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Difficulties faced by university students when using punctuation marks

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Abstract:

The current study investigated the most common punctuation errors made by second year students at English Department at Al-Mergib University. It also sought to find out the reasons behind committing such errors and to suggest some solutions. The selected instrument for this research was a test. The test included 18 different kinds of sentences missing some punctuation marks, and students needed to apply the proper punctuation mark in its right place. The sample was taken from second year level. The participants were 18. The data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The results of the study indicated that the second year students committed a large number of errors. They faced difficulties in the use of punctuation marks properly and effectively. The colon was the most difficult mark for subjects. In addition, the results of this study revealed that most errors were attributed to lack of knowledge which could be as a result to the lack of practice. The researchers have recommended the teachers and students to pay more attention to the punctuation marks and give more emphasis to the practice.

Background of the Study

المخلص:

الدراسة الحالية استقصت أخطاء علامات الترقيم الأكثر شيوعاً التي يرتكبها طلاب السنة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة المرقب. كما سعت لمعرفة الأسباب وراء ارتكاب مثل هذه الأخطاء واقتراح بعض الحلول لها. وكانت أداة هذا البحث عبارة عن اختبار. وشمل الاختبار 18 نوعاً مختلفاً من الجمل التي تفتقر إلى بعض علامات الترقيم، وكان على الطلاب تطبيق علامة الترقيم المناسبة في

مكانها الصحيح. تم اختيار العينة من طلاب السنة الثانية وبلغ عدد المشاركين 18. تم تحليل البيانات كمياً ونوعياً. وقد أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن طلاب السنة الثانية ارتكبوا عدداً كبيراً من الأخطاء وواجهوا صعوبات في استخدام علامات الترقيم بشكل صحيح وفعال. كانت النقطتان (:) هي العلامة الأصعب بالنسبة للعينة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن معظم الأخطاء ترجع إلى نقص المعرفة والذي يمكن أن يكون نتيجة لنقص التمرين. وقد أوصى الباحثون المعلمين والطلاب بأن يولوا المزيد من الاهتمام لعلامات الترقيم وأن يركزوا أكثر على التمرين والممارسة.

Writing is a productive skill and one of the important skills for communication. Good writing enables writers to convey messages with clarity and to communicate effectively. To produce a good piece of writing, the writers must concentrate and pay attention to several aspects that affect their writing. Punctuation is one of these important aspects. Without punctuation, sentences are just a combination of words which cannot convey the exact and intended meaning. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000): 1027, punctuation is defined as “the marks used in writing that divide sentences and phrases”. It is used to clarify the writer’s ideas and enables the readers to understand easily his intended meaning. As cited in Suliman et al., (2019), many believe that punctuation is a mental process, so it needs other skills like speaking and writing to be combined with (Graham & Berin, 2007; Alderson, 2000; Rivers, 1981). In

both of reading and writing, punctuation is a main tool that helps in conveying the message and helping the reader and writer to make the text clear, meaningful and easy to read. (Suliman et al., 2019) “They are signals to the reader that indicates pause, place emphasis, alter the function or show the relationship between the elements of the text.” (Jane, 2008: 122) Najat A.Muttalib (2020) stated that these marks play a fundamental role in "marking off sentences, clauses, phrases and separate items. These marks or signs are called punctuation marks. They are used to support the intelligibility and knowledge of written language. To exemplify, if they are not used correctly, the readers will have difficulties in understanding the text or may understand a completely different meaning to the intended one. “Proper punctuation is both the sign and the cause of clear thinking.” (Truss, 2003:202) Punctuation makes the reader know where sentences begin or end. It also can help the reader to understand when to breathe, pause, or raise his voice when reading a sentence. Punctuation is important because it makes the text clearer, more effective, and more understandable.

