



International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies

URL: www.aessweb.com



ERRORS IN THE USE OF PUNCTUATION MARKS AMONG POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS

Avomah Oscar Mac Akampirige

Department of Liberal Studies, Bolgatanga Polytechnic, Ghana

Apam Benjamin

Department of Statistics, Bolgatanga Polytechnic, Ghana

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to identify and examine the level of errors in the usage of punctuation marks among students in Ghanaian Polytechnics. Data was collected using test results on an unpunctuated passage and a written speech. Results of the study revealed that students of the Polytechnics still have great challenges in identifying punctuation marks in written text. Another disturbing conclusion from the study indicated that students in Ghanaian Polytechnics use these punctuation marks inappropriately in their own free writing.

© 2014 AESS Publications. All Rights Reserved.

Keywords: Punctuation marks, Errors, Polytechnics, Lingua franca, Low standard, Inter-language, Ghana.

Received: 23 October 2013 / Revised: 18 January 2014 / Accepted: 21 January 2014 / Published: 24 January 2014

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language occupies a very significant position in all aspects of the life of Ghanaians. It is indeed the “lingua franca” of the country, serving as the main language of government, commerce, administration and in fact, the main medium of instruction in all educational institutions. In spite of the important role played by English in the socio-economic development of Ghanaians, there have been several complaints that the standard of English at all levels of education is falling. This low standard has been observed and voiced by many researchers (Burton, 1963; Yaabere, 1993; West African Examinations Council, 1996; 1994). Whilst many others turn their attention on the importance and identification of punctuation marks in written English (Eckersley and Eckersley, 1970; Gary, 1982; Hennessy, 1988; Sackeyfio *et al.*, 1991; Hacker, 1995; Keene and Adams, 1996; Opoku-Agyemang, 1998; Sally *et al.*, 2000; Schor and Summerfield, 2000; Le Tourneau, 2001), some researchers studied the errors committed by both

students and writers (Brown and Scragg, 1948; Burton, 1963; Tandoh, 1987; Buandoh, 1996). Muller (1991), on the other hand, argued that there are no rules about punctuation marks. As the learner progresses, it is expected that his/her inter-language also moves closer to the target language system and that fewer errors may be produced. This study however considers the level of errors committed by tertiary students.

2. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The study sample of 200 students was obtained from Bolgatanga Polytechnic. A test (unpunctuated passage) and a take-home exercise (a speech) were given to students. The test was a page of an unpunctuated passage given to students to read and punctuate in thirty (30) minutes under supervision. The passage was meant to test students' ability to identify and insert punctuation marks in written English. The second exercise was an essay type question which was meant to test students' ability to write on their own using punctuation marks appropriately. The scoring was done focusing on all errors of punctuation marks (full stop, commas, colons, semi-colons, question marks, hyphens, dashes, parenthesis, capital letters, apostrophes, and quotation marks).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the analysis indicated that 36% of the students who were tested based on the unpunctuated passage had an average scored and above (Table 1). Thus they were able to identify about 50% of the "full stop" in the unpunctuated passage. The question mark, on the other hand, was not very easy for students to identify and insert in the passage as presented in Figure 1. The analysis showed that 63% of the students could not identify more than 50% of the question marks to be inserted in the passage (Figure 1). From Table 2, 10% of the students were not able to identify the colon; 50% could only identify one of the colons in the passage whereas 40% were able to identify two or three of the colons in the unpunctuated passage. The number of students who were able to insert the semi-colons in the passage at their right places is presented in Figure 2. It was revealed that 13% of the students could not insert any of the semi-colons, 40% inserted one semi-colon, 30% inserted two semi-colons and 20% inserted more than two semi-colons. According to Table 3, only 35% of the students were able to identify more than have of the hyphens in the passage. The use of the comma is another challenging punctuation mark to students as evidenced by Figure 3. Out of the seventeen (17) commas in the passage, 53% of the students could only score between 1 – 5; 34% scored between 6 – 10 marks; 10% scored between 11 – 15 whilst 3% of the students scored between 16 and 17 marks. The inability of students to identify the full stop perhaps led to their inability to insert the capital letters appropriately in the passage. According to Figure 4, only 24% of the students could identify and place the capital letters appropriately in the unpunctuated passage. The use of the apostrophe is not as familiar to many students as the full stop and comma. According to Table 4, 70% of the students failed to identify more than 50% of the apostrophes in the unpunctuated passage. The ability of students to identify the quotation marks was not very different from that of the apostrophe. As presented in Table 5, only 3% of the students

were able to identify all four quotation marks in the passage whereas 76% of students scored below the average mark.

