

The Punctuation Errors of the ESL Learners in the Eastern Province, Sri Lanka: Issues and Remedies

A.F. Abdul Halik¹ and S. Niruba Jayasundara²

¹English Language Unit, T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka

²Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

Corresponding author: abdulhalik@gmail.com

Abstract: This study attempts to investigate the obstacles of General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level (O/L) students of T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Mutur in using the correct punctuation markers in writing. 20 GCE (O/L) students were randomly selected for data collection from the total population of 60 students. This study employs qualitative research methodology applying observation and a test as research instruments to collect the data. The finding shows that most of the participants do not have previous knowledge about punctuation markers except full stop, capitalization, and question marks. Most of them do not have an idea of apostrophe, quotation marks, exclamation marks, ellipsis, and more. They encounter difficulties in identifying and using punctuation markers accurately in writing. This study recommends the following as remedies; teaching punctuation rules using the deductive method, applying interesting punctuation activities and games in the classroom, correcting students' writing strictly focusing on punctuation errors, giving reading practice, and explaining the way the punctuations have been used in writing.

Keywords: Capitalization, Comma, English as a Second Language, Punctuation

Introduction

The English language has been the global language and it has been the language of administration, law, business, education, religion, etc. in most of the countries around the globe. The English language is spoken as the first language (L1), second language (L2), or foreign language (FL) by over two billion people around the world (Wikipedia). As far as language and communication are concerned, writing is one of the communicative modes which deals with the writers and readers. In written communication, the writer has to express his/her ideas to the readers to reach the goal of writing. To make good writing, the students must pay attention to using many aspects of writing. In this sense, Harmer (2004) considers punctuation as one of the important features of writing, and using punctuation correctly is an important skill. As Crystal (2003) states, punctuation plays a critical role in the modern system, yet its

significance is regularly understood. In other words, if punctuation marks in the text are not properly used, the readers may have difficulties understanding the text. Similarly, a punctuation error can convey a completely different meaning to the one that is intended. Nurwahyuni (2017) describes that the sentences 'He was bitten by a dog which hurt him' and 'He was bitten by a dog, which hurt him' give different meanings when only a comma is added in the sentence. The first sentence means that the dog hurt him. The second sentence means that the bite hurt him. The comma after the dog has completely changed the meaning of the sentence.

Previous studies emphasized English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners face difficulties in using correct punctuation markers in writing. In Sri Lanka, according to the school's ESL curriculum, writing is one of the significant components in the syllabi of the English language. Using appropriate punctuations in appropriate positions in writing has become a challenge for most of the students in Sri Lanka. Observation and test reveal many students fail to use the punctuation markers of the full stop, capital letters, comma, question mark, apostrophe, colon, and semi-colon in appropriate positions in writing. Even the knowledge of using the full stop in a sentence is in question. This investigation as both the test and the observational research seeks to discover and evaluate the punctuation errors of the ESL learners in writing. Via qualitative analysis, the subject being ESL learners of Sri Lanka was subjected to considerably detailed scrutiny. So, this study seeks to address, the cause and condition of the errors in using the punctuation markers and the viable remedies to eradicate such errors

Problem Statement

The use of correct punctuation is a significant part of writing since improper use of punctuation changes the meaning of writing. A large number of ESL/EFL learners confront difficulties and challenges in using the correct punctuation inappropriate place in their writing. Similarly, as far as the GCE (O/L) students of T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Muturare concerned, it was observed in classroom teaching that most of the students make errors and mistakes in using appropriate punctuations in appropriate places in their written communication. Most of them do not have the basic knowledge of punctuation, particularly; they fail to put even the full stop, question mark, and capital letters in a sentence.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the punctuation errors made by GCE (O/L) students of T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Mutur in writing
- To suggest necessary remedies and recommendations overcome the difficulties in using punctuations in writing

Hypotheses of the Study

The following hypotheses are formulated in this study.

