



‘We Don’t Know When to Insert Them’: Misuse of Comma and Full stop among Students in Selected Institutions in Delta State, Nigeria

UCHE OBOKO

Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria

SOLOMON ONOVWIONA

Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi -Uku, Nigeria

Abstract. The paper investigates the misuse of comma and full stop among students of University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, and Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba— all in Delta State, Nigeria. Through a simple random sampling technique, 600 students admitted to the institutions during the 2023/2024 academic session were selected from the three institutions (200 from each). The students chosen were students who offered the Use of English course which is a compulsory course for all students in their first year of study. Data for the study were obtained from answers to structured quiz on punctuation, long essays, examination scripts of the students during their first semester and interview. Data for the study were analysed using the theory of error analysis. Findings reveal that poor knowledge of word classes, phrasal and clausal elements, over generalizations among other factors affect students’ placement of the two punctuation marks. Again, the study reveals the relationship between good knowledge of punctuation marks and effective written communication. The paper recommends that teachers should devise activities and tasks on the rules of punctuation and encourage students to put them into practice both at sentence and discourse levels.

Keywords: punctuation, comma, full stop, error analysis, effective writing

1. Introduction

Every human society uses language to communicate which is usually spoken or written. When it is spoken, it makes use of sounds which are systematically arranged to form meaningful and understandable utterances. When language is written, it makes use of alphabet or letters which are equally combined to form meaningful words. It would be observed that in spoken forms, there is a set of prosodic devices through which differentiation of various kinds could modify the

stream of speech, thus, endorsing and helping users communicate the grammatical and other distinctions in English.

In Nigeria, the English language has remained a lingua franca and the official language in which the activities of the nation are conducted in. The obvious importance which is attached to the English language in Nigeria has made Nigerian learners aspire to be competent in both the spoken and written forms. Unfortunately, most undergraduates still show gross ineptitude in the mastery of both the spoken and written forms of the English language. Ekah (2018, p.29) citing Essen (2003) and Jowitt (2013) believes that the poor performance of students in writing ‘revolves around ungrammatical expressions, wrong choice of words, poor sense of punctuation and failure to understand the fundamental principles of writing’.

Evidently, in spoken words, pauses and inflexions are indicated through voice while in writing, they are indicated through plethora of devices recognized as punctuations marks. In reiterating the importance of punctuation, Babalola (2005, p.269) remarks that the ‘purpose of punctuation is to examine the visual devices that perform a similar role for the English we write’.

Commenting on the importance of punctuation marks, Ezugu (1998, p.46) citing Edger Allan Poe maintains as follows:

That punctuation is important, all agree but few comprehend the extent of its importance. The writer who neglects punctuation, or mispunctuates, is liable to be misunderstood. This according to the popular idea, is the sum of the evils arising from heedlessness or carelessness. It does not seem to be known that even where the sense is perfectly clear, a sentence may be deprived of half its force, its spirit, its point, by improper punctuation.

Despite the importance of punctuation in the English language, the researchers as teachers of communication skills/use of English to students in higher institutions, have observed over a long period of time that the students have perennial problem of punctuation especially in the use of comma and full stop.

In the light of the above, the current paper attempts to investigate the extent to which comma and full stop have been misused among students of selected institutions in Delta State. The study tries to find answers to the following questions:

- To what extent have comma and full stop been misused among students of the selected institutions?
- In what aspects of writing have the comma and full stop been misused among students of the selected institutions?
- How has the misuse of comma and full stop affected effective communication in students' writing?

2. Previous Studies on Misuse of Comma and Full stop in Students' Writing

Over the years, the study of punctuation among students has gained increased significance within the field of language teaching. As such, different studies have been carried out on punctuation among undergraduates. These studies include Raheem and Ghafar (2024) who investigated the punctuation and spelling errors EFL learners face in their academic writing. Findings from their study reveal large prevalence of punctuation and spelling errors among Iraqi EFL learners which is mostly noticed in the use of capital letters and full stops. In like manner, Ahmed, Awais and Nawaz (2024) examined the misjudgment of English comma sense and types of errors among EFL students at different educational levels. The researchers used 7 unpunctuated sentences in English and 7 unpunctuated sentences in their mother –tongue (Urdu language) to investigate if the mother tongue affects the students' knowledge of punctuation. Findings from the study reveal that errors of omission were more frequent among other errors which shows the interference of the grammatical rules of their first language (Urdu) on the target language (English). More so, Pangke, Maru and Liando (2024) interrogated how students' writing skills can be improved through the use of punctuation in writing descriptive texts at SMP Neger 3 BEO. The researchers used multiple-choice test with ten questions, pre-tests and post-tests. The pre-test