The scoring system in the essay topic (speech) was quite different from the unpunctuated passage.

The results indicated that about 70% of the students did not have vocatives as part of their speech.

Development of points in the body of the speech also suffered the wrong use of punctuation marks, especially the comma. A clear example is stated below:

“I will make sure that I see to running of taxis in the school, because it is one of the problems, which I have noted in the school, at times it is not all the time that the school, an even after 2.00pm when we want go...”

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to identify and examine the level of errors in the usage of punctuation marks among students in Ghanaian Polytechnics. The data appeared to support the following conclusions: Students of the Polytechnics in Ghana still have greater challenges in identifying punctuation marks in written texts as well as using these punctuation marks appropriately in their own free writing.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Contributors/Acknowledgement: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

REFERENCES

- Brown, P.P. and J. Scragg, 1948. *Common errors in the gold coast*: London: Macmillan Education.
- Buandoh, A., 1996. A preliminary report on the study of error patterns in the written English of senior secondary school students. In Dakubu (ed) *English in Ghana*. pp: 195–209.
- Burton, S.H., 1963. *English in Ghana: An exposition study*. London: Macmillan.
- Eckersley and Eckersley, 1970. *A comprehensive English grammar for foreign students*. London: Longman Group.
- Gary, F., 1982. *Prentice hall grammar and composition*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc, Englewood Cliffs.
- Hacker, D., 1995. *A writer's reference*. 3rd Edn., Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's.
- Hennessy, M., 1988. *The random house practice book for writers*. New York: Random House.
- Keene, M.L. and K.H. Adams, 1996. *Easy access: The reference handbook*. 3rd Edn., U.S.A.: McGraw Hill.
- Le Tourneau, M.S., 2001. *English grammar*. Harcourt College.
- Muller, G.H., 1991. *McGraw-Hill handbook for the reader*: McGraw-Hill.
- Opoku-Agyemang, N.J., 1998. *A handbook for writing skills*. Accra-Ghana: University of Ghana Press (UGP).
- Sackeyfio, N.A., K.A. Adu, F.B. Hyde and J.A. Sackey, 1991. *Ghana senior secondary school English books*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp: 1–3.

Sally, B.E., G.J. Ahed, C.T. Brusaw and W.E. Oliu, 2000. Writing from A to Z. The easy-to-use reference handbook. 3rd Edn., London: MayField.

Schor, S. and J.Y. Summerfield, 2000. Learning and communicating: Lecture notes. Ghana: University of Education.

Tandoh, E., 1987. Aspects of the written english of university of Ghana undergraduates. Legon: University of Ghana.

West African Examinations Council, 1994. Chief examiners report. (Core Subjects) Accra, WAEC.

West African Examinations Council, 1996. Chief examiners report. (Core Subjects) Accra, WAEC.

Yaabere, B.G., 1993. Low standard of english in our schools. The Daily Graphic.

Table-1. The full stop

Scores	Number of students	Percentage (%)
0	0	0.00
1 – 5	16	16.00
6 – 10	48	48.00
11 – 15	20	20.00
16 – 19	10	10.00
20	6	6.00

Table-2. The colon (:)

Scores	Number of students	Percentage (%)
0	10	10.00
1	50	50.00
2	36	36.00
3	4	4.00

Table-3. The hyphen (-)

Scores	Number of students	Percentage (%)
0	20	20.00
1 – 5	45	45.00
6 – 10	26	26.00
11 – 12	9	9.00

Table- 4. The apostrophe (')

Scores	Number of students	Percentage (%)
0	13	13.00
1	47	47.00
2	10	10.00
3	4	4.00
4	7	7.00
5	2	2.00

Table- 5. The quotation mark (" ")

Scores	Number of students	Percentage (%)
0	51	51.00
1	25	25.00
2	11	11.00
3	10	10.00
4	3	3.00

Figure- 1. The question mark (?)

