



An Appraisal of the Usage of Punctuation Marks by 400-Level English Students in Selected Nigerian Universities

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Abstract: This article analyses 400-level English students' use of punctuation marks in Ahmadu Bello University Zaria (ABU) and Federal University Gusau (FUG) during the 2023/2024 academic session. The students were given an in-class test to assess their level of knowledge on punctuation. The research questionnaire contained 15 short responses and an essay writing question. The subjects were seated in a class, and each student provided independent responses to validate the data. Fifty students' scripts were randomly selected from each institution. The test scripts serve as the data for the study. The researchers used a quantitative method to analyse the questions. The study adopts a model proposed by Gass & Selinker (2008), which has six important steps: collecting data, identifying errors, classifying errors, quantifying errors, analysing sources of errors, and remediating errors. The research found that ABU English students' knowledge of punctuation marks is higher, with ellipsis and dash having 100% correct scores and the semicolon being the least in the ranking scale with 38% correct scores. Federal University Gusau students' knowledge of the full stop is higher, with 96% correct scores, and the colon is the least with 16%. The study also established that the errors resulting from the misuse of punctuation marks are mostly due to carelessness, which accounts for the misrepresentation of the English students. The article recommends that lecturers handling writing in the universities should ensure that English candidates, being potential teachers, adhere strictly to punctuation rules for more effective communication.

Keywords: Punctuation Marks, Punctuation Usage, 400-Level English Students.

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INTRODUCTION

Language undoubtedly, is the chief means through which humans communicate with one another. It is an effective tool in socialisation and social intercourse. However, for effective use of written language, there is need for the writer to recognise the fact that certain linguistic elements are important in conveying meaning. Failure to use them effectively may render his/her message meaningless. Such linguistic items are punctuations. English language has a number of punctuations which are

used for a variety of purposes. They are applied depending on specific rules that govern how they are used. Allen (2002) gives 14 types of punctuation marks which are instructed in schools and institutions of learning. These include full stop, comma, question mark, colon, semi colon, brackets, dash, hyphen, ellipsis, quotation marks, slash, exclamation mark and apostrophe.

In written compositions, punctuation is one of the issues that pose great challenge to writers generally and students in particular. Thus, some

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writers of English are unable to make use of punctuations while writing in different contexts. In other words, most writers lack basic knowledge of punctuations and misuse them in so many instances. This calls for concern by the academic community. The researchers being university lecturers observed that many students have little knowledge on the structure, type and functions of punctuations and in particular the English students who are expected to have background knowledge of the topic under investigation. This is a serious issue of concern that led to the conduct of this research with a view to providing workable solutions to the problem. This study is on the use and abuse of punctuation marks by the graduating university English students of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria and Federal University Gusau in northern Nigeria. It was designed in accordance with the stated objectives of collecting data from our sources: students' written tests and questionnaires.

Punctuation Defined

Punctuation represents those symbols and signs that help the readers to read easily. Punctuation helps by indicating where a sentence ends and the next begins. It also assists in indicating short and long pauses where needed. Punctuation is therefore important, in academic writing in particular, to be used correctly. Without it, the reader would be lost. Many scholars have defined the term 'punctuation' differently, among them is the linguist Stilman (1997) who states that:

The word punctuation derives from the Latin for "point". That is, the mark within a sentence point to the various meaning of its words, making sense of what otherwise might be a string of sounds. They serve two functions: they define how the various elements of a sentence relate to each other, thereby ensuring clear and unambiguous communication, and they help to establish the tone (p. 53).

Crystal, (1999), defines punctuation as the part of language's system which provides clues to the way a text is organised. Say (1998) highlights the advantages of punctuation. He argues that "punctuation marks, the symbols that assist the understanding of written text, have usually been regarded as conventions, thus as being outside the domain of pure linguistics...they have a singular function such as helping reading aloud" (p.1). Punctuation marks serve many purposes, and most marks can be used for more than one purpose. For example, they may connect or separate sentence material, or they may end sentences. According to Kirkpatrick, (2007), punctuation marks can be seen as "the use of certain established marks (*punctuation marks*) or symbols within a piece of written text.