Carey (as cited in Najat A.Muttalib (2020)) asserted the importance of punctuation marks for readers in getting an immediate grasp of meaning to avoid ambiguity. According to Partidge (as cited in Najat A.Muttalib 2020) “good punct.

not only prevents ambiguity and confusion but soothes the path of the reader as well.” Inappropriate use of punctuation marks can mislead and confuse readers. Therefore, it is crucial for writers to focus on punctuation marks when writing and use them properly. Some common punctuation marks are the period or full stop (.), comma (,), question mark (?), exclamation (!), apostrophe (’), quotation mark (“”) and hyphen (-). Punctuation marks have a lot of different uses. Each symbol has its own use. Writers confuse between these marks or don’t know which correct mark should be used in its proper place. There are many different reasons for the writers’ misuse of punctuation marks in their writing. Since the researchers are lecturers at English Department at Al-Mergib University, they noticed that their students faced difficulties in using the punctuation marks when writing paragraphs. Therefore, this research is an attempt to investigate punctuation errors made by students of second year when writing English sentences, and to find out the reasons behind such errors. Identifying and understanding the students’ errors is very important and helpful in improving the teaching process. If the causes of these errors are identified, teachers will be able to help students overcome this problem.

According to some previous studies about this topic, many researchers found out that the misuse of commas is the most

common error made by students. For example, Al-Mutib (1989) mentioned that the comma was misused to connect two related clauses in the place of the semicolon. He stated that the use of semicolon in such case is very rare. In addition, Khalil (2000) stated that the most common errors committed by Palestinian students were commas and periods. Their errors were categorized into comma splice and superfluous commas. Awad, A. (2012) also conducted a research on the most common punctuation errors committed by the English and TEFL majors at An-Najah National University. The results of his study showed that most common error was the overuse of comma through replacing the period, followed by the misuse of the capital letter, the quotation marks and the semicolon respectively. Abdulkhaleq, A. concluded in her research that most students in the second stage at the English Department at the University of Mosul did not have any idea about the correct and appropriate uses of punctuation marks. The results of her study revealed that the students had more difficulties in the use of ellipsis, parenthesis and square brackets followed by colon and semicolon. She attributed the reasons of these difficulties to the lack of knowledge and the negligence of punctuation marks exercises. Furthermore, A Shweba, A. and Mujiyanto, Y. (2017) attributed the causes of punctuation errors and the other mechanics' errors of the

first year students at the English College in Al- Mergib Universty to the lack of balance in the curriculum and the mother tongue influence in addition to the lack of knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

Writing is one of the most important skills that every learner must master. However, writing errors are common problems that are not usually taken seriously by a significant number of learners. Punctuation inaccuracy is one of the most common and serious writing difficulties faced by students and noticed by teachers. Therefore, this research aims to highlight this issue trying to identify its reasons and suggest some practical recommendations to solve it.

Research Questions

This research seeks the answer to the following questions:

Q1- What are the most common punctuation errors made by second year students at English Department at Al-Mergib University?

Q2- What are the difficulties that second year students face when using punctuation?

Q3- What are the reasons behind these difficulties?

The Aims of the Study

This study aims to investigate the difficulties in using punctuation marks faced by second year students at Al-Mergib University and the most common errors committed by those students. In addition, it attempts to identify the

reasons behind those difficulties through analyzing the errors and to suggest possible solutions.

Significance of the Study

This research provides abundant information about the correct use of punctuation marks, and their importance for developing proper reading and writing skills for lecturers, students, and future researchers. For the lecturers, this research is beneficial as it helps them to identify the types of errors committed by students and their reasons. This can help them focus more on some rules of punctuation marks relating to these errors in their teaching process and encourage students to practice such rules. For the students, this research is valuable because it does not educate them about how to use the punctuations properly only, but also it helps them to evaluate themselves in using punctuation marks.

For future researchers, this research is also helpful since it assists the researchers to know the magnitude of the punctuation problem and develops researches that are related to this topic. Eventually, it will help to find solutions for the punctuation dilemma.

Scope of the study

There are about fourteen punctuation marks in English, but this study does not cover all of them. The researchers focus on only the most common seven punctuation marks.

