

An Analysis of Punctuation Marks' Usage: The Case of Written Text of Musi Comprehensive Students in Tenth Grade

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Abstract

This study analyses 49 English students' use of punctuation marks in Musi Comprehensive, South Africa. The data is collected from fourth term, paper three exam scripts written by the students of Musi Comprehensive. In paper three, students are expected to write an essay, which is compulsory, and choose one from the following: letter (formal or informal), obituary, directions or diary. This study only focuses on their essay writing. The researcher only picked the scripts that are under 60%. The study uses qualitative method to analyse the data. The result of the research shows that 71% of the students made an error on punctuating capital letters, 43% of the students made an error on full stops, 41% made an error on apostrophe, 29% on Commas and 4% made an error on question mark. The result of the study also found that there are three types of punctuation errors made by the students of Musi Comprehensive, namely: Misuse, Omission and addition. There are punctuation marks that are misused 235 times, there are punctuation marks that omitted 92 times and there are punctuation marks that are unnecessary added 47 times. This study recommend that teachers focus more on punctuating sentences especially on capital letter. This calls for immediate action.

Keywords: Punctuation marks, Error, Punctuation Usage, Writing, Essay

Introduction

In the early years of the 19th century, English language was introduced into many black communities of the Eastern Cape (and subsequently Natal) by missionaries, who at the same time systematised Xhosa, and later the other African languages. According to Silvia, 1997, English was used as the medium of instruction on missionary schools. By the end of the century, there was an influential corps of educators, writers and political leaders who were fluent in English. Till this date English is still used as the medium of instruction in South Africa. The students in public schools' study English language as their second language.

Writing as an aspect of literary and secondary skill of language involves unique and distinctive features. Speech is primarily and involves some pauses, that have representations in written form. These representations are punctuation marks, which are grammatical and significance for meaning. The pauses and raising voices for emphasis to questioning tone for clarity in a sentence are what a written text shows through signs and symbols known as punctuation marks in English language, (Abdul and Khan, 2016).

Those tiny little marks on a page can completely change the sense of a sentence, (Penn, 2018). Penn, 2018 further says that when it comes to other aspect of grammar, splitting infinitives, knowing the difference between “further” and “farther” or when to use active voice verses passive. All these things one can easily look them up quickly and move, but punctuation is not as easily referenced. Punctuation rules are some of the most ignored rules in writing.

The correct punctuation is crucial because it allows sentences to be grammatically correct and make sense. In agreement with this, Shujaat et al (2020) noted that writing is a task that requires great effort towards mastery. writing is one of the important aspects of language like in completing written assignments and tests. Writing is a very important part in South African curriculum, as there is a whole paper during exams called paper three. This paper is a

text writing paper, where students are expected to write essay, transactional letters, diaries etc. Writing is an activity whereby one need to convey messages in writing to other parties using written language. There are challenges in writing skills that one might encounter, challenges like spelling, punctuating, planning and organising ideas and word choice. The reason for paper three is to assist students to express their ideas in written form.

There are many forms of writing, students can express their feelings and ideas through these forms which are writing essays, transactional letters, dialogues, diaries and many more. According to Caulfied (2023), essay is a focused piece of writing that is designed to inform or persuade. There are many different types of essays, but they are often defined in four categories: argumentative, expository, narrative, and descriptive essays.

Punctuation is a tool that is used in assisting the readers to understand their words. Therefore, it is important that they are used correctly and used where necessary, as Beyer in Khan (2016) states that they clarify the meaning of written sentences. The following are types of punctuation marks:

1. Full Stop/Period (.)

Full stop is a punctuation mark that is used to end a sentence. Full stops are also found after certain abbreviation.

Examples:

- a) Justice went out with friends.
- b) Don't forget to lock the door.
- c) Prof.
- d) E.g.

2. Apostrophe (')

Apostrophe is a punctuation mark that is used to show possession or create a contraction.

Examples:

- a) Justice's car is broken.
- b) The boy's school.
- c) Can't
- d) You're

3. Capital Letters (A, B, C, D... Z)

Sentences always start with a capital letter. Proper nouns and proper adjectives need capital letters. The main words in titles of books, films, or plays are written in capital letters. The first word in direct speech is capitalised.