Say (1999) adds that, punctuation is an effective instrument that facilitates processing information especially in reading exercise. Its existence in the text enables the readers to make sense of what is expressed and understand the relationship between the ideas. Therefore, in order to develop as a proficient writer, it requires learning to apply punctuation correctly in writing.

Statement of the Problem

Scholars such as Allen (2002) and Mawudoku (2020) have expressed concern about the poor standard of English at various levels of education. This decline in the learning and use of written English is attributed to several factors, including inappropriate teaching methods and a lack of focus on the mechanics of writing. The use and misuse of language have far-reaching effects on how information is communicated from one person to another. "It is believed that of all the core competencies recognized to contribute to lifelong learning and sustainable development, none is quite as central as the ability to read and write" (Sani *et al.*, 2007, p. 75).

In written compositions, students face a great challenge in using punctuations. To succeed in education and live average life in the years to come depends largely on quality education, which demands that language and learning which are tools for communication in both written and speech production need to be given much attention. It is against this background that this study seeks to investigate the use of punctuation marks, and provide means of rectifying the situation. As a result of this, this study answers such critical questions as:

- i. Do the punctuations in English play important roles in writing?
- ii. If yes, what are the roles and why should they be applied in writing?
- iii. If no, what possible effects do their absence has on English write ups?

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study would be an analysis of use and abuse of punctuations among graduating English students of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria and Federal University Gusau for the 2023/2024 academic session. The questionnaire contains 15 short responses. The questions cut across almost all the punctuation marks and were mainly on the symbols and functions of punctuation marks. The candidates were also given an essay question to write on the importance of punctuation mark to university students. Fifty students' scripts were randomly selected from each university. The test scripts serve as the data for the study. Freeborn (1986) states that, the formal study of language- linguistics- can be applied to written and spoken English in order to

describe styles and varieties of language use precisely and accurately.

Theoretical Framework

Error analysis is an instrument used by the EFL teachers in order to find solutions to the problems that influence their learners. This study will adopt a model proposed by Gass & Selinker (2008) include six important steps: Collecting data, identifying errors, classifying errors, quantifying errors, analysing sources of errors, and remediating errors (p.67).

METHODOLOGY

The subjects of the study were randomly selected from 400 level graduating students in the academic year 2023/2024 in the English Departments of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria and Federal University Gusau in northern Nigeria. To achieve the objectives of the study, an in-class test was designed and administered by the researchers. The questionnaire contains 15 short responses and an essay writing question. The subjects were seated in a class and each student provided independent answers/responses under the supervision of a lecturer in the English departments in order to validate the data.

For the analysis of the instances of misuse punctuation marks, the errors were categorised into different groups depending on their nature. In this case, Gass & Selinker’s (2008) model which has six important steps: collecting data, identifying errors,

classifying errors, quantifying errors, analysing sources of errors, and remediating errors using the frequency and percentage formulae will be adequate for analysis. The following frame was used:

Significance of the Study

Language students should be concerned with the importance of punctuation in writing. This is against the backdrop of the fact that punctuations have in written compositions. The present study, however, focuses on the use of punctuation in English and how this affects communication.

Findings of this study would provide students and teachers of language, and of course the general users of the English language with valuable information that would enable them assess the extent to which language has been affected, via the use of punctuation.

Finally, the findings of this research would serve as another reference point in the growing research on the structure of punctuation. For, if the essence of language is to communicate, then a situation where abuse of certain aspects of language distorts communication specifically calls for investigation, hence, the need for this study.

Data Presentation

Below is the data derived from the in-class test administered to the graduating English students of the selected northern Nigerian universities on the use of punctuation marks.

