



The Use of Punctuation Marks in Essays Written by SS 3 Students in Salem Group of Schools

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Abstract

Punctuation marks are important signs used in texts to separate words, phrases, clauses, and sentences to make the grammatical structures readable and easy to understand. Nevertheless, the incorrect usage of punctuation remains a persistent challenge among students, especially those who are second-language users of English. This study examines the use of punctuation marks among SS3 Senior Secondary School (SS3) students at Salem Group of Schools in Dutse. The main objectives are to: (1) identify common punctuation errors among SS3 students, (2) to examine how punctuation marks affect the clarity and coherence of students' essays. (3) to assess the proficiency of SS 3 students in using punctuation marks accurately and appropriately in the essays. Data were collected through written essays to examine the accuracy, frequency, and common errors in punctuation usage. Findings reveal frequent misuse of basic punctuation marks, largely due to insufficient instructional emphasis. The study recommends improved teaching strategies and curriculum supports to enhance students' writing skills. The findings indicate that strengthening students' proficiency in punctuation can contribute to greater writing clarity and improved academic outcomes.

Keywords: Punctuation usage, essay writing, assessment, reading habits, student performance.

Introduction



Punctuation marks are elements that mark off words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in texts for clarity and efficiency. As Straus (2008) describes, they are the written equivalent of pauses and gestures in speech. Without them, written language becomes unclear and difficult to interpret. Without punctuation marks, written language would be a jumble of words, making it difficult to understand the intended message. These small but mighty marks guide the reader, indicating pauses, stops, emphasis, and even tone. This study investigates the punctuation usage of SS3 students in Salem Group of Schools, Dutse. It explores the types of punctuation marks used, the frequency of their use, and the common errors encountered by students, with a view to improving teaching methods and learning outcomes. They are relevant tools that indicate pauses and changes in tone for better comprehension of written materials. They play a key role in how we interpret the written word. Just as in speech where pauses, intonations, and emphasis help us understand meaning, punctuation serves a similar purpose in written language. According to Quirk et al (1985) punctuation facilitates clarity, coherence, and effective communication in writing. Crystal (1995) also emphasizes that punctuation helps indicate grammatical structure, intonation, and meaning, compensating for the absence of spoken language cues.

Statement of the Research Problem

Many SS3 students struggle with the correct use of punctuation marks in their essays, leading to communication breakdowns and unclear writing. This study investigates the scope and the nature of these punctuation issues to recommend strategies for improvement.

Aim and Objectives

This work aims at examining the proficiency of SS3 students in using punctuation marks accurately and appropriately in their essays. By analyzing their usage pattern, we can identify common errors, challenges, and areas for improvement related to punctuation marks.

The specific objectives are:

1. to identify common punctuation errors among SS3 students
2. to examine how punctuation marks affects the clarity and coherence of students essays.



3. to assess the proficiency of SS 3 students in using punctuation marks accurately and appropriately in the essays.

Research Questions

1. What are the common errors found in SS3 students' essays, and how can they be addressed?
2. To what extent does the correct use of punctuation usage correlate with essay quality and academic performance?
3. How does the use of punctuation marks in the written essays of SS3 students in Salem Group of Schools impact the overall clarity and coherence of their writing?

Punctuation Marks and their Functions

1. **The Full Stop.** A full stop is used at the end of a declarative sentence, which is a statement of fact or opinion. For example, Aisha is student.
2. **Question Mark?** A direct question ends with a question mark to indicate inquiry. For example, what is your name?
3. **Exclamation mark!** We use an exclamation mark to express strong feelings such as fear, excitement, or surprise. For example, Help!
4. **Colon:** We use a colon to introduce a list of items, an explanation or a quotation. For example, you need the following items: a passport, a visa, an application and the fees.
5. **Semi-colons;** We use a semicolon to join two related independent clauses or sentences. For example, He is a good reader; he has read many books.
6. **Hyphen** –We use a hyphen to join compound words. For example, mother- in-law.
7. **Apostrophe'** An apostrophe is used to show possession. or contraction. For example, the boy's bag has been stolen.
8. **Ellipsis...** An ellipsis is a set of three dots that indicates the voluntary omission of words in a text. For example, I bought... in the market.



9. Bracket () It is used to include additional information. For example, I was born in Dutse (Jigawa State).

10. Quotation mark” These are used to indicate direct speech or quotations. For example, the woman asked, “Where is your house?”

11. Comma, A comma separates items in a list, clause or adds a pause. For instance, a shopping list could include meat, bread, tomatoes, and vegetables etc.

