

Mokgwathi & Otlhomile, 2017

Volume 3 Issue 1, pp. 17 - 30

Date of Publication: 15th March, 2017

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2017.31.1730>

This paper can be cited as: Mokgwathi, T., & Otlhomile, B. (2017). Where Has All The Punctuation Gone? Of Culprits, Victims and Casualty. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 3(2), 17-30.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

WHERE HAS ALL THE PUNCTUATION GONE? OF CULPRITS, VICTIMS AND CASUALTY

Tsaona S. Mokgwathi

*Department of Social Sciences and Academic Literacy, Botswana International University of
Science and Technology, Palapye, Botswana*
mokgwathit@biust.ac.bw

Boitshoko E. Otlhomile

*Department of Social Sciences and Academic Literacy, Botswana International University of
Science and Technology, Palapye, Botswana*
otlhomileb@biust.ac.bw

Abstract

This paper investigates the root cause of little or lack of punctuation in writing. The researchers as teachers of writing for many years at different institutions have realised that students have little or no regard for the use of punctuation in writing, yet punctuation is one of the most important aspects when writing both in English as the Language of Instruction in education and in Setswana as the national language. Punctuation gives meaning to the written words, and that its omission or wrong use may convey a different meaning from the one the writer intended, or may render the writing altogether meaningless. The study was conducted at a university of science and technology and it involved first year students enrolled in four engineering programmes. The first year classes were chosen because it is the first stage into university education. The data were collected and analysed qualitatively. It is hoped that the results of the study will inform lecturers at tertiary institutions and teachers of secondary schools about the punctuation problems that students bring into the university. These problems have a negative effect on the quality of the students' written work, and

eventually, their academic performance. It is recommended that the students are sensitised about the importance of correct punctuation in writing. Consequently, lecturers of writing in tertiary education institutions will receive students who are better writers.

Keywords

Punctuation, Culprits, Victims, Casualty, Writing Skill

1. Introduction

Punctuation is one of the most important aspects when writing both in English as the Language of Instruction (LoI) in education. It gives meaning to the written message, and its omission or wrong use may convey a different meaning from the one the writer intended, or may render the writing altogether meaningless. Similarly, Connelly (2005) states that punctuation marks control the writer's tone and clarify the thought. Despite the importance of punctuation in writing, students at the Botswana International University of Science and Technology (BIUST) continue to display complete disregard for the use of punctuation in all their writing. Whether this is a result of ignorance or sheer negligence, the end result is incoherent writing.

Punctuation is a very important sign-post that not only conveys the meaning of the written text, but also through its use, conveys the feelings and emotions of the writer. Alfaki (2015) concurs that through writing; a person can express own ideas, thoughts, opinions and attitudes. For this reason it is important that punctuation marks are used correctly for the written text to be consistent with the writer's intentions. In that regard, Sawhney (2015) states that "a wrong punctuation mark may create startling change in the sentence or can even render the sentence meaningless (p1509)." Punctuation involves the use of a series of conventions that make it easier for readers to follow the writer's line of thought. The basic rules are:

- A full stop (.) marks the end of a sentence which stands for a main idea.
- A comma (,) marks a pause in the flow of an idea, which is not a complete sentence but allows for additional information.
- A semi-colon (;) is a longer pause, which is meaningful but may not be the end of a sentence.
- A colon (:) indicates that a list of ideas is about to follow.
- A question mark (?), as the name implies, is used to indicate to the reader that the sentence is a question and not a statement.

- An exclamation mark (!) conveys to the reader the writer's emotions such as surprise, excitement, and anger.

The correct use of all these punctuation marks renders the written text meaningful. However, their incorrect use may imply a wrong meaning from what the writer intended. Furthermore, exclusion of punctuation marks may result in a meaningless text. Unfortunately, the modern-day student does not seem to be aware of the dire consequences of wrong use or non-usage of the punctuation marks. Whilst the researchers are expected to focus their teaching on technical writing and academic literacy, they find themselves having to go back to the basics to teach students on how to punctuate correctly. Students at the level of the university still find it difficult to punctuate correctly or even to punctuate at all. Afrin (2016) makes a similar observation that most of the students at tertiary level education are very weak in the writing skills. Hence the researchers undertook this study to share with other educators the extent of the problem at their university and the measures they have used to try to remedy the situation.