- a) We went to the movies.
- b) I went to Lesotho.
- c) I watched a movie called, "Coming to America."
- d) The coach asked, "Where are the balls?"

4. Comma (,)

- We use commas to separate words or phrases in a list,
- We place commas before and after words such as however and nevertheless,
- Introductory words or phrases separated from the rest of the sentence with a comma,
- Additional information may be separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma or commas.

Examples:

- a) I bought books, shoes, bottles and a new phone.
- b) I was, however, late for my interview.
- e) Once again, I was kicked out.
- f) I obtained an excellent result, seven distinctions overall.

5. Brackets/Parenthesis ()

When something is written in parenthesis or brackets, it is usually an explanation, an aside or some additional information. Instead of brackets or dashes commas can be used.

Examples:

- a) Justice (the smartest student) in his class.
- b) Justice, the smartest student, in his class.

6. Question Marks (?)

This mark occurs at the end of a question.

Example:

“Did Justice win the award?”

7. Semi-colons (;)

The semi-colon is a long pause that balances two equally important, related or parallel ideas. It also indicates opposite ideas. It joins two main clauses where there is no conjunction. It may often be replaced by full stop or by the conjunctions and, but, so, for and although.

Examples:

- A) She went by train; she would rather have flown.
- A) In summer he plays cricket; in winter he plays football.
- B) I worked hard for the test; I had nothing to fear at all.
- C) He worked hard for the exam, but he still failed.

8. Ellipsis (...)

The three dots indicates that something is missing or have been omitted.

Example:

You had better tidy your room or else...

Based on the researcher's experience in tutoring English language, there are many errors committed by students especially in public schools as English is their second language. Most of the students said that learning their own mother tongue language is hard, it becomes harder to learn a foreign language that they hardly speak, only spoken during English period. The dominating challenge encountered by Musi Comprehensive students is punctuation. Some of the students do not punctuate at all in their essays writing, some use wrong punctuation marks, others mix up the punctuation marks. Others use any punctuation mark they desire wherever they want within a sentence.

Problem Statement

In essay writing, several students struggle to punctuate sentences appropriately. To pass their paper three, not only the content and structure of the essay contribute to their marks, but a proper punctuation also plays a huge role, as this contributes to the meaning of sentences. It is with this problem that this study seeks to investigate the use of the punctuation marks and provide means of rectifying the situation.

The Objectives of The Study

1. To find out what types of punctuation errors are made by the tenth-grade students of Musi Comprehensive,
2. To find out the dominant punctuation error made by the students,
3. To find the number of students that committed punctuation mark errors.

Significance of the Study

1. This study is expected to give information to the students on using punctuation marks, so that they can increase their ability in using punctuation in their writing.
2. This study is also expected to give information to teachers to develop appropriate teaching technique for the student's punctuation.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted two theories. The elaboration on the concepts and terms will be presented in the following.

1. Grammatical Tradition

This theory states that punctuation marks clarify grammatical structure and relationships within a sentence, without a necessary link to speech. Key principles include using minimal punctuation for clarity, placing marks correctly to avoid changing the meaning, and ensuring punctuation aids readability by signalling grammatical structures like sentence breaks, clause, and phrases.

Example; using a comma to separate independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.

“I went to the store, but it was closed.

2. Prosodic Tradition

This theory states that punctuation indicate the intonational contours, pauses and rhythm of spoken language. This theory views punctuation as a tool for reproducing the sound contour and pacing of spoken language, including emphasis, stress, and hesitation. A skilful writer uses punctuation to enhance the effectiveness of their writing, like how a speaker uses pitch and pauses to make their speech more impactful. Punctuation marks such as commas, question marks, and exclamation points can indicate different intonational patterns, influencing how a sentence is “Heard” in the reader’s inner voice.

ALTHOUGH these two theories contrasts, according to AI Overview, most modern punctuation combines these principles, with the core goal being to clarify meaning and reduce ambiguity by aiding comprehension and preventing misreading. These theories help the researcher to identify patterns, resolve ambiguities and understand how different aspect of language interact to create meaning. Furthermore, these two theories help the study to

understand how punctuation functions, improve clarity in written texts and analyse potential conflicts or nuances in punctuation use.