Ahmadu Bello University

S/No	Question	Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	Total
1	What’s the chief use of a full stop?	48 (96%)	2 (4%)	100%
2	Which punctuation mark is used after an interrogative sentence?	48 (96%)	2 (4%)	100%
3	A punctuation mark that is used to separate chapters from verses in Holy books is	29 (58%)	21(42%)	100%
4	A punctuation mark that is used to show emphasis is called	28 (56%)	22(44%)	100%
5	The punctuation mark in bracket (^) is called	32 (64%)	18(36%)	100%
6	Which punctuation mark is used to separate items/expressions in apposition?	39 (78%)	11 (22%)	100%
7	Which punctuation mark is used to separate clauses of equal importance?	19 (38%)	31 (62%)	100%
8	Identify the punctuation mark below: ;	45 (90%)	5 (10%)	100%
9	Identify the punctuation mark below: -	26 (52%)	24 (48%)	100%
10	Write the symbols of the following punctuation mark: Inverted comma	37 (74%)	13 (26%)	100%
11	Write the symbols of the following punctuation mark: Colon	48 (96%)	2 (4%)	100%
12	Write the symbols of the following punctuation mark: Parenthesis	47 (94%)	3 (6%)	100%
13	Write the symbol of the following punctuation mark:	50(100%)	0 (0%)	100%

	Ellipsis			
14	Write the symbol of the following punctuation mark: Dash	50(100%)	0 (0%)	100%

Source: Field work, 2024

Findings

Based on the data obtained, analysed and tabulated, findings are made about the students' ability to use punctuations. The study reveals the students' use of the various kinds of punctuations. The frequency of the use of the ellipsis and the dash 50 (100%) is higher than any other type of punctuation mark as shown by ABU students. What draws one's attention is that Full stop, question mark and colon rate second in usage with 48 (96%) in ABU students' test. This is amazing considering the fact that the full stop and the question mark are common punctuation marks that are popular among students in their writing right from primary schools.

The data shows that the parenthesis rates third position in usage with 47 (94%) in ABU. This is not surprising because it is also one of the popular punctuation marks. Semi colon rates fourth position in usage according ABU students' performance with 45 (90%). This is also surprising considering the fact

that it is one of the difficult punctuation marks used by students. Comma rates fifth position in ABU with 39 correct answers (78%). The comma is another popular punctuation mark among students. Inverted comma rates sixth position in ABU with 37 scores (74%) which is one of the difficult punctuation marks to use by students. Caret rates seventh position with 32 (64%) in ABU. This is another internal punctuation mark that gives students headache. Colon rates eighth position with 29 correct answers (58%) in ABU. This punctuation mark is also one of the most wrongly used among students. Exclamation mark rates ninth position in ABU with 28 correct scores (56%). This punctuation mark is another common punctuation among students. Hyphen rates tenth position in ABU with 26 correct scores (52%). It is one of the most difficult punctuation that confuses students. Semi colon rates eleventh position with 19 correct scores (38%) in ABU. This punctuation mark also poses a challenge to students.

Federal University Gusau

S/No	Question	Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	Total
1	What's the chief use of a full stop?	46 (92%)	4 (8%)	100%
2	Which punctuation mark is used after an interrogative sentence?	45 (90%)	5 (10%)	100%
3	A punctuation mark that is used to separate chapters from verses in Holy books is	18 (36%)	32(64%)	100%
4	A punctuation mark that is used to show emphasis is called	28 (56%)	29(44%)	100%
5	The punctuation mark in bracket (^) is called	20 (40%)	30(60%)	100%
6	Which punctuation mark is used to separate items/expressions in apposition?	33 (66%)	17(34%)	100%
7	Which punctuation mark is used to separate clauses of equal importance?	15 (30%)	35(70%)	100%
8	Identify the punctuation mark below: ;	45 (90%)	5 (10%)	100%
9	Identify the punctuation mark below: -	19 (38%)	31(62%)	100%
10	Write the symbols of the following punctuation mark: Inverted comma	24 (48%)	26(52%)	100%
11	Write the symbols of the following punctuation mark: Colon	8 (16%)	32(84%)	100%
12	Write the symbols of the following punctuation mark: Parenthesis	28 (56%)	22(44%)	100%
13	Write the symbol of the following punctuation mark: Ellipsis	25 (50%)	25(50%)	100%
14	Write the symbol of the following punctuation mark: Dash	40 (80%)	10(20%)	100%

Source: Field work, 2024

Findings

Based on the data obtained, analysed and tabulated, findings are made about the students' ability to use punctuations. The study reveals the students' use of the various kinds of punctuations. The frequency of the full stop 46 (92%) is higher than any other type of punctuation mark as shown by FUG students. This is not surprising because full stop is common punctuation known by all students. It is worthy to note that Question mark and semi colon rate second in usage with 45 (90%) according to the FUG students' performance. This is amazing considering the fact that semi colon is not very popular to most students.