1.1 Background on Admission of Students on BIUST Programmes

In order to understand the level of students' competency in English as the LoI, a background on BIUST policy on admission is necessary. When BIUST began admitting student's in 2012, it did not offer Technical Writing and Academic Literacy (TWAL) to its students until January 2014. This is paradoxical given the fact that in its entry requirements, BIUST states that a D grade or better in English Language at Secondary school leaving certificate, is sufficient for the applicant to be admitted (BIUST Undergraduate Prospectus for 2014/15). The implication is that many of its students may not be competent in writing in English. Therefore, there was need to enhance their communication in English as the LoI in Botswana. English is also the official language used in the secondary domain cluster functioning as the language of government administration, the judiciary, science and technology, trade and industry, and the media (Mokgwathi, 2011). BIUST had also ignored the fact that these students come from a general English background at secondary school. Therefore, there was need to orientate them towards writing for Science, Engineering and Technology in addition to enhancing their communication skills to meet the expected standard at university. Further, the students are required to comply with academic writing conventions which include correct use of the instructional language, acknowledging and proper citing of sources, and using referencing techniques applicable in their disciplines. Since January 2014, the Technical Writing and Academic Literacy (TWAL) course is taught

to undergraduate students. However, its mode of offering varies from one college to the other. For instance, students in the College of Engineering and Technology study the course for three semesters; while those in the College of Sciences (including ICT), study it for four semesters.

2. Conceptual Framework

The Social-Constructivism theory based on Vygotsky [1896-1934] (1962)'s theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) (Blake and Pope, 2008) informed the conceptual framework of this paper. ZPD refers to the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (McLeod, 2012). The social constructivism theory posits that children performed better when working collaboratively on a task with an adult than when working on their own (Daniels, 1996). This is because the process of engagement with the adult enabled them to refine their thinking or their performance to make it more effective. This theory suggests that learners are much more actively involved in a joint enterprise with the teacher of creating ("constructing") new meanings. The researchers found this theory appropriate for this paper because the tasks students were given required interaction between the students and their lecturer or the teaching assistant who often supervised students' work during tutorial sessions.

3. Research Problem

This paper discusses the role of punctuation marks in writing. The researchers embarked on a study to investigate the root cause of the problem of lack of punctuation use in students' written work. The researchers have realised over many years of teaching similar courses at different institutions that students, regardless of their level of education, have little or no idea about the role of punctuation in writing. It seems the students are oblivious of the fact that punctuation use and its correct use result in effective communication. The researchers are aware that there are no universal rules of punctuation (Carrol and Wilson, 1995). However, the fundamental rule is that punctuation is indispensable in writing. Furthermore, academic writing requires correct use of punctuation in addition to good grammar, correct spelling and capitalisation. It is against this background that the researchers embarked on this research to bring to the fore the extent of the problem of lack of punctuation in students' work. This is important because lack of punctuation or its incorrect use

negatively impacts on the quality of writing and consequently on students' academic performance.

To address the research topic, the researchers used the following research questions:

1. What is the extent of the problem of punctuation among BIUST students?
2. What is the effect of lack of punctuation on students' writing and performance?
3. What strategies are used to address punctuation problems?

4. Methodology

The study involved 20 first-year engineering students, and their written work served as data for the study. These students were randomly drawn from four engineering programmes of Mechatronics, Geological, Civil and Environmental, Chemical, Material and Metallurgical Engineering. From each programme, five samples of students' work were randomly chosen to give a fair representation.

The written work chosen for the study was a summary exercise that had been marked. A summary was chosen because the researchers felt that it will give an authentic picture of the quality of students' writing regarding punctuation use when they enter university. A summary exercise gives the students an opportunity to formulate their own writing without plagiarising what has already been written. It also tests the students' understanding of the salient points of the original text. Therefore, it was assumed that through it, the students would display their level of competency in writing in general, and a good understanding of punctuation rules in particular. Each summary was analysed to determine whether punctuation marks have been used correctly. Where punctuation marks were wrongly used, implication on meaning was determined.

4.1 Site

The study was based at the Botswana International University of Science and Technology, which is a university specifically established to train future scientists, engineers, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) experts. The students are required to study the TWAL course as part of general education. The engineering students are offered this course for one and a half years distributed over three semesters in three years. During the first two semesters, students are introduced to the principles and practices of Technical Writing. In the third semester, they are introduced to basic research skills and are expected to

apply their skills in producing a research report. This is important because it gives students an opportunity to display their writing skills.

5. Data Analysis

The data were analysed qualitatively. This involved reading each of the 20 summaries to see whether the four main punctuation marks (full stop, comma, semi-colon and a colon) were correctly used. In addition, a question mark and an exclamation mark were checked for correct usage although rare in students' writing. In analysing the data, implication on meaning as a result of a punctuation mark used or not used was observed. The overall implication on the quality of writing was also observed.