They are: comma, colon, semicolon, full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, and apostrophe.

Definitions of Key Terms

1- Punctuation: is defined as “the marks used in writing that divide sentences and phrases; the system of using these marks” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2000: 1027)

2- Punctuation marks: in Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, they are the group of signs or marks that divide sentences and phrases. (2000:1027)

3- Difficulties; is the plural of difficulty which means problems in doing or understanding something or something which is not easy to deal with. (Cambridge Learner’s Dictionary, 2024)

Methodology

The researchers chose a quantitative method to achieve the goal of this study, which is to find out the most common punctuation errors made by second year students at English Department at Al-Mergib University. For the data analysis, the descriptive analytical method was adopted by the researchers.

Research Sitting and Participants

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Arts, AL-Mergib University (English Department). The study was limited to second-year students. 18 participants from the English department aged 19 to 22 years were involved. They were 11 males and 7 females.

Research Instrument

Test is the established instrument for the current research. The test paper consists of two requests. The first request is to provide general information as the gender and the age. The second request involves eighteen different forms of sentences and students need to add the right punctuation mark in its proper place according to the kind of the sentence.

Results

After distributing the test, the researchers analyzed the subjects' answers to find out the most common punctuation errors they made and the struggles they faced when using punctuation marks in sentences. The following table is a summary of the number of errors committed by the subjects for each punctuation mark.

Punctuation Marks	No. of students	Percentage
Colon	18	100%
Semicolon	11	61.11%
Apostrophe	10	55.56%
Comma	14	77.78%
Full Stop	10	55.56%
Question Mark	8	44.44%
Exclamation Mark	12	66.67%

Table (1): The frequency distribution of the most common punctuation errors made by second year students at English Department at Al-Mergib University.

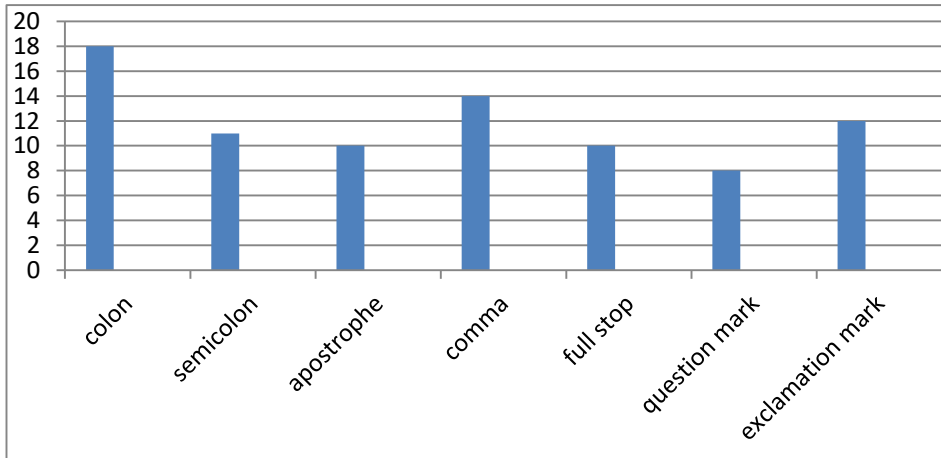


Chart (1): the frequency distribution of the most common punctuation errors made by second year students at English Department at Al-Mergib University

According to the above table, the students' answers showed that the colon was the most difficult punctuation mark because all students were not able to know how to use it in its suitable place. Whereas the question mark was the easiest mark for students as only 44.44% did not know how to use it. The comma ranks as the second most difficult punctuation mark with 77.78% followed by the exclamation mark in the third place with 66.67%. For the semicolon, about 61.11% of students faced difficulty in using it correctly. The full stop and apostrophe got the same percentage which was about 55.56%.