- The use of capital letters inappropriate position in writing has been a challenge for most of the GCE (O/L) students of T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Mutur.
- Most of the GCE (O/L) students of T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Mutur make errors in the use of a comma in proper positions in writing.

Limitations of the Study

In classroom teaching, problems and difficulties were observed in various elements of writing such as sentence, vocabulary, legible handwriting, use of tense, use of punctuations, etc. However, to limit the current study, only punctuations were focused on investigation. Moreover, As far as punctuation marks are concerned, there are over 14 punctuation marks in the English language. Since punctuations are a vast area of study, identifying all the punctuation errors is challenging for the researcher. Therefore, to identify a specific problem, capitalization and comma were focused on in this study. Likewise, concerning the sample population, there were 60 students in GCE (O/L) at the place where the study was carried out. However, this study was limited to 20 students and the data were collected among the selected 20 students.

Review of Other Relevant Studies

This section presents the review of secondary data based on the aim of this study.

Concept of Punctuations

The use of punctuation has been a significant element in writing. However, the use of correct punctuation in writing seems challenging for most ESL and EFL learners. Thus, several local and international research studies have been conducted regarding punctuation marks. Accordingly, Gamaroff, (2000) & Shaughnessy (1977) claim that 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. Similarly, regarding the importance of punctuations, Nurwahyuni (2017) asserts that punctuation is the use of special marks that you add to separate phrases and sentences, to show that something is a question, and so on. Using Punctuation is very important because it can make the reader easy to understand the meaning in writing even without looking at the expression of the person who wrote the message. Further, Solomon (1990) & Zolfaghari (1999) stated 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. Moreover, Harmer (2004) considers punctuation as one of the important features of writing, and using punctuation correctly is an important skill. Many people judge the quality of what is written not just on the content, the language but also on the use of punctuation; capital letters, commas, full stop, sentence, and paragraph boundaries. Similarly, crystal (2003) state punctuation plays a critical role in the modern system, yet its significance is regularly understood. In other words, if punctuation marks in the text are not properly used, the readers may have difficulties understanding the text. He further states that a punctuation error can convey a completely different meaning to the one that is intended. Likewise, Jackson (2005) indicates that the purpose of punctuation is to enable your reader to interpret unambiguously the structure, and therefore the meaning, of your writing.

According to Carroll and Wilson (1993), 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. When the punctuation marks are misused, the meaning is not conveyed. According to Nurwahyuni (2017), he presents seven punctuation marks used in writing. They are full stop, comma, question mark, colon, exclamation point, apostrophe, and quotation mark. However, capitalization was not included in his study. Further, according to Zuzana (2000), proper punctuation makes a text clear to understand. Wrongly placed punctuation marks may make a sentence ambiguous or even change the meaning. In particular, the findings of a study carried out by Mohammad & Hazarika (2016) show that the highest percentage of the students (53.33%) agree that they never have problems in capitalization while the analysis of writing sample of the students reveals they always struggle with capitalization.

Use of comma in Writing

Shokouhi & Dabbagh (2009) believe that learners are inconsistent in utilizing commas and periods. As a result, most of the students make errors in punctuations. Further, as reviewing a related study, the result showed that comma was the most common errors made by students. She also found that the errors happened because of carelessness and lack of a high personal standard of excellence (Nurhayati, 2013). Similarly, Nurwahyuni (2017) concludes that omission of commas was the most frequent errors made by the students.

Factors of errors

Regarding the cause of punctuation errors, Mourtaga (2010) attributes in his study that the main cause of errors committed by second or foreign language learners to their lack of practice in English writing. Nurwahyuni (2017) points out that some factors were influencing the students to make an error in using punctuations: (1) Omission some of the punctuation marks, (2) Lack of accuracy, (3) Misuse of using some marks such as question marks and commas before quotation marks, (4) Misunderstanding of the meaning of the text.

Methods and Materials

This part presents the methods of the current study. Different subtopics are given to explain the methods and materials of the study.