The data also indicates that in the use of the dash 40 (80%) correct responses have been recorded rating third position in FUG. This is surprising because it is one of the punctuation marks whose symbol most students do not know. Comma rates fourth position in usage according FUG students' performance with 33 (66%). This is also not surprising considering the fact that it is one of the common punctuation marks known by students. Exclamation mark and parenthesis rate fifth position in FUG with 28 correct answers (56%). The two punctuation marks are not known by many students. Ellipsis rates sixth position in FUG with 25 scores (50%) which is one of the difficult punctuation marks many students are ignorant of. Inverted comma rates seventh position with 24 (48%) in FUG. This is another internal punctuation mark that gives students headache. Caret rates eighth position with 20 correct answers (40%) in FUG. This punctuation mark is also one of the most wrongly used among students. Hyphen rates ninth position in FUG with 19 correct scores (38%). This punctuation mark is another difficult punctuation mark that many students are ignorant of. Colon rates tenth position in FUG with 8 correct scores (16%). It is one of the difficult punctuation that confuses students.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From the data presented in the above tables, a lot of things can be deduced. The first question asks students to mention the function of full stop. The full stop which is the most common punctuation mark among students rates second position in ABU. This is something not expected from graduating English students who are the future teachers of mechanics. According to Kirkpatrick, (2007) the full stop is one of the most important punctuation marks, and the most emphatic, because it's main function is to mark the end of a sentence.

The second question requires the students to mention the punctuation mark that follows an interrogative sentence. The students' performance in using the question mark is commendable in the two

institutions. Sekyi-Baidoo (2003) states that, it is very peculiar because whenever someone uses it even the children can identify that a question is being asked.

The third question asks the students to state the punctuation that is used to separate chapters from verses in the holy books. Their responses to the question indicate their knowledge of functions of colon which is impressive in ABU but the reverse is the case in FUG students' performance because it is the least in the ranking scale. Gordon (1986) explains that, it as a pointer which indicates that some items are going to be listed.

Question four requires the candidates to mention the punctuation used to show emphasis. Students' responses on the uses of the exclamation mark are fair in the two institutions. Sakyi-Baidoo (2003) says that, this is another punctuation mark which children do not use at all when writing but use very often when speaking. The fifth question provided a symbol of the punctuation mark that is used to insert omission. The graduating students' knowledge of the caret is commendable in ABU but fair in FUG. One begins to wonder why some graduating students in English fail to know the functions of caret in writing which indicates insertion of omitted letters or words in a sentence.

Question six asks the students to mention the punctuation mark that is used to separate items in apposition. Their responses reveal that their knowledge of the comma is very impressive among the ABU graduating students while FUG students' knowledge is very poor. The functions of comma in writing are very clear. Wiredu (1999) sees two main uses of comma. First, it separates certain parts of sentences. Among several categories of this uses of comma are; it separates words, or groups of words in a list. There is need for improvement here even though a comma is one of the popular punctuation marks that all students are expected to master.

Question seven asks students to mention the punctuation mark that separates clauses of equal performance. The responses from the data reveal instances of lack of commitment from both the ABU and FUG students in the use of semi colon being the last in the ranking scale. The *semicolon*, represented by ; is a rather formal form of punctuation (Mawudoku, 2020). Mechanical error of this nature is not expected from graduating English students considering English as their major discipline.

Questions eight provided a symbol of semi colon and required the students mention it's name. Their responses indicate that the use of the hyphen in ABU is highly commendable but presents a challenge to FUG students. Researchers and the general public

expect English students to master the functions of the hyphen in separating compound words.

Question nine equally asks the students to mention the name of the hyphen. In FUG, the students' performance is commendable while that of ABU is below average. This is one of the punctuation marks that pose challenge to students. English students are expected to know the symbol and the functions but their performance shows a different thing to the reader.