The question of the summary was:

Read the passage below and write a summary of about 70 words. The summary must be in continuous writing.

The Three Stages of Research

The first stage has to do with ideas that could be starting points for research projects. These ideas may originate from several sources: from the laboratory itself, either in connection with existing work or from deliberate exploratory studies; from refineries and chemical plants as the direct outcome of actual operating problems; or from marketing, where a close watch is kept on customers' requirements and probable trends. The second stage, development research, comprises all the investigation required for putting the idea into practice. If, say, a new product is to be put on the market, the best manufacturing conditions (temperature, pressure and flow rate) must be worked out: analytical methods for controlling a commercial plant must be devised and construction materials for the plant must be investigated. Often a new catalyst must be found, and hundreds of exploratory experiments are carried out, guided by knowledge gleaned from fundamental studies on catalysis.

Engineering studies provide the data needed for the design of reactors and other equipment. Complete miniature laboratory units, incorporating all the essential features of the process are visualised, will probably be followed by the construction of a pilot plant to prove that the process is workable on an industrial scale. The pilot plant also enables the entire range of possible manufacturing conditions to be studied. This stage is both lengthy and extremely expensive: costs of a pilot plant may be more than P10 million. Once the properties of a new product have been explored, the product is generally passed to the product research

laboratory, where its possible uses are studied. Here, cooperation with other industries can be especially valuable.

Obtained and adapted from: *Langan, J. (2008) Writing Skills for Colleges and Universities in Africa*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

In analysing the summaries, the following were noted:

- Long sentences characterised by few or no punctuation
- Wrong use of punctuation - wrong use of the comma (,). Generally students either used the comma wrongly or omitted it altogether where it was necessary.
- Non-use of the comma after transitional words; for example, first, second, third, then, and finally.
- No use of a full stop to mark the end of a sentence.
- Non-usage of capital letter at the beginning of a sentence - there were instances of non-use of capitalisation even where it was obviously necessary; for instance, at the beginning of a sentence or when stating a name of a person or place.
- Use of a capital letter in the middle of a sentence without naming a person or place.
- There was no use of question mark, semi-colon and colon.
- Quotation marks were also not present.

6. Results Discussion

The results of the study were discussed under three research questions. The first research question was “What is the extent of the problem of punctuation among BIUST students?” From the analysed data, the results revealed that students hardly used punctuation marks in writing. Lack of punctuation results in lengthy sentences which end up concealing the meaning the reader intended. Where punctuation is used, either it is used wrongly or it is overused. Awad (2012) makes a similar observation that the comma was overused at the expense of the period. Akampirige & Benjamin (2014) also observe that students were unable to use punctuation marks correctly in their own free writing. For example, an extract below from a summary written by a Chemical, Material and Metallurgical Engineering student demonstrates overuse of the comma:

Extract One

Second stage, development research, comprises investigation for putting the idea into practice, likewise, product to be put on the market, then best manufacturing conditions must be done.

The sentence above is lengthy and incoherent because of overuse of the comma. Infact, the sentence can be split into two sentences as follows:

Second stage, development research, comprises investigation for putting the idea into practice. For instance, if a product is to be put on the market, then best manufacturing conditions must be done.

The analysed data further revealed that the students failed to use the comma after transitional words such as: *For example, first, second, third, then, and finally*. Extract two below from a summary written by a Mechatronics Engineering student illustrates this:

Extract Two

For example if a new product is introduced, all the important tools for it to succeed must be planned. Finally the product is put on an industrial scale however this is costly and takes time.

Three transitional words have been used in the extract above: For example, finally and however; but the writer failed to punctuate with a comma after each one of them. The writer failed to see that a comma is used to signal a pause that even a speaker will make in a speech.

The results also showed that the students cannot use the full stop correctly. The full stop is very important because it marks the end of a sentence which is often a statement. Its wrong use is illustrated in extract three below from a summary written by a Civil and Environmental engineering student:

Extract Three

Second stage involves putting ideas into practice in order to develop the research. by carrying out investigations an example would be a new product, the best manufacturing conditions must be worked out.

In the extract above, the writer uses a full stop in the middle of a sentence and starts the next sentence with a small letter. In addition, a comma is used wrongly. This resulted in the meaning of the sentence(s) being obscured.

Furthermore, the results showed that some of the students wrongfully used capital letters –it is evident that the students have not internalised the basic rules of English grammar. The extract below demonstrates this anomaly:

Extract Four

The first stage has to do with ideas that could be starting points For research projects.

The writer has used capital **F** in the word “for” in the middle of a sentence.