Research Design

The current study aims to investigate the difficulties confronted by GCE (O/L) students of T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Mutur in using punctuation inappropriate places in writing. In this study, a random sampling technique was used to select the sample. The research instruments of this study were observation and a test which were qualitative instruments. The primary data were analyzed in descriptive and statistical methods.

Population and Sample

The total population of this study was 60 students in GCE (O/L) at the T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Mutur. Out of the total population, 20 students were selected as a sample population to collect primary data. The sample was selected through random sampling.

Research Instruments

Research instruments or research tools seem significant for primary data collection in research. There are qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments. In this sense, classroom observation and a test were used as research instruments of this study, which were qualitative. Classroom observation was one of the instruments in which the data were collected through observation in classroom teaching. In the observation process, the participants were given two roleplays which appear in the GCE (O/L) textbook, and they were instructed to identify the punctuations used in the writing. The observation aimed at collecting data regarding participants' common knowledge of the use of punctuation marks. Further, the test on the other hand was used as another instrument that consisted of two parts. Each part consisted of 5 questions which were set based on the aim of collecting data regarding participants' knowledge of the use of commas and capitalization in punctuation. In part 1, the participants were instructed to underline the words which should be capitalized and in part 2, the participants were instructed to rewrite the sentences using the correct comma.

Data Collection Procedure

After the sampling process is complete, classroom observation was used as the first data collection instrument, in which the participants were observed in classroom teaching by giving two roleplays. In the observation process, the participants were instructed to identify the punctuations used in the roleplays. Further, as the next data collection procedure, the test was conducted, which was distributed among the participants, and the participants were given clear instructions on how to do the test. After the test was performed by the participants, the test paper was collected from the participants.

Results and Discussions

This part presents the results of the findings and a discussion of the results. The data were collected using classroom observation and a test. Based on the findings of the analysis of data, the results are discussion are presented under subtopics.

Results and Discussion of the Observation

This section presents the results of the findings of classroom observation. The participants were observed and the punctuation errors and mistakes of the participants were noted down while the researcher asked the students to identify the punctuation used in the roleplays given. Some punctuation marks had been used in the roleplays, which include: full stop, capitalization, comma, question mark, exclamation marks, apostrophe, ellipsis, and quotation marks. According to the analysis of the observation, findings show that out of 20 participants, 13 participants identified 'full stop', 14 participants identified 'capitalization', 10 participants identified 'comma', 04 participants identified 'exclamation mark', 14 participants identified 'question mark', 03 participants identified 'apostrophe', 03 participants identified 'quotation mark and no any participants identified 'ellipsis'. The following table shows participants' performance in identifying the punctuation marks in the roleplay.

Participants' performance in identifying the punctuations in the roleplay

No	Punctuation marks	Participants' number	Percentage for number
01	Full stop	13	65%
02	Capitalization	14	70%
03	Comma	10	50%
04	Exclamation mark	04	20%
05	Question mark	14	70%
06	Apostrophe	03	15%
07	Quotation mark	03	15%
08	Ellipsis	00	00%

Table 1

According to the results of the classroom observation, a few number students only could be able to identify all the punctuation marks in the roleplay. In particular, most of the students

identified only 'full stop', 'capital letters' and 'question mark'. Therefore, it is obvious that the participants do not know all the punctuation marks and their usage in writing. They were aware of only full stop', 'capital letters' and 'question marks. Although most of the students identified 'capital letters', they were unaware of the use of capital letters. Moreover, a very few participants only identified the punctuations such as exclamation mark, apostrophe, quotation mark and ellipsis appeared in the roleplay. Hence, based on the results, it can be concluded that most of the participants do not have ideas about all the punctuation marks. In particular, they do not have sufficient knowledge about the rule of punctuation and their usage. Students are not taught about the punctuation marks and their usage in writing although it appears in the textbook.