12. Dash----- Adds emphasis or explains a list. E.g., Food, books, clothes—all were donated.

The Significance of Punctuation Marks

According to McCloskey (2000), punctuation marks do not only help clarify the meaning of a sentence but also contribute to the tone, rhythm, and flow of writing. Punctuation marks are valuable tools for enhancing one’s ability to comprehend a text. They serve as cues to understanding written materials by organizing ideas clearly for effective communication of the message. Misuse of punctuation marks can result in misunderstanding of the intended meaning of the written materials. Punctuation marks serve to indicate the tonal variations and pauses found in the spoken form of a language when writing. Mastery and good usage of punctuation marks are necessary for intelligible written English. Adejube and Okon (2019) in their work “Punctuation marks and the Writing Skills of Students in Nigerian Secondary Schools” also support the assertion that punctuation marks help in improving writing skills among ESL learners.

This study is very vital to all second language users of English. By examining the use of punctuation marks in the essays of SS3 students, the study offers the following contributions:

1. The findings of this study can help students perform better in their writings, thus, improvement in their academic achievements. This agrees with the views of Strunk and White (2000) that consistency and simplicity, especially in punctuation and Syntax are important in academic writing. In other words, punctuation marks help students convey their thoughts clearly. It is



important to use punctuation marks properly because they help support and clarify the details in the text.

2.The study can provide insights to teachers and curriculum developers to refine writing instruction and incorporate effective strategies for teaching punctuation marks. By prioritizing punctuation in curriculum design, planners can help students develop strong communication skills and become confident and effective users of language. Mastery of punctuation is key to scoring well in English Language and other written subjects.

3.Nunberg (1990), explains that punctuation is part of the grammatical competence of literate users. He describes punctuation as a tool in shaping effective communication. Proficiency in using punctuation marks is essential for language fluency. This study can contribute to strengthening students' overall language skills and their ability to express ideas clearly. A misused of punctuation mark can result to misinterpretation of the sentence meaning.

4.Effective written communication is crucial for future career success. By improving punctuation usage, students can develop stronger communication skills that are valuable in various professional fields, Truss (2003). Students demonstrating strong writing skills, including proper punctuation, increase their chances of career development. According to Straus (2008), punctuation serves not only to mark grammatical boundaries but also to enhance clarity and coherence in written communication. Crystal (2006) summaries punctuation as a tool to clarify meaning, mark intonation and rhythm, signal grammatical boundaries and a guide reader interpretation.

Research Methodology

This study will employ a hybrid research approach.

1. Sample Selection: A representative sample of essays written by SS3 students in Salem Group of Schools, will be selected for analysis. The sample size will depend on the availability and suitability of essays. The selected essays will be collected and compiled for analysis. The essays will be analyzed to ensure confidentiality.



2. Qualitative Analysis: A qualitative analysis will be conducted to identify common errors, challenges, and patterns related to the use of punctuation marks in the essays. The analysis will involve a close reading of the essays, paying specific attention to punctuation usage.

3. Quantitative Analysis: A quantitative analysis will be performed to determine the frequency and distribution of different types of punctuation marks used in the essays. This analysis will provide statistical insights into the overall proficiency and trends in punctuation usage.

4. Comparison and Interpretation: The qualitative and quantitative findings will be compared and interpreted to identify significant patterns, trends, and areas for improvement in the students use of punctuation marks.

The identified punctuation errors in the essay of the students are analyzed.

NO	Code	Wrong use of Punctuation marks	Correct use of Punctuation marks	Remark
1	Paper 1	my name is Ibrahim Mustapha I am in Salem Group of Schools and I am in SS3 class. My father is a business man and he gives me money all the time! I love to eat food with my dad!	My name is Ibrahim Mustapha, I am in Salem Group of Schools, and I am in SS3 class. My father is a businessman, and he gives me money all the time. I love to eat with my dad.	The student did not make use of capital letters, commas, and full stops. He used an exclamation mark in place of a full stop.
2	Paper 2	i like my school very much because they have qualified teachers discipline and good educational standard	I like my school very much because it has qualified teachers, discipline, and good educational standards.	The student did not use the correct punctuation. These include capitalization, commas and full stops.
3	Paper 3	I don't like my Mathematics	I don't like my Mathematics	The student did not use