showed a standard deviation from the acceptable punctuation marks while the post-test revealed a significant improvement. The study concludes that mastery of proper punctuation can significantly improve students' descriptive writing abilities. Again, Putri, Suhalmi and Erniyati (2024) analysed capitalization, punctuation and spelling errors found in students' theses in the Department of English IAIN KERINCI. The researchers obtained their data through manual collection. Findings reveal that while capitalization errors were most prevalent, punctuation errors were minimal. Also, Sülükçü and Kirböga (2020) investigated the punctuation knowledge levels of fresh men students. Their study holds that the students made the most mistakes when using the dash and that female students made use of quotation marks better than male students. Shweba and Mujiyanto (2017), in their study of error of spelling, capitalization and punctuation marks in writing encountered by first year college students in Al-merghib University, Libya observe that the students commit errors in punctuation due to lack of knowledge, lack of balance in the curriculum and the influence of mother tongue. Still contributing to the discourse, Akampirige and Apam (2014) worked on errors in the use of punctuation marks among polytechnic students in Ghana. Drawing their data from test results of unpunctuated passages and a written speech, their study reveals that students have great challenges in identifying punctuation marks in written texts. In like manner, Similarly, Al Murshidi (2014), analyses subject-verb agreement, grammatical errors and punctuation errors in submissions of UAE University male students. The study concludes that causes of grammatical errors vary from students to students but errors in subject-verb agreement is mostly as a result of a misconception in students' minds. Using Science College, Taif University, KSA, Abdulmir and Sawsan (2012) examine the syntactical and punctuation errors analysis of technical writing of university students. Their work discovers that learners' failure to understand basic English grammar is ascribed to intralingual interference associated with the developmental sequence of learning English for technical communication in the four language skills rather than to interference of the mother tongue. Within Nigeria, scholars like Abdulmumini and Shehu Musa (2024) appraised the use of punctuation marks by 400 Level English Students in Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria and Federal University, Gusau (FUG) during the 2023/2024 academic session. Using the in-class test and questionnaire, the study discovered that students from Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria have higher knowledge in the use of ellipsis and dash but have poor knowledge in the use of semi colon. Similarly, students in Federal

University, Gusau have higher knowledge in the use of colon. The study concludes that the misuse of the punctuation marks is as a result of carelessness. Also, Abdulmumini and Shehu Musa (2025) compared the use of punctuation in handwritten and typed essays of 400 level undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria and Federal University, Gusau (FUG). The researchers compared the typed assignments in Microsoft word format and hand written in-class test scripts among the students of the institutions. Findings reveal that students commit more punctuation errors in handwritten essays compared to typed essays. Finally, Ekah (2018) looks at the use of comma in students' writing from the grapho-syntactical considerations. The study reveals that there is a relationship between grammar and effective punctuation among students and further recommends that punctuation should be an integral part of language teaching.

Evidently, these scholarly works mentioned above provide insight into the present study. Although the studies examined punctuations in students' writing, none of the studies investigated the misuse of comma and full stop across the three different levels of higher institutions. The present study is set to fill the gap in knowledge by investigating the misuse of comma and full stop among undergraduates of University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, and Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba— all in Delta State, Nigeria.

3. Theoretical Underpinnings

Error analysis involves 'analyzing independently or objectively learners' interlanguage' (that is their version of the target language) and the target language itself, followed by a comparison of the two, so as to locate mismatches (James 2013, p.5). Re-emphasizing the point, Richard and Schmidt (2002) hold that the major reason for error analysis is: first, to identify approach which learners use in language learning, in terms of the methods and strategies used in teaching and learning. Second, to try to identify the causes of learners' errors, that is, investigating the motives behind committing such errors as the first step to

eradicating them. Third, to find out the common difficulties in language learning, as an aid to teaching and in the preparation of instructional materials.

The two major causes of error as identified by the error analysis approach are the interlingual error and the intralingual error. While interlingual errors are as a result of the learner's linguistic background and native language interference, intralingual errors are caused due to misuse of some target language rules. The errors identified in the study are due to misuse and non-mastery of the grammatical rules of the target language.

4. Research Methodology

The researchers randomly selected 600 students (200 from each of the institutions) admitted during the 2023/2024 academic session in University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, and Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba — all in Delta State, Nigeria. Only first year degree students were selected from three institutions. The justification for the selection across the three levels of higher institutions is to find out if the misuse of comma and full stop is common to students in all the institutions selected for the study or if it is peculiar to students in a particular institution. Data for the study were collected from answers to structured quiz on punctuation, assignments on long essays, examination scripts of the students during their first semester and interview.