Writing

Writing is another and important English skill that students must master. In the process of learning English, they are four skills to be mastered: writing, speaking listening, and reading. Mieke (2024) states that writing is important because it forces learners to think about grammar and spelling.

Error

In learning English, students may commit mistakes in writing. These errors are caused by students having difficulties in understanding thoroughly the functions of each punctuation mark. As foreign language learners, students cannot avoid making mistakes, it is expected from them to make and learn from them. Brown (2000:217) defines error as a real deviation of native speaker adult grammar, reflecting competence from students.

Literature Review

Anggara (2020) conducted a study entitled, “An analysis of students’ errors in writing descriptive text.” In this study, the researcher analysed errors in the use of capital letters, the use of punctuation marks, commas, and written preposition in the exposition essay. Another relevant study conducted by Jamaliyah, Ramlan, Fauziah, and Suryani (2020) titled, “The errors Analysis of students’ Grammatical writing on Narrative Text,” the researchers focused on the problem of analysing punctuation in students’ essays. Sudilah (2015) conducted research titled, “Punctuation errors by the Fourth semester students of The English Department. According to Sudilah’s (2015) results, there are 59 cases of errors found, covering four kinds of punctuation marks, full stop (4 cases), comma (36 cases), apostrophe (5 cases), and quotation mark (4 cases). Lastly, is the study by Awad (2012) titled, “The most Common Punctuation Errors made by the English and the TEFL Majors at An-Najah National University.” The

research was conducted to check the common mistakes that made by the English and FETL majors at An-Najah University students. The result of the research indicated that the most common mistakes made by the students were comma, capital letter, period, quotation mark, and semi-colon respectively. The results of Award (2012) study are slightly like the current study, in a way that the current study indicates capital letters as the most common mistakes made by the students of Musi Comprehensive, followed by full stop, apostrophe, and comma.

Methodology

In gathering the data, the researcher took the primarily step by going to Musi Comprehensive and talk with the English HOD of the school and requested for tenth-grade English scripts, paper three for term four. Since the scripts were already marked, the researcher decided to collect data on the scripts that the marks were below 60%. The researcher was given scripts for two classes, grade 10a and grade 10c. The total number of the students in grade 10a are 39 and in 10c are 34. The scripts that were below 60% in grade 10a are 20 and in grade 10c are 29, totalling 49 scripts. Paper three of the paper they wrote consists of essay writing, letter writing, diary, dialogue and postcard. The researcher only collected the data on the students' essays. The researcher read and used different colours to mark the punctuation errors made by the students in their essay writing. The grammatical tradition and prosodic tradition theories guided the study's analysis. This involves examining how each sentence was punctuated and if the principles of the two theories were accurately applied.

Data Representation

The following table represents the number of the students that made errors for each punctuation mark.

Table 1. Number of Students that made Punctuation Errors

Punctuation Marks	Number/Percentage
Capital Letters	35/71%

Full Stop	21/43%
Apostrophe	20/41%
Comma	14/29%
Question Mark	2/4%

Based on the results of the research, it is found that there are three groups of grammatical errors namely, Omission, addition and misuse of punctuation mark. These types of errors needed to be analysed and corrected.

Table 2. The types of Students' Grammatical Errors

No	Types of Errors	Total Frequency of Errors
1	Misuse	235 times
2	Omission	92 times
3	Addition	47 times

Discussion

The results of the research that will be discussed are the forms of using punctuation in writing explanatory essays for tenth-grade students of Musi Comprehensive. The results of the research are described on the use of punctuation that appears in the students' essays. The discussion will also cover the forms of punctuation errors in writing the essays. NB: if the student does not use punctuation mark, that should be used in sentence, they will be marked with [*], but if the student use punctuation marks that are inappropriate, they will be marked with a [yellow colour].

Errors using Comma (,)

Data 1: As people [*] we are supposed to make sure that we close ticking taps and pipes. In data 1, there is an omission of a comma (,). Referring to the rules for using a comma, these marks are used after words or connecting expressions between sentences. This data should be written in this way, "As people, we are supposed to make sure that we close ticking taps and pipes."