The next research question is: “What is the effect of lack of punctuation on students’ writing and performance?” The results have shown that lack of punctuation or wrong use of punctuation marks negatively affects the quality of the students’ writing. Poor writing skills affect the meaning that is to be conveyed. The reader – who is usually the teacher or lecturer– may misinterpret the message or may not be able to understand the message altogether. As a result, a student may be penalised by being awarded a low mark. Low marks reflect poor academic performance on the part of the student.

Furthermore, evidence from the students’ written work has also shown that other punctuation marks such as the semi-colon, colon and even a question mark are usually used wrongly or even omitted where they are required. Awad (2012) similarly observes that students often misuse the semi-colon.





The last research question is: “What strategies are used to address punctuation problem?” The correct use of punctuation marks cannot be ignored because punctuation marks contribute to meaning of a written text. In the researchers’ views, punctuation marks are important to both spoken and written communication just like road signs are important in driving. Connelly (2005) similarly observes that punctuation marks are like traffic lights telling us to slow down and stop. Therefore, to address the problem of punctuation in students’ writing, the researchers have used three strategies. The first strategy is ‘The fill-in-the gaps’ strategy. In this strategy, students are given a text with all punctuation marks removed. Then they are asked to punctuate the text to make it meaningful. This strategy is effective because the students are able to see the importance of punctuation in giving

meaning to a written text. Mohammed and Hazarika (2016) suggest a similar strategy that “... editing writing pieces with punctuation errors can help students in improving this segment [correct punctuation] p114”. Alfaki (2015) makes a similar observation that students need to practice writing [including use of punctuation marks] to become good writers.

The second strategy is “The self-criticism strategy”. Here the teacher and the students discuss the students’ marked written work. By revising their own work, students are able to appreciate the mistakes they have made and how to avoid them in future. Muwafaq That way, the students would diagnose their shortcomings and correct those (Muslim, 2014). Mohammed and Hazarika (2016) also allude to the same strategy that “class test should also be analysed and mistakes should be explained to students so that they can avoid the same mistakes in future ... pp113-114”.

The third strategy is “The road-sign strategy.”In this strategy, road signs are used to assist the students to understand the importance of punctuation marks in writing. For instance, a comma is similar to a yield sign, a full stop is like a stop sign, and an exclamation mark is equated to a warning sign. Wrong use of punctuation marks or their omission may result in incoherent writing just like violation of road signs may result in a serious injury. Incoherent writing may lead to low marks, which may result in possible failure by a student. Mohammed and Hazarika (2016) also assert that most students fail to perform better because they do not know the basic rules of punctuation. Table 6.1 below illustrates the similarities in meaning between road signs and punctuation marks.

Table 1: *Similarities between Road Signs and Punctuation Marks*

Punctuation Marks	Use	Road Sign
Exclamation Mark	Used when a person wants to express a sudden outcry or add emphasis.	
Semi Colon	To separate independent statements that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction.	
Full Stop	Placed at the end of declarative sentences or statements thought to be complete.	
Comma	used to show a separation of ideas or elements within the structure of a sentence	

All the three strategies discussed above are consistent with the social constructivism theory based on Vygotsky [1896-1934] (1962)'s theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) (Blake and Pope, 2008). By working with their lecturers, the students are able to understand why a particular punctuation mark is applicable at a certain stage of a sentence but not the other punctuation mark. In that regard, Afrin (2016) asserts that "English teachers need to spend a great deal of time checking, marking and giving feedback to their student's p. 112".

7. Study Limitation

The results of this study are limited to the four engineering groups which were the focus of this study. Therefore, they cannot be generalized to all engineering students or to all BIUST students. In the future, the study may be extended to other engineering programmes. Similarly, the results are not applicable to the students enrolled for the Sciences and Information Communication Technology (ICT) unless a similar study is conducted in their college.

8. Conclusions

The study has demonstrated that when students enter tertiary education, they bring with them some language difficulties which impact negatively on teaching and learning. As a result, lecturers in tertiary education teach language basics such as punctuation that students should have mastered at secondary school. Mohammed and Hazarika (2016) also state that "students do not know even the basic rules of punctuation though it has been part of their school curriculum p. 112". The study has also shown that punctuation is very important in writing. Without it, the reader is left struggling to make sense out of what is written (Awad, 2012). According to Awad, punctuation marks are important to a reader just like a torch is important to a person walking in the dark. Robert (2006) also states that punctuation marks cut the flow of words into meaningful groups and prevent confusion. Therefore, punctuation marks are invaluable to both the writer to communicate meaning and to the reader to receive meaning from a written text. According to (Ming, 2006) wrong use of punctuation marks is a distinctive indicator of lack of clarity in texts.