The sentences analysed are considered to be erroneous in terms of comma and full stop placements. However, after a careful scrutiny of the erroneous sentences from the three institutions, it was observed that the errors found in the sentences are similar. So, the researchers selected 67 sentences considered to be representatives of the errors observed across the three institutions. The errors identified were grouped according to grammatical rule misuse and frequency of such errors was counted according to the number of students and presented in percentages. The full stop is presented first followed by the comma.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

Research Question 1: To what extent have comma and full stop been misused among students of the selected institutions?

Table 1: Showing the extent of misuse of comma and full stop among the students of the selected institutions

S/ No	Grammatical Rule Misuse	University of Delta, Agbor	Delta State Polytechnic Ogwashi-Uku	Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba
1	Full stop in Subordinate clauses	136 (68%)	124 (62%)	116 (58%)
2	Full stop in Phrases	42 (21%)	38 (19%)	32 (16%)
3	Omissions of Full stop in Indirect Questions	166 (83%)	173 (86.5%)	122 (61%)
4	Comma in Relative Clause	99 (49.5%)	103 (51.5%)	76 (38%)
5	The Use of Comma in Separation of Syntactic Structures	97(48.5%)	106(53%)	111 (55.5%)
6	The Use of Comma in Coordinate Structures and Compound Sentences	175 (87.5%)	162 (81%)	158 (79%)
7	Comma Error in Defining Relative Clauses	144(72%)	156 (78%)	139(69.5%)
8	Comma Errors in Non-Defining Relative Clauses	138 (69%)	147(73.5%)	125(62.5%)
9	Comma Error in Subordinate and Parallel Clauses	63 (31.5%)	78(39%)	77(38.5%)
10	Comma in Interpolated Introductory Expressions and Vocatives	151 (75.5%)	165(82.5%)	156 (78%)

Source: Field Research 2021

From the table, students of University of Delta, Agbor, violated the grammatical rule of full stop in subordinate clauses more, followed by students from Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku and lastly, students from Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba. Again, the students in the three institutions, to a greater extent, understand that full stop should not be used in phrases. This is evident in the low percentages recorded by the students. In addition, omissions of full stop in indirect questions, use of comma in coordinate structures and compound sentences, use of comma in interpolated, introductory expressions and vocatives, and how comma should be used in defining relative clauses pose great challenges to students in the three institutions under study. This is revealed in the higher percentage recorded in the number of violations. Finally, it is evident from the table that the misuse of comma and full stop is peculiar to the three institutions with almost the same degree.

Research Question 2: In what aspects of writing have the comma and full stop been misused among students of the selected institutions?

The data presented below show the aspects of writing where comma and full stop have been misused among students of the selected institutions.

Full stop in Subordinate Clauses

*The external parts of the computer are the monitor, keyboard, floppy disk and printer (.) Because they are the parts that people touch always.

*The Rector advised the newly admitted students to work hard (.) Because their CGPA will reflect the extent to which they have worked hard.

*Students in the School of Engineering are very good at drawing (.) Because they are taught how to draw in technical drawing.

*The students were asked to leave the campus (.) When they started destroying the schools’ property.

*She said she has graduated (.) Although she did not finish her project.

* We decided to change everything (.) When you advised us to adjust the title of the project.

In writing, sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop, question mark, or exclamation mark Leech (2006). In the structures culled from the students’ writings, subordinate clauses have been made to stand as sentences with full stop leading to sentence fragments. The following structures: *Because they are the parts that people touch always, Because their CGPA will reflect the extent to which they have worked hard, Because they are taught how to draw in technical drawing, When they started destroying the schools’ property, Although she did not finish her project and When you advised us to adjust the title of the project* are subordinate clauses which have been made to stand on their own. When students write in fragments it gives the impression that they do not know ‘the rules’ (Greenbaum and Nelson, 2002, p. 184).

Full stop in Phrases

* Having read the book (.) The lecturer went back to his office.

* Saying goodbye (.) He left the room.

*To approve the course forms (.) The HOD refused.

* She was the one that taught us how to write essays (.)The new English lecturer with a tribal mark.