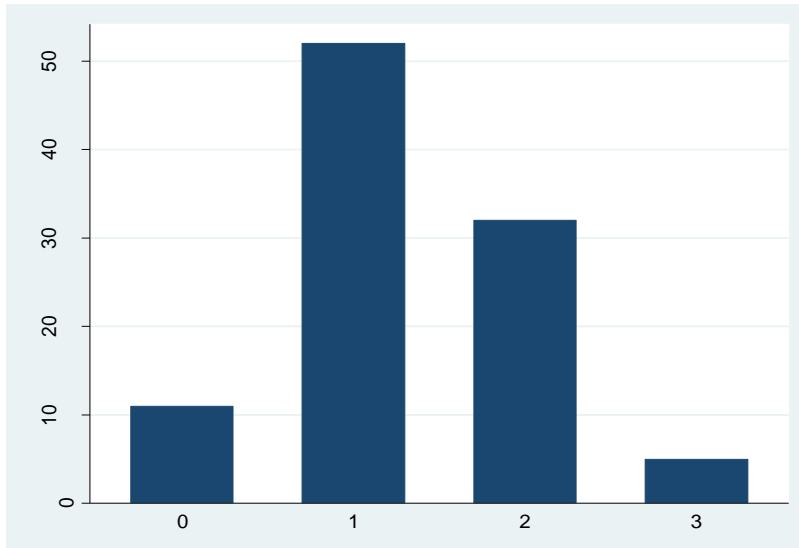


Figure- 2. The semi-colon (;)

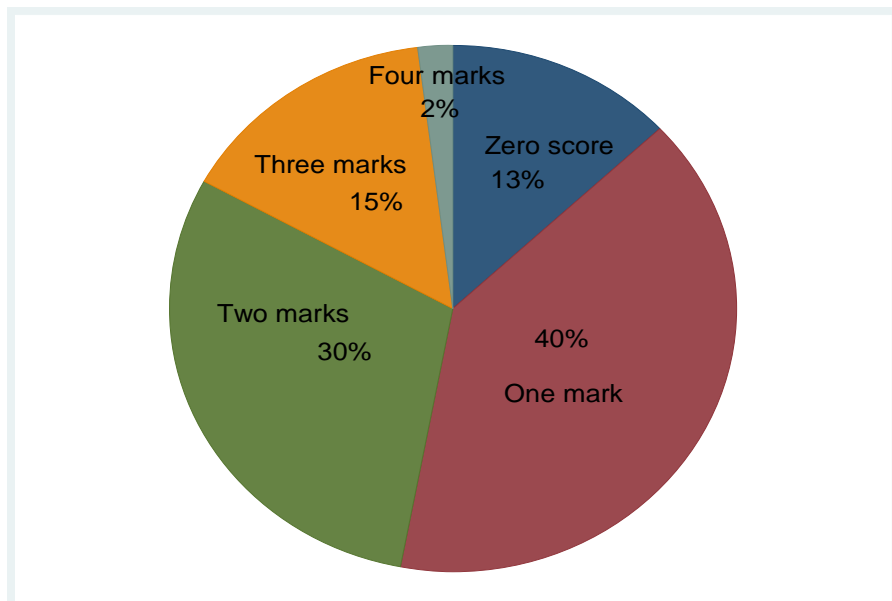


Figure- 3. The comma (,)