The research finds out that the knowledge of the *Inverted commas* is also commendable among ABU students but another area of challenge to FUG students. This is in line with the request of question ten where students were required to provide the symbol of inverted commas. Mawudoku (2020) is of the view that it is expected that teachers and students handle the use of inverted commas for at least, pupils need them and they are not beyond the children's capabilities to use them.

In question eleven, the students were required to provide the symbol of the colon. ABU students are highly committed here because their performance to the question ranks second while in FUG students' performance ranks tenth. The performance of FUG students need to improve in order to have a proper ground for their potential profession (teaching)

Question twelve also required the students to provide the symbol of parentheses. The data equally reveals that parenthesis as used by the students of both institutions is highly commendable. Also called *brackets*, the parenthesis pose a challenge to some students even in tertiary institutions. Symbol of ellipsis was required from the students in question thirteen. In ABU students' performance it ranks first while sixth in FUG which indicates lack of adequate knowledge.

Question fourteen requires the students to provide the symbol of the dash which ranks first in ABU and third position in FUG. This variation is very surprising considering the fact that both institutions teach their students punctuation in 100 level of their study which is a core course and a requirement for graduation.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that learners may make errors due to lack of understanding or inadequate teaching methodology. In the stage of learning, learners pass through situations where they confront problems in understanding some features. They find ways in order to overcome these situations: they use one form in one context and extend applying it in other

contexts where it should not be applied, for example some of the students use *ellipsis* '...' instead of *dash* '-' or exchange *hyphen* '-' with the *dash* '-' in their writing. Therefore, they commit errors at the grammatical level. Richard believed that learners' errors are produced because of fault deduction about the new language. These errors take different shapes: interference, overgeneralisation, and assimilation. All these elements are considered as ways of facilitating the task of learning (1971b: 14).

As far as this research is concerned, the errors are intentional and were committed due to lack of adequate knowledge on punctuations. The students were taught punctuations in their 100 level General Studies course which is a requirement for graduation. But their performance show lack of commitment to use the acquired knowledge in answering this research questions on the topic.

The outcome of the study has, to this extent been positive on the uses of punctuation in the institutions under consideration.

Importance of Punctuation Marks

Crystal, (1999) explains that, punctuation marks play a crucial role in the modern writing system, yet its significance is regularly underestimated. At least four important functions can be distinguished according to Mawudoku, (2020):

- a. Its primary purpose is to enable stretches of written language to be read coherently, by displaying their grammatical structure e.g. the use of sentence -ending points clause dividing commas, and paragraph making indentation.
- b. Punctuation marks also give the reader clues about the prosody (pg.248) with which a pieces of writing can be read aloud, though such features as question marks, and parentheses. These are especially important when directly representing the intonation and emphasis of spoken language.
- c. Punctuations may highlight semantic units or contrast present in the text but not directly related to its grammatical structure e.g. the choice of colors vs. semi-colors to show the rhetorical structure of a complex sentence and the use of line division and stanzas no poetry.
- d. Punctuations may add a semantic dimension, unique to the graphical medium, which it would be difficult or impossible to read aloud. e.g. the use of 'scare quotes' to show that a word has a special sense, or capital letters drawing attention to a very important point.

CONCLUSION

The research has found that, in English departments, the use of punctuation marks among the graduating students of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria is more impressive compared to their counterparts in Federal University Gusau. ABU English students' knowledge of punctuation marks is higher with ellipsis and dash having 100% correct scores and semi colon being the least in the ranking scale with 38% correct scores. Federal University Gusau students' knowledge of the full stop is higher with 96% correct scores and colon is the least with 16%. The study also established that the errors resulting from the misuse of punctuation marks are mostly due to carelessness and this accounts for misrepresentation of the English students. Therefore, it has become evident that the lecturers handling compositions take bold steps in giving the students assignments on punctuations weekly fortnightly. In conclusion, the lecturers handling writing in the universities shall also ensure that English candidates adhere strictly to the punctuation rules for a more effective communication. These students are potential teachers of punctuations after graduation. So, their knowledge on the topic is paramount and should be made to prepare for the task ahead of them.

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