantly lower in frequency. This pattern confirms that students focus primarily on basic sentence construction rather than varied expression.

Use of Capitalization

In terms of capitalization, students demonstrated relatively better performance compared to punctuation. Capital letters at the beginning of sentences were used correctly 87 times. For example: “One day I dreamed of being able to go on vacation to Lake Toba.” shows correct capitalization at the beginning of the sentence.

The use of proper nouns was also evident, with 18 occurrences. For example: “Last Saturday, Lina went to the library with her best friend, Rani.” demonstrates that students are able to capitalize names of people and days appropriately.

However, capitalization in titles was very limited, with only 2 occurrences. For example: “*The Day That Change Rani*” indicates that students have some understanding of title capitalization, but its use is not consistent across all writing.

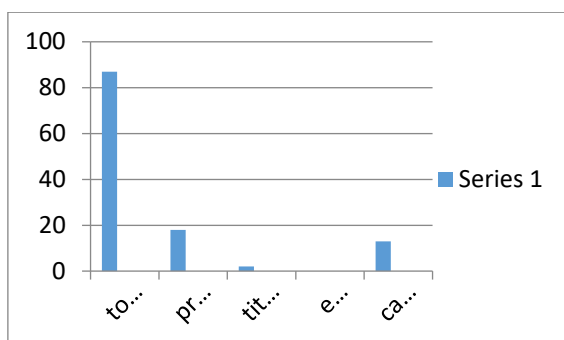
Capitalization in dialogue appeared 13 times. For instance: “*Hi, what are you doing?*” asks the grasshopper. “*I’m gathering food for winter,*” replies the ant.

These examples show that students are able to apply capitalization

in dialogue, particularly at the beginning of quoted sentences. However, inconsistencies were still found, indicating partial understanding.

The distribution of capitalization usage is illustrated in Diagram 2 below.

Diagram 2. Use of capitalization in writing



The diagram indicates that capitalization at the beginning of sentences is the most accurate, followed by proper nouns and dialogue, while the use of capitalization in titles remains the lowest.

Overall, students show a better understanding of capitalization compared to punctuation, although certain aspects still require improvement.

Discussion

The findings reveal that students possess a basic understanding of writing conventions, particularly in the use of full stops and capitalization at the beginning of sentences. These elements are fundamental and frequently practiced in

early writing instruction, which may explain their higher frequency and accuracy.

However, the limited use of other punctuation marks, such as question marks, exclamation marks, and semicolons, suggests that students lack confidence in producing more complex sentence structures. This tendency reflects a preference for simple sentences, which are easier to construct but limit variation and expressiveness in writing.

In terms of capitalization, students generally demonstrate better performance. Nevertheless, the low frequency of capitalization in titles and the inconsistent use in dialogue indicate that their understanding is not yet comprehensive. These areas require more focused instruction and practice. This result is consistent with recent studies showing that learners tend to master basic capitalization earlier than more complex writing features (Meister et al., 2023).

Overall, the results suggest that students have acquired basic knowledge but still need further development to improve both accuracy and variety in writing. Strengthening students' understanding of punctuation functions and capitalization rules can enhance the quality and effectiveness of their

academic writing. Previous research also emphasizes that mastery of punctuation and capitalization develops gradually and

requires continuous practice and exposure (Saoud et al., 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results and analysis of students' writing, it can be concluded that students generally demonstrate a basic ability in using punctuation and capitalization in academic writing. They are able to apply fundamental rules, particularly in the use of full stops and capitalization at the beginning of sentences, which indicates an understanding of essential writing conventions.

In terms of capitalization, students show relatively better performance, especially in sentence beginnings and proper nouns. Nevertheless, the use of capitalization in titles and dialogue is still limited and inconsistent, suggesting that their understanding is not yet comprehensive.

However, the findings also reveal important limitations. Although 15 types of punctuation were considered in this study, only 7 types were found in students' writing. This indicates that students tend to rely on a limited range of punctuation and prefer simple sentence structures. As a result, their writing lacks variation and complexity, even though it remains understandable.

Overall, while students possess basic knowledge of punctuation and capitalization, they still require further practice to improve both accuracy and variety in their writing. Therefore, it is important to provide more focused instruction and exercises to enhance students' writing skills in academic contexts.

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