The study has also confirmed that because of poor punctuation, writing and meaning become the casualties; the students are the victims because it is not their fault that they cannot punctuate correctly. It is a clear that somewhere the education system has ignored one of the important aspects of writing, namely the use of punctuation marks. In the researchers view,

the teachers of language are the culprits. Once teachers of language begin to pay special attention to punctuation use and emphasise its importance in conveying meaning, students will consciously learn it. Punctuation mistakes will decrease and the quality of students' writing will improve. Consequently, reading student's written work will be pleasant and performance will also be positively affected.

9. Recommendations

Having revealed the important role of punctuation use in writing, it is recommended that language teachers at all level of education should emphasise the importance of punctuation in giving meaning to the written word. Teachers of non-language subjects should also pay attention to punctuation when marking students' written work. Awad (2012) also asserts that "all teaching staff should overstress the importance of all the punctuation marks in the written and the oral communication courses p. 211". Afrin (2016) also observes that students are not motivated to write in English in non-English major classes. This implies that teachers of non-language subjects do not think that it is their responsibility to encourage students to write correctly, including using punctuation marks correctly. The establishment of writing centres in schools and institutions of higher learning will go a long way in giving facilitators [teachers] and learners an opportunity to pay attention to some of the important aspects of writing outside the classroom (Mokgwathi, 2015). Teachers will coach their students on how to write well, including using punctuation marks correctly, consistent with Vygotsky (1962)'s theory of social constructivism. Furthermore, when marking students' work, correct use of punctuation marks should be allocated marks to encourage students to understand and appreciate its importance in written communication.

In conclusion, the researchers concur with Lukeman (2006) that punctuation marks are as essential to good composition just as nails are important to a carpenter. Rumki (2005) also states that properly used punctuation helps readers to understand meaning and makes them engrossed in what they are reading.

References

- Afrin, S. (2016). Writing Problems of Non-English Major Undergraduate Students in Bangladesh: An Observation. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 4, 104-115.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/jss.2016.43016>

- Akampirigige, A. O. & Benjamin, A. (2014). Errors in the Use of Punctuation Marks Among Polytechnic Students. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 3(1), 93-98.
- Alfaki, I. M. (2015). University Students' English Writing Problems: Diagnosis and Remedy. *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, 3 (3), 40-52.
- Awad, H. (2012). The Most Common Punctuation Errors Made by the English and the TEFL Majors at An-Najah National University. *An-Najah University.J. Res(Humanities)*, 26(1), 211-233.
- Botswana International University of Science and Technology (2014). Undergraduate Prospectus for 2014/2015.
- Caroll, J. & Willson, E. (1995). Acts of Teaching. How to Teach Writing. Englewood: Teacher Idea Express.
- Connelly, M. (2005). Get Writing Sentences and Paragraph. Milwaukee Area Technological College Language Arts / Linguistics / Literacy. Wadsworth: Thomson.
- Daniels, H., (1996). An introduction to Vygotsky. London, Rutledge.
<http://site.ebrary.com/id/10057539> Accessed on 10th February, 2016.
- Lukeman, N. (2006). The Art of Punctuation. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- McLeod, S., (2012). Zone of Proximal Development. Simply Psychology.
<http://www.simplypsychology.org/Zone-of-Proximal - Development. html> Accessed on the 10th February 2016.
- Ming. Y. (2006). Discursive Usage of Six Chinese Punctuation Marks. Association for Computational Linguistics. Department of Applied Linguistics. Communication University of China 100024 Beijing, China.
- Mohammad, T. & Hazarika, Z. (2016). Difficulties of Learning EFL in KSA: Writing Skills in Context. *International Journal of English Linguistics*. 6 (3), 105-117.
- Mokgwathi, T. S. (2015). Using the Writing Centre Model to Enhance Report-writing Skills Among Engineering Students: A Case Study. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, 3 (1) 171-184.
- Muwafag Muslim (2014). Helping EFL Students Improve their Writing. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4 (2), 105-112.
- Robert, C. (2006). The English Style Book: A Guide to the Writing of Scholarly English. University of East Anglia. Norwich.

Sawhney, E. (2015). Living and Learning English: Challenges Before the Undergraduate Engineering Students in India. *People: International Journal of Social Sciences*. 2 (1), 1504-1513.

Vygotsky, L. (1962). In Atherton J. S., (2013) *Learning and Teaching; Constructivism in learning* [On-line: UK]
<http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/constructivism.html> Accessed on 2nd May, 2016.