

Punctuation Errors by The Fourth Semester Students of The English Department

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Abstract

This paper was written based on the end-semester composition examination paper of the fourth semester students of the English Department, Faculty of Education And Teacher Training, Ahmad Dahlan University in Yogyakarta. The study aimed at : (1) analyzing the students' errors in using punctuation marks in their composition examination paper and (2) identifying the most as well as the least frequently used punctuation marks in their composition examination paper, and (3) finding out whether there is relation between students' ability in using punctuation mark and their final examination grades.

The objects of the study were 29 composition examination paper written by the fourth semester students of the academic year 2008/2009. The criteria used to identify and analyze the students' errors were adapted from the Writer's Bureau Handbook, the Essentials of English, and the American English Today. The results of the study indicated that : 1) there were 59 cases of errors found covering four kinds of punctuation marks – full stop (.), commas (,), apostrophe ('), and quotation mark (" "). They respectively occurred 14, 36, 5, and 4 times, 2) Of the 29 students, none used 10 to 11 kinds of punctuation marks. Only 1 student (3,44%) used 9 kinds of punctuation , 2 students (6,90) used 7 kinds, 19 students (65,51%) used 5 to 6 kinds and 3 students (10,34%) used 4 kinds, 4 students (13,80%) used 2 to 3 kinds of punctuationmarks. It could be interpreted that in the average the students were able to use 5 to 6 kinds of punctuation marks in their composition. 3) There was also a close relation between the students' ability of using punctuation and their composition grades.

Key words: students errors, punctuation marks

Intruduction

When people speak to each other, they often pause between groups of words, put emphases on certain words and use gestures or facial expressions to make their meaning clearly understood. Yet, they can not do so when they want to express their messages in the written form. Instead of pausing, putting emphases on certain words and using gestures, they to use punctuation marks; otherwise the message expressed in their writing would not be easily understood. Their writing would be long continuous stream of words which would be very difficult to understand its meaning. As a result communication will not occur successfully.

It would be even more difficult if that happens in the classroom between the students and their teachers. Teaching and learning process will not take place as they are expected. It is natural, therefore, if teachers or schools expect their students to be able to use punctuation marks correctly soon after they learn to write. This expectation is not only true in the first language, but also in the second or foreign language teaching and learning. For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students especially, knowledge, practice, and exercises in the use of various kinds of punctuation marks must have been given to students at the prior semesters, before they sit at the third semester. The use of punctuation marks has been given as parts of composition or writing– since students are at the first semester. It is hoped that by the time the students are at the sixth semester, when they are about to write their position paper, they no longer have difficulty in using punctuation marks. They are already capable of using various kinds of punctuation marks to make their writing clearly understood; and to avoid monotony.

Importance of the Study

By doing this research he writer hoped that results of the study could provide valuable information for both students and lecturers of composition subject. For the students, the errors they made could be regarded as valuable feedback and a device to motivate them in order to learn more effectively. For the lecturer, the information given by this study could be used as evidence of his/her success and failure. It told him/her how far toward the goals the students have been progressing. In the end, the lecturer could design better preparation for his/her teaching.

Purpose of the Study:

The aims of this study are :

- Identify punctuation errors made by students of the English Department.

- Know what kind of punctuation mark was the least inappropriately used by the students in their composition works?
- Know the kinds of punctuation mark which was the most frequently used by the students in their composition works.

Literature Review

This part will present what punctuation mark is, the importance, the kinds, and the rules of using punctuation marks. Additionally, the significance of analyzing the students errors will also be explained.

Punctuation Mark

Punctuation is generally described as the right use of the "stop" in a sentence, whereas in the Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995) it is stated that punctuation is a sign, such as a comma, a period, or a question mark that is used in dividing a piece of writing into sentence, phrases etc, whereas according to Hopper (1990) punctuation is a device used to assist the reader. It takes place of changes in tone, inflection, and volume, and of pauses, facial expressions, etc., by which a speaker makes his meaning clear.

The Importance of Punctuation Mark

Most people realize the importance of accurate punctuation. In order to communicate effectively through the medium of print (whether on page or on screen), it is essential that the rudiments of punctuation are understood and applied – routinely and consistently. Punctuation, is therefore, plays an important role in developing writing skills. It is very often proved that punctuation may change the meaning of a sentence. In a conversation, a speaker automatically pauses when he/she speaks in order that his/her thought may be understandable. For his/her thought to be equally clear on paper to be understandable, he/she must use certain signals to indicate short, long, or extra-long pauses (Johnson et. al :1973) . It has been previously mentioned in the introduction that when speaking, a speaker will use different kinds of pauses or breaks and change in the tone of voice. These help signal what words go together. When the speaker pauses briefly, *the way* he/she pauses shows whether he/she has completed a statement or whether he/she is only halfway through a sentence. When he/she says " He is a teacher" in a normal way, it means one thing. But when his/her voice goes up at the end in a questioning way "He is a teacher?" the same words mean something else. Unfortunately too many people, including students of foreign language teacher training and education, lack confidence in their ability to punctuate precisely and with clarity.