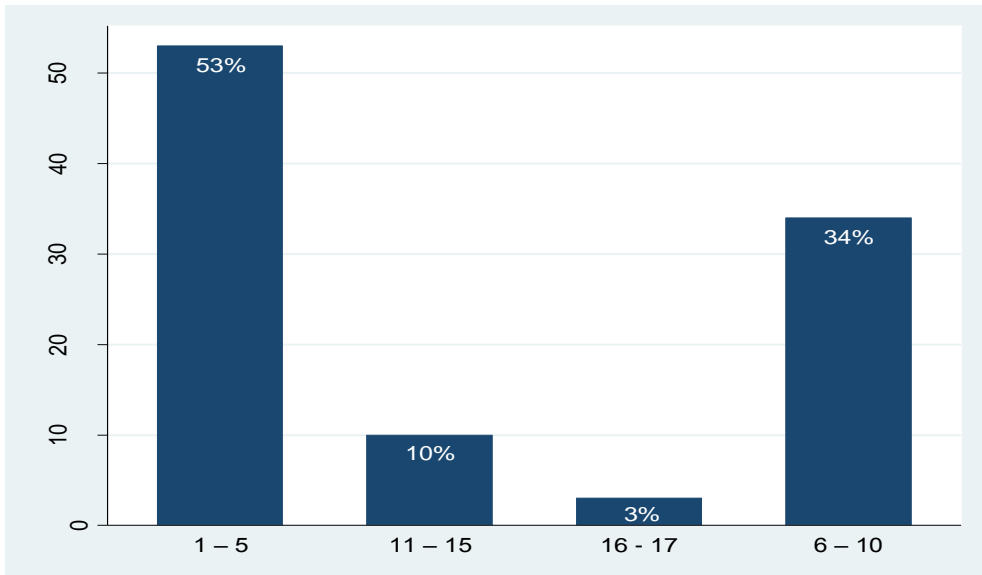
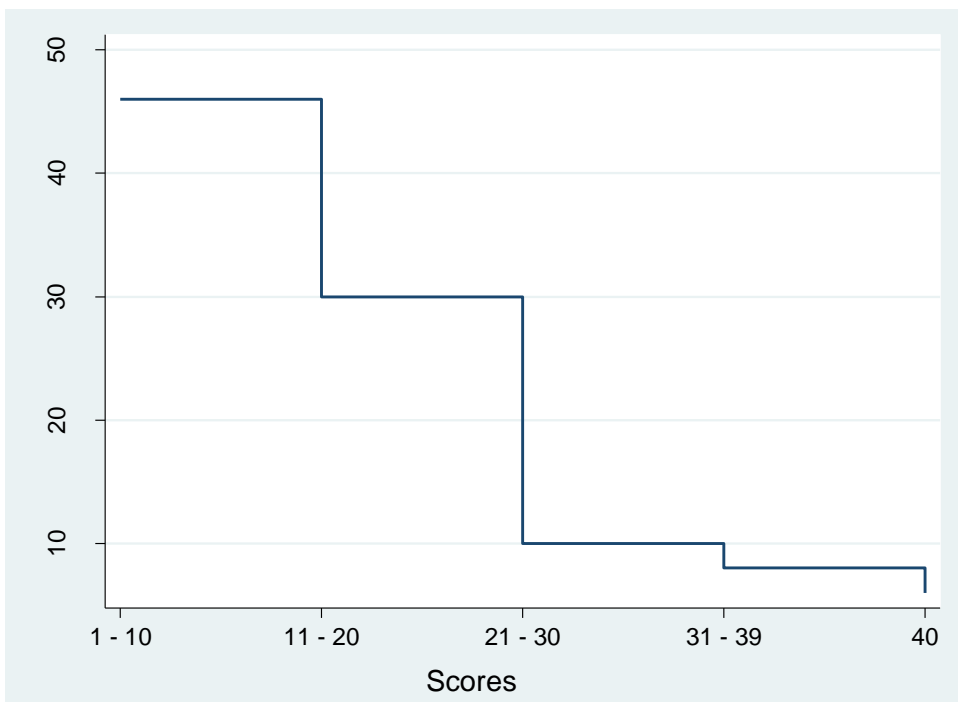


Figure- 4. The capital letter



Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the author(s), International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.