The students made various types of errors in using the previous punctuation marks. These errors are explained below one by one with examples for each punctuation mark as follows:

1- Colon

It can introduce an example, a list, an explanation, or a quotation. Or, it can be used to emphasize a certain point. Since the first rule is more common, the researchers focused on it. The test included two sentences which needed to insert this punctuation mark to introduce a list.

The sentences were:

1. I need to pick up the following things bananas, strawberries, and cookies.
2. You must take the following courses History, and French.

All students were unable to use the right punctuation mark “colon’ in both sentences which reflects that they had a problem in the use of colon. Only two students used the colon correctly in just one sentence. The other students left the sentences without any answer except two students who used the comma instead of the colon. The errors made by students in using the colon are not attributed to the first language interference because the students’ first language also uses the colon to introduce a list. The errors are attributed to lack of knowledge or careless.

2- Comma

This punctuation mark is the most puzzling mark. It has so numerous rules. Since it is difficult to cover all the rules of comma in addition to the rules of other punctuation marks in this study, the researchers focused on the most common rules of comma, which are:

I- to separate items in the same list:

The test included one sentence needed to insert commas separating items in the same list, which was:

My mom bought me some shoes a jacket a bag and some toffees.

Nine students failed to use the correct punctuation mark “comma” in this sentence. Most of those students did not use any punctuation mark at all.

II- to separate the parts of a compound sentence:

The sentence was:

I hate carrots and tomatoes but mom still makes me eat them.

Most students succeeded in choosing the suitable punctuation mark and using it correctly. Only six students out of eighteen failed in applying this rule correctly. They left the sentence without any answer. This means that students can use a comma to separate the parts of a compound sentence.

III- with direct quotation:

The sentence was:

Smith said “that’s the way I look at it.”

Only eight students applied this rule correctly. Nine students wrongly inserted other punctuation marks like semicolon in different places in the sentence rather than inserting the comma after the verb “said”. One student used the colon in place of the comma which can be considered

correct because the colon can be used if the quotation is an independent clause, but it was preferred to start the quotation with a capital letter.

3- Semicolon

The test included three sentences missing this punctuation mark. The researchers focused on the two following rules:

I- To link two independent clauses that are closely related in thought:

The sentence was:

We had too many fumbles we lost the game.

Out of eighteen students, only nine students inserted the semicolon in its correct place. Seven students inserted other punctuation marks in the sentence at wrong places and two students inserted the comma instead of the semicolon.

II- Using a semicolon between two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb or transitional phrase:

The sentences were:

The emergency room was crowded however Warren was helped immediately.

I needed to go for a walk and get some fresh air also I needed to buy milk.

Only seven students were able to apply this rule correctly.

The other eleven students made different errors. Some of them did not insert any punctuation mark at all and others used the comma instead of the semicolon. Although both comma and semicolon can indicate a pause in a series, they are not interchangeable because they have different functions. This caused confusion for the students and made them fail in inserting the right punctuation mark.

4- Full stop

The test included two sentences without full stops. The students had to put the full stop at the end of those two sentences. The sentences were:

1. Aunt Sara lives in California
2. He asked where his suitcase was

Only eight students succeeded in choosing the full stop and put it at the end of those two sentences. In fact, the first sentence was easier than the second one because sixteen students put the full stop correctly at the end of it. The second one was more difficult and most students did not use the full stop. They used the question mark instead of the full stop. It seems that the word “asked” and the presence of “where” in this sentence caused some confusion for students and they thought that the sentence was a question, not statement. It is clear that this error was a result of lack of language mastery.

5- Apostrophe

The researchers focused on the two most common rules of apostrophe and used two sentences for each rule. The rules covered in this research were:

I- used to refer to ownership of something (possession):

This is my sisters car.

The childs toy is on the shelf.

II- used in contractions in place of omitted letters.

My bicycle isnt really new.

I dont care about it.

Ten students failed in applying the two rules in the previous sentences. Seven of them failed in applying the first rule i.e. did not insert the apostrophe in the first two sentences, while nine of them failed in applying the second rule.