When a speaker shifts from speech to writing, it is the punctuation marks which take over some of the work done in the spoken English like the rising and falling intonations. They can also be used to show how a paragraph or a sentence is put together and what should be kept apart. Punctuations can show what is important and what is unimportant. In relation to this, Guth (1970:397) indicates that the most basic function of punctuation marks are those that bring an utterance a complete stop. The exclamation mark, the question marks, and the full stop are then, basic stop-and-go signals regarding the grammatical traffic. They are used to indicate that a group of words (or just one single word) stands grammatically by itself. Furthermore, Brewton et. el. (1962) also indicated that the purpose of using punctuation is to show the reader how sentences and parts of sentences are related. In conversation a speaker has many resources and for showing such relations – a change in facial expression or in pitch of voice, for example. In writing, the resources are less numerous. And the writer must use them with accuracy if the reader is not to be confused. In most cases, the writer will not be present when his/her writing is read. Thus he/she will not have a chance to explain or clear up directions in meaning caused by faulty punctuation. In writing, therefore, he/she must be able to say what he/she really means by using appropriate punctuation marks. Punctuation marks are devices for making the writing clear and lucid. It would be advisable if teachers or teachers to be, therefore, be good at using punctuation.

The Kinds of Punctuation Marks

Different writers classified punctuation marks differently. Murthy (2003) stated that principally there are seven (7) kinds of punctuation, they are : full stop, comma, semicolon, colon, interrogative mark, exclamation mark, and inverted commas or quotation mark, whereas Hopper et. al. (1990) and Guth and Edgar H Schuster (1970) classified into nine (9) kinds of punctuation: end or terminal punctuation (which is further divided into the period, the question mark, and the exclamation point, comma , semi colon, colon, dash, hyphen, apostrophe, parentheses and brackets and, and quotation mark.. Lastly, according to A Writer's Bureau Handbook punctuation comprises eleven (11) kinds: full stop, comma, semi colon, colon, hyphen, inverted comma, brackets, dash, apostrophe, exclamation mark, and quotation mark.

Although the classifications are different, basically they are the same, and their functions are also the same.

The Rules of Using Punctuation Marks

The followings are quotation marks which every writer must obey:

The full Stop (.)

The principal use of full stop or the period is to indicate the end of a sentence which is not a question or an exclamation. It mainly has two functions:

- a. To indicate the longest pause.
 - There will be a meeting tonight.
 - Indonesia is one of the South East Asian countries.
 - I asked him if he would see me.
 - Please close the door.
- b. To be set after abbreviations
 - Dr. M.A. etc. P.O. Box

The Comma (,)

The comma is the most frequently used aid to reading. It is used to indicate the shortest pause. The followings are its various uses.

- a. It is used to separate three or more words of the same parts of speech.
 - Nouns: I saw Denny, Iwan, Rozan and Fakhry yesterday.
 - Verbs: I wrote, read, examine and put aside the document.
 - Adjectives : She is beautiful, smart, polite and kind.
 - Adverbs : He always explains the lecture very clearly, carefully, convincingly and effectively.
- b. To mark off phrases in apposition
 - Mother Theresa, a great social worker, was a very kind woman.
- c. Make mark off the nominative of address.
 - O God, give us strength and power to face this problem.
- d. After adverbial phrases of absolute construction.
 - The meeting was over, all left the hall.
- e. Before and after an adjectival phrase formed with participle.
 - Marcella, having completed her studies, decided to marry Andi.
- f. To separate words/phrases/clauses inserted into the body of a sentence.
 - The facts, however, are not absolutely accurate.
 - The lazy students have, contrary to the teachers' expectation, passed the test.
- g. To avoid repetition of a verb.
 - I give Linda a necklace, and Banu a watch.
- h. To separate a subordinate clause from the principle clauses.
 - If you go to Jakarta, please meet your uncle.
 - When she comes here, I will ask her about it.
- i. To be used with adverbial clauses
 - If it rains, the hike will be cancelled.
- j. After introductory modifier
 - On the whole, there are 88 subjects in this study.

k. To be used with dates, address, etc.

- It was Tuesday, May 31, 2011

Semi Colon (;)

The semi colon indicates a pause longer than colon and is used at one time to separate the different parts of very long sentences. It functions midway between the comma and the period as an indication of a pause. It is stronger than the comma and weaker than the period. The most common uses of semi colon are as follows:

- To join two closely connected sentences
 - The room was empty; the girls had all left.
- It is used in front of an adverb (however, so, for instance)
 - He was late in submitting his entry for composition; so the judges disqualified him.
- To separate a list of items where additional information is given about some of the items.
 - Three other people were with her; David, her big brother, Nancy, her little sister, and Tia her cousin.

Colon (:)

The colon indicates a slight shorter than full stop. It is a punctuation mark which is falling into disuse nowadays. In fact, there are some writers who never use colon at all. However, one time it is useful when a writer introduces a list of ideas or explanations.

- Candidates should bring into the examination room the following items : admission cards, pens, pencils, a rubber, a ruler, mathematical instruments and mathematical tables.

