

A Comparative Study of the Correct Usage of Punctuation in Writing Tasks of Adult Learners of English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Written expressions are highly effective for communicating and transferring knowledge to others. The symbols we use to make the comprehension of these written expressions more precise are called punctuation marks. Even though the Sinhala-speaking adult students had been exposed to formal teaching in English as a Second Language (ESL) from Grade 03 to Grade 13 in Sri Lankan schools, it is observed that the correct usage of punctuation marks of these adult Sinhala-speaking students of the “Diploma in English for Professional Purposes” (DEPP)-2019 course, conducted by University of Kelaniya was not satisfactory. According to the existing literature review, no researcher has addressed the acquisition order of punctuation marks using Sinhala-speaking ESL adult learners of Sri Lanka (age: 29-35 years) following a DEPP course at a state university. Therefore, the aim of the study was to compare the accurate use of eight punctuation marks of adult ESL learners during writing tasks and find out the order of acquisition of these punctuation marks. The main research question of this study is whether there are any significant differences among the students’ correct performances in 08 punctuation marks. A total number of 50 students were selected following the systematical sampling method from the DEPP-2019 course, and were asked to fill in the correct punctuation marks in a given passage and 24 sentences. The data of the students’ marks were analyzed using the SPSS-22 software, ANOVA HSD Tukey Test. The results showed several significant differences among the correct usage of 08 punctuation marks and a clear acquisition order of these 08 punctuation marks. This order can be used to facilitate teaching these punctuation marks to adult students in the ESL classroom and to make the necessary changes in the relevant curricula and syllabi.

Keywords: punctuation marks, comparative study, adult learners of ESL, writing tasks

1. Introduction

“Punctuation is one of the most important aspects of written English. However, it is still taken the most lightly. This feature of punctuation gives meaning to the written words, much like pauses and changes in tones of the voice when speaking” (Gniting, 2018, p 82). Accordingly, Gamroff (2000) and Shaughnessy (1977) claim that punctuation is often necessary to convey meaning. When poor punctuation exists in writing, it confuses readers. They also pointed out that the structure and coherence in every piece of writing are affected by punctuation marks. For example, in a prison, the phrase “*Release him, not hang him.*” orders a prison jailer to release a prisoner. If the comma is moved up to the end of the word ‘not’ (Release him not, hang him), then this prisoner would be hung by the prison jailer. This comma (,) punctuation mark in this declarative sentence can mean the difference between the life and death of a prisoner. Therefore, it can be seen that not only using the accurate punctuation mark is essential, but also the exact place we put the accurate punctuation mark is vital. Truss (2004) claimed that punctuation is formally designed to help readers understand a story without impediment. Here, Truss shows how punctuation marks are useful for us to make comprehensive and clear writing. Therefore, researching on how to facilitate teaching the correct punctuation marks for ESL learners is essential.

1.1. Types of Punctuation Marks

This study focused on a total of 08 punctuation marks, such as (1) full stop/period (.), which ends a sentence. (2) **Comma (,)** connects items in a list, introduces a quotation (words directly spoken), connects two independent clauses with the help of a conjunction, and separates a word or phrase that is relevant but not essential information (3) **Question mark (?)** indicates a question (4) **Semi-colon (;)** is used if one or more items in a list already have a comma and connect independent clauses (5) **Colon (:)**, introduces a quotation (words directly spoken)-less commonly, introduces a list of three or more items; and introduces an explanation (what follows “explains” or “answers” what precedes) (6) **The exclamation mark (!)** expresses emotion and gives a command. (7) **Apostrophe (’)**, shows possession or contraction. (8) **Quotation mark (“ ”)**, indicate a quotation (Punctuation chart, n.d.).