		teacher because he gives us too much assignments.	teacher because he gives us too many assignments.	the apostrophe.
4	Paper 4	I spent my last holiday in Lagos-state with my uncle family. I travel with my father bag.	I spent my last holiday in Lagos state with my uncle's family. I travelled with my father's bag.	The student failed to use the apostrophe mark.
5	Paper 5	Oh Lagos –State is too noisy, and the roads are always busy.	Oh! Lagos-State is too noisy, and the roads are always busy.	The student failed to use the exclamation mark.
6	Paper 6	Why must i pass English Language in my WAEC.	Why must I pass English Language in my WAEC.?	The student failed to make use of a question mark.
7	Paper 7	The last time they gave us holiday in our school I enjoyed so much because I visited my friend and we played a lot of game	The last time we were given a holiday in our school, I enjoyed it so much because I visited my friend and we played a lot of games.	The student did not make use of the full stop at the end of the sentence.
8	Paper 8	After some few days I and my junior brother traveled to Lagos and spent the rest of our holiday there.	After a few days, I and my younger brother traveled to Lagos and spent the rest of our holiday there.	The student did not make use of a comma.
9	Paper 9	In my school I learned so many things that I will never forget in my life	In my school, I learned so many things that I will never forget.	The student did not make use of commas and full stops.
10	Paper 10	I like my school because our student are the best in quiz competition	I like my school because our students are the best during quiz competition .weeks	The student did not make use of a full stop.

Classification and frequency of punctuation errors in student's essay

The following are explanations of each error.

1. Capital letter

Table 1: Errors in using capital letter

Number	Error in	Frequency
1	Omissions	50



2	Misuses/used unnecessary	-
	Total	50

A capital letter is used at the beginning of a sentence. This researcher found fifty errors made by ten students without misuse.

2 Full stop

Table 2: Errors in using full stop

Number	Error in	Frequency
1	Omissions	70
2	Misuses/used unnecessary	/
	Total	70

The full stop is used at the end of a sentence. After analyzing student's work, the researcher found seventy errors. The students often forget to end the sentence with a full stop.

3. Comma

Table3: Errors in using comma

Number	Error in	Frequency
1.	In a series	10
2	Stressing sentences	14



3	Misuses/used unnecessary	20
	Total	44

Comma is used to separate parts of a sentence. It tells readers to pause between words or group of words. Comma help clarify the meaning of sentence.

4. Exclamation mark

Table 4: Errors in using the exclamation mark

Number	Error in	Frequency
1	Omissions	5
2	Misuse/used unnecessary	3
	Total	8

The exclamation mark is not often used in academic writing. The omission of exclamation mark occurred eight times.

5. Apostrophe

Table 5: Errors in using apostrophe

Number	Error in	Frequency
1	Omissions	25
2	Misuse/used unnecessary	-
	Total	25



The apostrophe is used in two instances, they show contraction and possessive. In this research, the researcher found that many students made errors in using apostrophes. The total errors made by the students were twenty-five without misuse.

The following are percentages of errors in applying punctuation marks.

6. Percentage

Table 6: percentage error

Number	Kinds of errors	Total number of errors made by students	Percentage
1	Capital letter	100	28.57%
2	Full stop	80	22.85%
3	Comma	120	34.28%
4	Exclamation mark	10	2.85%
5	Apostrophe	40	11.42%
	Total	350	100%

The previous table showed the percentages of all numbers of errors made by students. The average number of punctuation errors for each category is the capital letter, 100(28.57%); full stop, 80(22.85%); comma, 120 errors (34.28%); exclamation mark, 10 errors (2.85%); apostrophe, 40 errors (11.42%). Here, there were 350 various kinds of errors made by the students where the most dominant error was applying comma which occurred 120 times.

Frequency distribution of all identified punctuation errors

Number	Punctuation mark	Frequency	Total	Note
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1	Capital letter	7/33	40	Pronoun I the first word in a sentence.
2	Full stop (.)	20	20	Final period
3	Comma (,)	1/1	2	Adverbial time stressing sentence.
4	Question mark (?)	2	2	Question sentence Question tag.
5	Exclamation mark (!)	1/1	1	
6	Apostrophe(')		3	Possessive Contraction

Discussion of Findings

The analysis identified 350 total punctuation errors across 10 student essays. Comma misuse was the most frequent, suggesting a lack of understanding of sentence structuring and clarity. Apostrophes and capital letters were also frequently misused, often leading to confusion in ownership and sentence starts. The findings confirm that students' low proficiency in punctuation contributes to poor writing coherence and readability.

Conclusion

Parkes (1992) sees punctuation as a reading aid. According to him, punctuation evolved as a reader-oriented system-helping oral interpreters of texts navigate meaning. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) reinforce the idea of punctuation as core to English grammar.

Punctuation marks are essential for coherent and effective writing. This study reveals significant gaps in the correct use of punctuation among SS3 students at Salem Group of Schools. The most common challenges include misused commas, apostrophes, and inconsistent capitalization.



Improving punctuation skills will greatly enhance students' writing clarity, academic performance, and future communication abilities.

Recommendations

1. Educators at both primary and secondary should make adequate provision for the teaching of punctuation marks at all levels of educational systems.
2. The students' knowledge of the usage of punctuations would help reduce the unnecessary mistakes made during their essay writing.
3. English textbooks should explain the uses of punctuation marks with adequate examples.

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