English is taught from grade 3 to 13 at schools, however, the GCE (O/L) students do not know punctuation marks. Punctuation errors are not corrected in writing tasks at schools. Therefore, most of the students failed to identify the punctuation marks that appeared in the roleplay.

Results and discussion of the test

This section presents the results of the findings and a discussion of the test. The test was conducted to identify the errors in using capitalization and comma in participants' writing. The first part questions were set based on the use of capital letters inappropriate places. There were five sentences in the first part, and there were 10 places where the words should be capitalized in the sentence. In this sense, according to the analysis of the test, the findings show that out of 10 places to be capitalized, 13 participants failed to capitalize the words in between 7 – 10 places, 08 participants failed to capitalize the words in between 4 – 6 places and 04 participants failed to capitalize the words in between 1 – 3 places. The following graph (4.1) shows the participants' performance in the first part (part 1) of the test paper by percentage

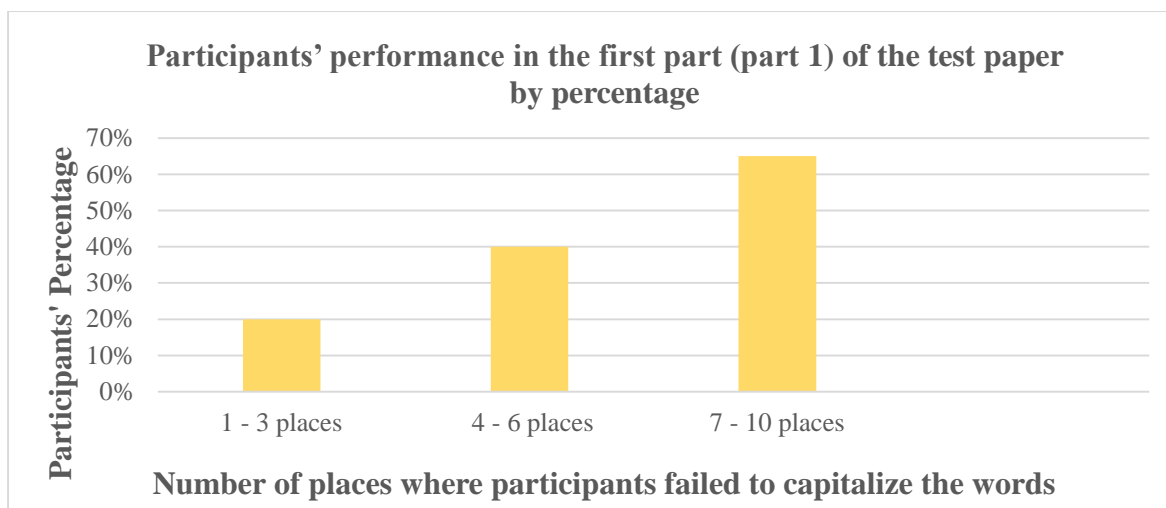


Fig. 1 (Participants' performance in the first part (part 1) of the test paper by percentage)

As shown above, most of the participants did not use capital letters in the appropriate place in writing. Based on the findings, it is obvious that they do not know the use of capital letters in writing. If the rule of capitalization had been taught, the participants would have correctly used the capital letters in the right place. However, all the participants capitalized when the name of a person appeared in the sentence. Therefore, students are aware that when a certain (E.g. Name of the person) proper noun appears, the first letter should be capitalized. Despite this, when other proper nouns appear, they fail to capitalize the first letter. When the students are taught about capitalization and its rule with relevant examples, students will be able to easily pick up the rule. A few participants only could be able to capitalize the first letters in all the places. They have sufficient knowledge about capital letters and the rule of capitalization in writing.

Further, concerning the use of the comma in a sentence, the second part of the test paper was set based on the use of the comma in appropriate places in a sentence. The participants were given five sentences to rewrite by putting a comma in the appropriate places. Accordingly, based on the data analysis of the second part, the findings show that 08 participants put the comma in 1 sentence out of five sentences, 07 participants put the comma in 2 sentences, 05 participants put the comma in 3 sentences, and nobody put the comma in 4 – 5 sentences. The following graph (4.2) shows the participants' performance in the second part (part 2) of the test paper by percentage.