1.2. The Statement of the Research Problem

It is observed that despite the previous exposure to formal teaching of ESL from Grade 03 to Grade 12 in schools, adult learners who follow the “Diploma in English for Professional Purposes” course conducted by the Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka in 2019, do not show a satisfactory performance in the correct use of punctuation marks in their writing tasks. Furthermore, as shown in the 1.1 passage, the usage of some punctuation marks is complex as the same function can be fulfilled by different punctuation marks (e.g. comma and semi-colon). At the same time, some punctuation marks show different functions (e.g. colon and apostrophe). Therefore, finding the acquisition order of the punctuation marks of these adult learners and identifying the reasons for differences in the acquisition of these different punctuation marks is imperative to enhance the teaching methods of punctuation in ESL. On the other hand, according to the literature, no research study has addressed the acquisition order of punctuation marks among Sinhala-speaking ESL adult students (age: 29-35 years) of a week-end Diploma course conducted by a state university in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, using the findings of this research, necessary guidance can be given to the relevant curriculum reviewers and syllabus designers who are working on enhancing the process of teaching punctuation marks fruitfully to adult learners.

1.3. The Purpose/ Aim of the Study

Therefore, the purpose of the study is to compare the accurate use of 08 punctuation marks among a selected group of adult ESL learners in writing tasks in the DEPP-2019 course conducted by the University of Kelaniya, find the acquisition order of the punctuation marks of adult learners and thereby, find suitable methods to facilitate teaching punctuation to adult learners of ESL.

1.4. Justification of the Research Problem

According to the literature review, some studies on correct punctuation usage have been conducted using Sri Lankan ESL learners. Halik and Jayasundara (2021), first used a role-play on punctuation marks as a tool with a number of twenty G.C. E. O/L (Grade 11) students in Sri Lanka, have found that these students could identify the particular punctuation as follows: full stop 65%, capitalization 70%, question mark 70% comma 50%, exclamation mark 20%, Apostrophe 15%, quotation marks 15% and ellipsis 00%. Secondly, Halik and Jayasundara administered a test paper to the same students.

They found that the use of the comma in the appropriate place was a considerable challenge for most of the participants, as no participant had appropriately used a comma in all the 05 sentences given. Moreover, Abeynayake (2017), using the written documents of fifty Bilingual Education (BE), English and Sinhala teachers in Government schools in North Central Province, Sri Lanka, followed by classroom observations and interviews, has shown that 65% of BE teachers have made errors and mistakes in using punctuation marks. As previously mentioned, according to the literature, no comparative study has been done on the correct usage of punctuation marks in writing skills by adult Sinhala-speaking ESL learners (age 29-35 years) of a weekend diploma course and finding the acquisition order of the correct usage of punctuation marks, conducted by a state university in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study fills that relevant research gap.

1.5. Research Objectives

1. To find out whether there are any significant differences among the students' correct performances in the eight punctuation marks
2. To examine which accurate punctuation mark showed the highest performance
3. To observe which accurate punctuation mark showed the least performance
4. To find out the acquisition order of accurate punctuation marks of adult learners (age: 29-35 years)

1.6. Research Questions

1. Are there any significant differences among the students' correct performances in the eight punctuation marks?
2. Which accurate punctuation mark showed the highest performance?
3. Which accurate punctuation mark showed the least performance?
4. What is the acquisition order of punctuation marks of adult learners (age: 29-35 years)?

1.7. Hypotheses

1. Significant differences exist among the adult learners' performances in the 08 punctuation marks.
2. There is a clear order for adult learners (29-35 years) in acquiring punctuation marks.

2.0. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

When writing tasks in ESL are concerned, the correct usage of punctuation marks is prominent. The role of punctuation marks is to make the written tasks comprehensive and clear. Therefore, the correct usage of punctuation marks is significant in writing tasks. However, selecting the accurate punctuation marks at the correct place is challenging. The reason is that the usage of some punctuation marks is complex since the same function can be fulfilled by different punctuation marks (e.g. comma and semi-colon), as we discussed above. In this section, definitions and previous results of research studies conducted in other foreign countries and Sri Lanka will be discussed in the order.