Data 2: Why should we save water [,]. In data 2, there is a use of a comma (,) which is misused or should have used another mark instead. A question mark is supposed to be used instead. Referring to the rules for using a comma, the marks cannot end a sentence like a full stop and question mark do. The data should be written this way, “Why should we save water?”

Errors using Capital Letters

Data 3: I am going to talk about [T]he importance of saving water. In the above data, there is a misuse of capital letter. A small letter [t] was supposed to be used instead. Referring to the rules for using capital letters, capital letters are used in the beginning of a sentence. This data should be written in this way, “I am going to talk about the importance of saving water.”

Data 4: I chose this topic because [i] want to give people a good advice and a bad thing about water. In the above data, the student did not use a capitalise the word “I”. Referring to the rules for using capital letters, a word [I] is always capitalised, regardless of where the word is in a sentence. This data should be written in this way, “I chose this topic because I want to give people a good advice and a bad thig about water.”

Errors using Apostrophe (‘)

Data 5: It is because you see video’s or games that needs you to download. In the above data, there is a misuse of an apostrophe. Referring to the rules for using apostrophe, this mark is used to indicate possessive case or contraction. The data should be written in this way, “It is because you see videos or games that needs you to download. The word does not need an apostrophe. Almost half of the students made these types of error throughout their essays, even though other students made the error with different words (job’s, life’s, South African’s, love’s, etc.). some of the words are correct like (love’s and life’s) but they are wrong according to the context of the sentences written by the students.

Data 6: So that we don[*]t suffer. In this data, there is an omission of an apostrophe. According to the rules for using apostrophe, this mark is used to indicate omitted letter. This

data should be written in this way, “So we don’t suffer.” this is another punctuation mark that is mostly omitted by lots of students with different words like (cant, wont, Im, etc.).

Errors using Full stop (.)

Data 7: We can save water by putting it in the tank[.]. in this data, there is an omission of a full stop. Referring to the rules for using a full stop, this mark is used at the end of a sentence. The above data should have been written in this way, “We can save water by putting it in the tank.”

Data 8: This essay will discuss and make sure that you don’t waste[.] water. In the above data, there is a misuse of full stop. Referring to the rules for using full stop, the mark is used at the end of a sentence. This data should have been written in this way, “This essay will discuss and make that you don’t waste water.

Errors using Question Mark (?)

Data 9: why should we save water[*]. In this data, there is an omission of a question mark. Referring to the rules for using a question mark, the mark is used when a question is being asked. This data should have been written in this way, “Why should we save water?”

Conclusion

The results indeed show that there are punctuation errors in English essay writing, written by students of Musi Comprehensive. Punctuation mark in writing is very important because it can help the reader to more easily understand what you want to say, Nurhaidah (2018). Based on the above findings of the analysis, the results show that 35 out of 49 students made capital letters errors, 23 out of 49 made full Stop errors, while 21 out of 49 made apostrophe errors, 14 out of 49 made comma errors and 2 out of 49 made question mark errors in essay writing.

The fact shows that error through misuse of punctuation occurs very frequently. However, there were also errors of omission and addition. The results also show that misuse of

punctuation is committed 235 times, omission is committed 92 times while there is an unnecessary addition of punctuation marks that is committed 47 times. After the researcher analysed the errors, it is found that the almost half of Musi Comprehensive, tenth grade only know that the word “I,” is capitalised in the beginning of the first sentence, it becomes a struggle when they must capitalise the above-mentioned word within a paragraph. Also, some seems to forget that each sentence end with a full stop.

Recomentation

The researcher would like to propose suggestions and hopefully will be used for the teacher and students.

The teacher should teach punctuation marks topic from the beginning, should be taught like it was never taught before. The students of Musi Comprehensive tenth grade only use five types of punctuation marks in their essays. The research did not only mention the five above types of punctuation mark because they are only punctuation marks that the students made errors on, but these are the only punctuation marks that the students know and misuse them.

The students also need to try to understand the usage of the punctuation marks. Even if they are taught or understand few of those punctuation marks, they must make sure that they fully understand those few and understand how these punctuation marks are applied in sentences.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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