6- Question Mark

Out of eighteen students, ten used the right mark (question mark) at the end of the two sentences included in the test which represented 44.44%. It can be said that the majority of students were able to use the question mark correctly. For those students who made errors, most of them substituted the question mark with the exclamation mark or full stop. The sentences included in the test were:

Are you going to the beach in June or July

Will you go with me

7- Exclamation Mark

The sentences were:

What a nice dress you are wearing

What a good movie

Twelve students failed in inserting the exclamation mark correctly which represented 66.67%. Most of errors were the substitution of the exclamation mark with the question mark or full stop. Just few students did not insert any punctuation mark at all. These errors were made because the students did not grasp the meaning of the sentences. They thought that those sentences were statements or questions. These errors are clearly attributed to lack of knowledge which is the reason for most errors made by the participants in this test.

The following table is a summary of the punctuation errors made by the participants for each rule included in the test.

Types of Punctuation Errors	The Rule	Frequency
Colon	To introduce a list	18
Comma	To separate items in the same list	9
	To separate the parts of a compound sentence	6
	With direct quotation	10
Semicolon	To link two related independent clauses	9
	With a conjunctive adverb or transitional phrase	11
Full Stop	At the end of a sentence that is a statement (declarative sentence)	10
Apostrophe	Possession	7
	contractions	9
Question Mark	At the end of a sentence that asks a question (interrogative sentence)	8

Exclamation Mark	At the end of a sentence that is exciting or should be said loudly (exclamatory sentence)	12
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Table (2): Frequency distribution of different punctuation rules included in the test

Conclusion

This study focuses on the use of punctuation marks in English. It investigates the errors made by the second-year students at the Department of English at Al-Mergib University. As it is mentioned before, punctuation is a set of marks that regulates and clarifies the meanings of different texts. This study is focused on seven punctuation marks. They are full stop (.), question mark (?), exclamation (!), colon (:), semicolon (;), apostrophe (') and comma (,). It has been shown that the subjects under investigation committed many errors in their performance. This is due to difficulties in using the punctuation marks. One of these difficulties is their lack of knowledge with the usages of these marks. It was noticed that most participants in this study left a number of sentences without inserting any punctuation mark. Subjects do not know how to use these marks or they have a little information about them. Second, the meaning of the sentence is one of the struggles of the students in selecting the correct mark. Students do not know if this sentence is a

question, exclamation phrase, or statement because they do not know what the exact meaning of the sentence. In addition to the usage and the meaning of sentence, there is another difficulty which is the structure of the sentence. If students know that the sentence contain clauses or it has many lists, they will be able to use the correct mark. The results also showed that the subjects have difficulty in specific marks more than the others. The research has found out that colon was the most difficult mark for subjects. They have a problem with using this punctuation mark although the rules of using it in English are similar to the rules in the subjects' first language. Also, most subjects face difficulties in using the comma and semicolon. They made several errors in using them. The subjects did not differentiate between them or they did not know how to use them at all. On the other hand, the question mark was the easiest one for the subjects because it has only one use which is to put this mark at the end of questions. This research is also made to investigate the reasons of punctuation errors in written English sentences. It is suggested that most of the errors made by the subjects are not attributed to the first language interference. Most errors are attributed to lack of knowledge. This can be due to the lack of practice which hindered their ability to punctuate correctly. Also, it can be the result of the negligence of punctuation marks exercises in their syllabus. Accordingly,

further attention should be made to this area of knowledge to be performed correctly and accurately. In fact, writing formally in English is more than just choosing the right words in the right order.

In the course of conducting this research, it has been noticed that students need to do much effort in order to learn more about punctuation marks. They have to know how to use them, be able to differentiate between them and be aware of the important role they play in building a language.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researchers present the following recommendations:

- 1- Teachers should motivate the students toward expensive reading for better improvement in punctuation practice.
- 2- Teachers should give more emphasis to the teaching of punctuation marks through giving students more practice in the use of the punctuation marks.
- 3- Punctuation marks should be taught from the beginning stages.

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