2.2. Definitions of Punctuation Marks

Sulukcu and Kirboga (2020) have stated, "Today, punctuation marks and their use vary between countries and new punctuation marks are introduced, and new functions are added to the existing ones" (p. 686). Moreover, Peters (2002) states that punctuation marks have a very important role in giving the intended meaning to the language. Furthermore, this study shows that using the wrong placement of such punctuation marks can change the meaning of the sentence completely and sometimes even convert the sentence to complete nonsense. "Punctuation marks are pauses or gestures used to clarify the meaning of our words. They are signals to the reader that indicate pause, place emphasis, alter the function or show the relationship between the elements of the text". (Jane, 2008, p. 122). In addition, Reman (2005) says that all writing requires complete mastery of punctuation because it is the punctuation which removes ambiguities and makes prose clear and easily comprehensible.

2.3. Theories on punctuation marks

A **colon mark** is placed outside quotation marks and parentheses. E.g.(i) There is only one thing wrong with "Harold's Indiscretion": it is not funny. To separate titles and subtitles (as of books). E.g.(ii) The Tragic Dynasty: A History of the Romanovs (Романишин, 2015). A **semi-colon mark** is placed between two independent clauses whenever these clauses are not joined by one of the coordinating conjunctions: and, but, or, nor, for and yet. E.g.(iii) I must go home now; my mother needs me. (iv) She came early; however, she had gone home. (V) No one knows the fate of the ship; it never returned. To separate independent clauses joined by a conjunction when either clause or both contains comma punctuation. E.g. (vi) Jane, who is my sister, plays with dolls; but John, my youngest brother, prefers a gun, a knife, a ball, or a kite. (Романишин, 2015).

2.4. Previous Research Studies

Ginting (2018) has shown a total number of 53 students' ability to use punctuation marks in writing a descriptive paragraph. This research showed that only 2% of students were categorized as "excellent" who got 80 marks, 10% were categorised as "good", 32% were categorised as "fair", 24.5% were categorised as "Low", and last, 22.5% were categorised into failed. These findings claim that almost 50% of students have got low or failed marks.

Furthermore, Laily (2008) used 100 students in the second semester of the Department of English of the University of Muhammadiyah, Surakarta, and the students were required to rewrite an essay which has previously had 11 inaccurate prepositions by replacing the accurate prepositions. The results showed that the period has 16% inaccuracy, Comma 15%, Question mark 4%, Slash 6%, Strip 3%, Brackets 9%, Quotation Mark 3%, Apostrophe 1%, Exclamation 17%, Semicolon 13%, Colon 13%. Based on these findings, Laily (2008) has shown that the highest errors were with the period, comma and exclamation. Meanwhile, the lowest number of errors made by students is the use of "apostrophe".

In addition, Abeynayake (2017) tried to examine whether the English Language (L2) proficiency of (BE) teachers of North Central Province, Sri Lanka, helps to facilitate the (BE) students in their subject matter.

Distributing web pages and questionnaires to 50 selected Bilingual Education (BE) students in government schools in North Central Province, Sri Lanka, and following classroom observations and interviews, Abeynayake (2017) has shown that 65% of BE teachers have made errors and mistakes in using punctuation marks.

Halik and Jayasundara (2021), using a role-play on punctuation marks as a tool with a number of twenty G.C. E. O/L (Grade 11) students in Sri Lanka, have found that these students could identify the places where the particular punctuation marks as follows: full stop 65%, capitalization 70%, question mark 70%, comma 50%, exclamation mark 20%, apostrophe 15%, quotation mark 15% and ellipsis 00%. Secondly, by giving a test to the same students, Halik & Jayasundara found that no participant had appropriately used 'comma' in all the 05 sentences given to the students. The finding shows that most of the participants do not have previous knowledge about punctuation markers except full stop, capitalization, and question marks.

2.5. Research gap

By reviewing the existing works of literature, it was found that there is a research gap to be filled; no study has been done on a comparative study of the correct usage of punctuation in writing tasks of adult Sinhala-speaking ESL Learners, studying a “Diploma course in English” conducted by a state university in Sri Lanka. Therefore, as an attempt to fill the research gap, this research was conducted.