Hyphen (-)

A hyphen is different from a dash (--) . A dash lengthens the pause, while a hyphen shortens it. There are several ways a writer can use the hyphen.

- To link to or more words together to form a compound word, especially a compound noun
 - son-in law
 - well-known author
- To link certain prefixes like anti-, ex- and pro- to a noun. The hyphen is dropped , however, if the word containing the hyphen is in regular use. This use of hyphen is limited to words which are first being introduced into English.
 - ex-champion
 - pre-war
- To show that the two separated vowels are pronounced separately.

- co-operate
- co-operation

If these two vowels are not separated with hyphen the reader will be tempted to pronounce the "o o" in co-operate and co-operation as "o o" in look, book, foot, etc.

- d. Sometimes a hyphen is used to make the meaning of a sentence clearer. The sentence "We are going to have two hour long lessons" may be ambiguous. Does this sentence means there are two lessons of one hour each or the lessons are each two hours long. By putting hyphens in, the meaning of the sentence will be clearer: two-hour-long lessons → (each sentence is two hours long) two hour-long lessons → (there are two lessons and each lesson is one hour long)
- e. A hyphen is also used to indicate a break in a word at the end of a line. This is when there is not enough space to finish the word.
 - miss-understand
 - account-ant
 -

Method of the Study

Participants

The objects of the study are 29 composition works drawn from the third semester students of the English Department, the Faculty of teacher Training and Education Ahmad Dahlan University Yogyakarta of the 2008/2009 academic year. Since the number of students is less than 30, all of their papers are taken as the sample. (Sugiyono, 2005). Various punctuation marks used by the students treated as the data of the study.

Data Collection

Aiming to identify the kinds of punctuation used by the students, this study has been completed through documentation of the students' final examination paper. It has been previously mentioned that the data of this study are drawn from the students' composition paper. Therefore, the data include sentences arranged by the students where many kinds of punctuation mark were used to make the meaning of their sentences clear. The students' use of punctuation mark in their composition paper was identified and recorded by using the following table as the instrument of the study.

No of the Subject	The Kinds of Punctuation Mark Used										
	.	,	;	:	-	()	—	?	!	`	" "

In addition to this method, sentences incorrectly punctuated were also noted down. Especially, sentences concerning the most frequently used punctuation marks were identified to find out whether they were correctly used. The students' final composition examination grades were also written down to see whether the students with high final examination grades also have high ability in using punctuation mark in their composition paper.

Data Analysis

Content analysis, one of the data analysis approaches, has been employed for data examination. As dictated by content analysis, the following steps are taken: data coding, labeling themes, categorization of the data in accordance with the number of punctuation marks, and interpretation of the findings (Yildirim and Simek,2005). The data collected are first identified based on the kinds of punctuation mark, which consisted of 11 kinds, namely full stop (.), commas (,), semi colon (;), colon (:), hyphen (-), brackets (), dash (_), question mark (?), exclamation mark (!), apostrophe (`), and quotation mark (" "). This is done to find out whether the students are able to use the various kinds of punctuation marks to indicate their ability. It is expected that the more kinds of punctuation mark the students use, the higher ability they could perform in their composition paper. All of the data are statistically analyzed. Percentage is used to describe the frequency of the punctuation marks used by the students. The most and the least frequency use of punctuation mark are considered evidence of the students ability in using punctuation mark.

Finally, from the most frequently used punctuation marks, information whether the students are using the punctuation correctly or not is also analyzed based on the rules of punctuation. Possible corrections are also given as an offer for the students to solve their problems.

Findings

The study indicates that from the 29 final examination papers: 1) there are 59 cases of errors found, covering four kinds of punctuation marks – full stop (4 cases), commas (36 cases), apostrophe (5 cases), and quotation mark (4 cases). 2) The ability of students in using punctuation marks ranges from to 9 kinds. Of the eleven kinds of punctuation marks the majority of the students use 5 to 6 kinds in their examination works. Only 1 student (3,44%) uses 9 kinds of punctuation, 2 students (6,90%) use 7 kinds,19 students (65,51%) use 5 to 6 kinds and 3 students (10,34%) use 4 kinds, 4 students (13,80%) use 2 to 3 kinds of punctuation marks. It could be interpreted that in the average the students are able to use 5 to 6 kinds of punctuation marks in their composition. 3) There is also

a close relation between the students' ability of using punctuation and their composition grades. The student who uses 9 kinds of punctuation marks gets an A in her composition examination. Most of the students who use 5 to 6 kinds of punctuation get B. Those who use only 2 to 3 kinds punctuation marks get D. Therefore, it can be inferred that students with higher grades tend to be able to use more punctuation marks. Competent students will apply more than 6 kinds of punctuation marks in their composition. They have the courage to apply the knowledge they have, without being afraid of making errors.

Suggestion

Based on the research findings, the writer would like to invite writing or composition teachers to put greater attention on giving their students as many chances as possible to build higher confidence in their ability to punctuate precisely and with clarity. It is also advisable for writing teachers to make an insight that the students' inability to punctuate well is also their responsibility.

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