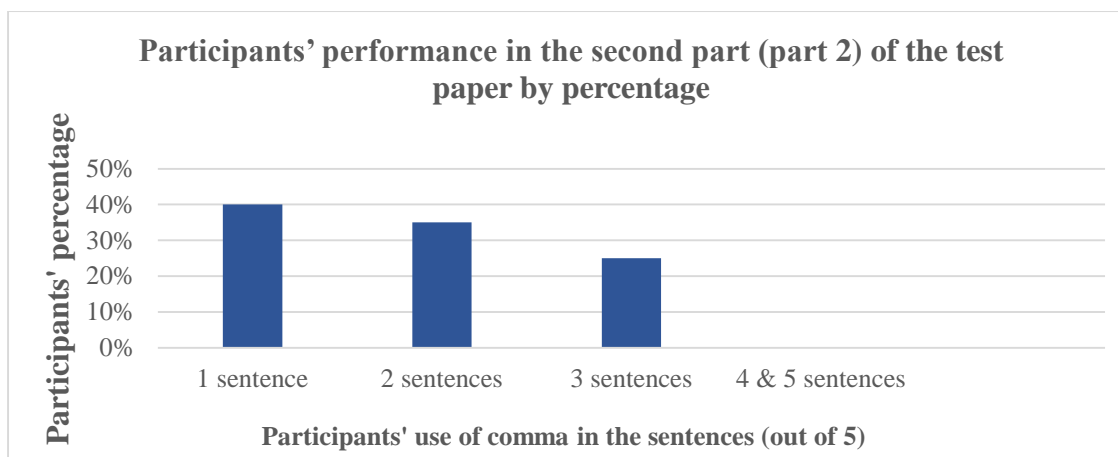


Fig. 2 (Participants' performance in the second part (part 2) of the test paper by percentage)

As shown above, in the graph, the use of the comma in the appropriate place was a huge challenge for most of the participants as no participants had appropriately used a comma in all five sentences given. Based on the findings, it is apparent that the participants were not aware of the rule of putting a comma in writing. Despite the fact, the use of the comma is significant in writing which shapes the meaning and gives a clear idea to the readers. When the comma is misused, the meaning of the sentence changes. Therefore, the rule of the use of comma should be taught using the deductive method. Therefore, students will have sufficient knowledge about the use of comma and other punctuation marks.

Conclusion

This study was carried out to identify the difficulties confronted by GCE (O/L) students of T/Mu/Al-Hilal Central College, Mutur in using punctuations in the appropriate place in writing. In this study, both capitalization and comma were focused on. The primary data were collected among the participants using two research instruments, namely: observation and test. According to the analysis of the observation, the findings show that most of the participants do not have previous knowledge about punctuation marks. Most of them do not have ideas about the apostrophe, quotation mark, exclamation mark, ellipsis, and more.

Further, according to the analysis of the test, a large number of participants (13 participants) failed to capitalize the words in the given sentences. Likewise, about the use of a comma in a sentence, the findings show that 8 participants correctly put the comma in only one sentence out of 5 places to put a comma. Moreover, no participants correctly put the comma in all five sentences. The students do not know punctuation rules. The students are not aware of the

guidelines for using appropriate punctuation. As a result, they encounter difficulties in identifying and using punctuations accurately in writing.

Recommendations

This study suggests the following as remedies to eradicate the errors made in using punctuation marks.

When the punctuation rules are taught using the deductive method and many interesting punctuation activities and games to be practiced in the classroom.

When students' writing is corrected, teachers should strictly focus on punctuation errors and correct them.

When the reading practice is given, more focus should be given to the use of punctuation marks and the teacher should explain the way the punctuations have been used.

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