3.0. Methodology of the study

3.1. Data Collection, Tools and the Sample

The quantitative method was used in this study for data collection and data analysis. The researcher focused on 08 punctuation marks as follows. 1. Full stop (.), 2. Comma (,), 3. Question mark (?), 4. Semi-colon (;), 5. Colon (:), 6. the exclamation mark (!), 7. Apostrophe (') & 8. Quotation mark (“ ”). Sixteen sentences were selected using 02 passages (02 sentences for each punctuation mark), and 24 separate sentences (03 sentences for each punctuation mark) were selected.

Total marks were given out of 05. Only these testing punctuation marks were deleted before the test, and the remaining spaces which were previously occupied by the correct punctuation marks were also deleted. The other irrelevant punctuation marks were not deleted. Fifty students were selected from the DEPP 2019 course using the systematic sampling method. The students were asked to rewrite the given 02 passages and 24 sentences, including the correct punctuation marks in the correct places. The collected data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

3.2. The administration of the Test and Limitations

The students were asked to rewrite the given 02 passages and 24 separate sentences, including the accurate punctuation marks in the correct places. The capitalization was not considered, as it is not considered as a punctuation mark. The answer scripts were marked, and for each correct use of punctuation mark was given 01 mark. This study focused only on adult students (age 29-35 years) who followed the “Diploma in English for Professional Purposes Course” conducted in 2019 by the Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Only a total number of 08 punctuation marks were focused.

4.0. Data Analysis and Results

One Sample Statistics was computed by using SPSS to test the median values of the correct performance of these 08 punctuation marks. An ANOVA Test was computed using the HSD TUKEY Test in SPSS to compare the significant differences among median values of the correct performance of the 08 punctuation marks.

Table 01:

One- Sample Statistics

| One-Sample Statistics | | | | |
|-----------------------|----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
| Full stop | 50 | 4.26 | .723 | .102 |
| Comm | 50 | 3.12 | .594 | .084 |
| Semc | 50 | 1.04 | .781 | .111 |
| Colon | 50 | 1.80 | .670 | .095 |
| Ques | 50 | 4.44 | .577 | .082 |
| Excl | 50 | 2.96 | .699 | .099 |
| Apos | 50 | 3.28 | .757 | .107 |
| Quoa | 50 | 3.74 | .600 | .085 |

According to Table 01, the highest mean value is shown almost equally by the full stop and the question mark, where the semi-colon and colon marks show the least mean values. The next step is to compute an ANOVA HSD Tukey Test in SPSS to observe the significant differences among the punctuation marks.

In the ANOVA HSD TUKEY Test, the significant differences among the groups are measured by the 'p' value. If $p < 0.05$, it shows the lowest significance. If $p < 0.01$, it shows a higher significance. If $p < 0.001$, it shows the highest significance.

Significant differences in the correct usage of punctuation marks were found as follows:

Significant differences ($p = 0.00$) exist between the correct use of full-stop and comma, full-stop and colon, full stop and semicolon, full-stop and exclamation mark; full-stop and apostrophe and full-stop and quotation mark. Therefore, there is no significant difference between full-stop and question mark. The Quotation mark shows significant differences from all the other punctuation marks.

There are significant differences between the correct usage of **comma** and **full stop**, **comma** and **semi-colon**, **comma** and **colon**, **comma** and **question mark**. There is **no significant** difference **between commas** and **exclamation**, **as well as between commas** and **apostrophes**. Significant differences exist between the **colon** and **all other punctuation marks**. Moreover, significant differences exist between the **semicolon mark** and all the remaining punctuation marks. A comparison of the findings of the above given significant differences with reversion to Table-01 mean values of the correct performance of the punctuation marks at the given test is given below.

Retrieving Table 01 above One-Sample Statistics to confirm the acquisition order of punctuation marks.

Table: 01

| One-Sample Statistics | | | | |
|-----------------------|----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
| Full stop | 50 | 4.26 | .723 | .102 |
| Comma | 50 | 3.12 | .594 | .084 |
| Semicolon | 50 | 1.04 | .781 | .111 |
| Colon | 50 | 1.80 | .670 | .095 |
| Question | 50 | 4.44 | .577 | .082 |
| Exclamation | 50 | 2.96 | .699 | .099 |
| Apostrophe | 50 | 3.28 | .757 | .107 |
| Quotation | 50 | 3.74 | .600 | .085 |

According to Table 01, retrieved above, the **full stop and the question mark** has almost the same mean values (4.26 and 4.44) and they are the highest two Mean values in this table. At the same time, according to the significant differences shown in the ANOVA HSD TUKEY test, There is no positive significant difference between the mean value of **full stop and the mean value of the question mark**. Therefore, it confirms that, in the acquisition order of correct use of punctuation marks, the **full stop and question mark lie at the top of the order together**. According to Table 01, the quotation mark has the second-highest mean value. At the same time, according to ANOVA test findings, the **quotation mark** has significant differences from all the other punctuation marks. Therefore, it is confirmed that the **quotation mark** should lie next, alone in the **02nd line** in the acquisition order. Next, according to Table 01, the next highest mean values are **for apostrophe, comma and exclamation mark**. At the same time, there are no significant differences among the **apostrophe, comma and exclamation mark**. Therefore, it confirms that the **apostrophe, comma and exclamation mark should lie together in the 3rd line**. According to Table 01, the **colon mark** shows the next highest mark. At the same time, there are significant differences between the colon mark and all the other punctuation marks tested in this study. Therefore, we can confirm that **colon mark** lies alone on **the 4th line**. In the end, the semi-colon shows the least performance, and it shows significant differences from all the other punctuation marks. Therefore, we can confirm that the last remaining punctuation mark in this study, the **semi- colon** lies alone on the last line (**5th line**) of the acquisition order of the punctuation marks.

Therefore, according to the findings of this study, the acquisition order of the tested 08 punctuation marks is as follows:

1. **Full-stop, Question Mark**
2. **Quotation Mark**
3. **Apostrophe, Comma, Exclamation Mark**
4. **Colon**
5. **Semi-Colon**

Hypothesis Testing

1. **H1:** Significant differences exist among the adult learners' performances in the eight punctuation marks.

The results of this study clearly show that some punctuation marks have significant differences between some punctuation marks, but some punctuation marks do not have significant differences with some punctuation marks. Therefore, the **H1 hypothesis is partially proved**.

2. **H2:** There is a clear order for adult learners (age: 29-35 years) to acquire punctuation marks.

According to the findings of this study, there is a clear order in the acquisition of punctuation marks. Therefore, the **H2 Hypothesis is proved**.

5. Discussion

The discussion in the 4.0 (Data analysis and Results) section on significant differences among the correct performance of the punctuation marks clearly shows that there are significant differences among/between some punctuation marks, but there are no significant differences among/between some punctuation marks. Moreover, this research has **found an acquisition order, as shown above**. This clarification **answers question no 01 and question no 04**. **In addition**, this order of acquisition of punctuation marks of adult ESL learners (age: 29 -35 years) above clearly shows that the highest performance is shown by the full-stop and question mark, almost equally. The lowest performance is shown by the semi-colon mark. This clarification answers research **question No.02** and research **question No. 03** of this study.

6.0. Conclusion

The order of the Acquisition of punctuation marks of adult learners, as shown in Section 05 (Findings), is as follows.

1. Full-stop, Question Mark
2. Quotation Mark
3. Apostrophe, Comma, Exclamation Mark
4. Colon
5. Semi-Colon

This order of acquisition is vitally important to make fruitful teaching on correct punctuation marks for adult learners (age 29-35 years). The teachers of ESL would be aware of the learning order of correct punctuation marks, and thereby, they can teach and administer tests for adult students starting from the top of the order (full stop and the question mark) simultaneously and, next, the quotation mark. The apostrophe, comma and exclamation mark can be taught simultaneously, and go down following the order given above, and end up with the semicolon. The adult students will experience learning and using the easiest punctuation marks, the most difficult punctuation marks, and the other punctuation marks in between them quite comprehensively. This way, the teachers can also facilitate teaching punctuation marks for ESL adult students. This study suggests that relevant university academics, school teachers, and education policymakers who are involved in teaching adult students to update the teaching curricula, syllabi, and lesson plans on punctuation marks in the English language, following the acquisition order of punctuation marks found in this study.

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