In sentence 7, a present participle phrase, *having read the book* has erroneously been used as a sentence. Similarly, a gerund, *saying goodbye*, an infinitive phrase, *to approve the course forms*, and lastly, a noun phrase, *the new English lecturer with a tribal mark* have been made to stand as sentences. Sentence 7 would be grammatical if a comma is inserted after *book* and the capital letter in the definite article changed to a small letter. In sentence 8, and depending on the sense of usage, the clause, *he left the room* would be joined with a preposition, *without*, to read: *He left the room without saying goodbye* or a dash, to read, *He left the room– saying goodbye*. In sentence 9, an infinitive phrase, *to approve the course forms* has been used as a sentence. To correct the sentence, the phrase, *to approve the course forms* should be joined to the clause to read: *The HOD refused to approve the course forms*. Finally, the noun phrase, *The new English lecturer with a tribal mark* should be linked to the independent clause in order to make a grammatical sentence: *The new English lecturer with a tribal mark taught us how to write essays*.

Omissions of Full stop in Indirect Questions

16 * He asked to know who signed the attendance list?

17* I wonder if he would come to school?

18* He asked me about the academic problem that I have?

19* The security asked me where I was coming from?.

Grammatically, there are three ways to end a sentence– a full stop, exclamation or a question mark. The three question marks are mutually exclusive. Sentences 16, 17 and 18 which are indirect questions ended with question marks which make the sentences deviant. Similarly, sentence 19 ended with a question mark and full stop which is a wrong way to end a sentence.

Comma in Relative Clauses

20 *The boy who won the essay competition (,) is in the School of Engineering.

21* The man (,) who was appointed the Dean of Students' Affairs is in the Department of Languages.

22* The new hostel which many students liked (,) is very expensive.

23* The book that she took (,) was not hers.

24 *The department (,) that I liked was not accredited.

Relative clauses begin either a structure modifying a preceding noun or nominal group, or a structure for which a nominal group could be substituted. Relative sentences are usually introduced by *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, *that*, *what* and others. However, not all relative clauses are separated by comma. A defining relative clause is closely tied to the word it refers to; therefore, it is not marked off by a comma (Carter et al. 2011, p. 451). The excerpts above which are defining relative clauses have been marked off by commas which make the sentences erroneous. While sentence 20 was marked off with a comma after *competition*, sentence 21 has a comma after *man* and in sentence 22, a comma was inserted after *liked*. Sentence 23 has a comma after *took* and in sentence 24, a comma was inserted after *department*. The insertion of comma in the sentences makes the structures deviant.

Conversely, a non-defining relative clause is not closely related to the noun or nominal group it refers to. It does not give any specific information that is relevant to the sentence but only gives additional information which may be omitted without affecting the structure of the sentence. Non-defining clauses are 'marked off with commas' (Carter et al. 2011, p. 429). From the students' scripts, the following sentences were extracted:

25 * Examination malpractice (,) which is one of the social ills () has eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigerian educational system.

26 * Mr Ikenwe () who is the school orator (,) was the master of ceremonies at the event.

27 * The truck from the fire station () which came an hour later () could not put out the fire.

28.* The two brothers () who were in our school (,) participated in the competition.

29 *The student (,) who was sent home () died last week.

Sentences 25 and 29 have the opening comma but the second commas were omitted. In sentences 26 and 28, the opening commas were omitted but the closing commas were inserted. In sentence 27, both the opening and closing commas were not inserted. The omission could be as a result of ignorance of what defining and non-defining relative clauses are. There is need therefore for teachers to intensify efforts in this regard.

The Use of Comma to Separate Syntactic Structures

The sentence combines elements such as morphemes, words, phrases and clauses to build its structure. The combined elements are in meaningful relationship with one another. Any slipshod separation of the elements results in deviant forms. The following

sentences from students' writings show the use of commas to separate syntactic units in an erroneous manner.

30* What they do (,) is of no interest to me.

31*What he does now (,) will destroy him in future.

32* We didn't know (,) who did that.

33* We accepted to eat (,) whatever she eats.

34*The policy is (,) that there will be no cooking in the hostels.

35* The truth is (,) that students cannot afford the text books.

36* Matriculating students were told (,) to pay for the gowns.

37* The students (,) elected Ozieh(,) the new SUG President.

38* The Secretary General (,) thought (,) that we are going to vote against him.

39* Students (,) who work hard (,) pass always.

From the excerpts, the students have used commas in various ways to separate subjects from their verbs, verbs from their objects, subjects from their predicates, subjects and objects from their complements all in a bid to indicate diminutive pauses. The arbitrary insertion of commas results in punctuation errors.

In sentences 30 and 31, the noun clauses, *what they do* and *what he does now* which act as the subjects of the sentences have been separated from their verbs: *is* and *will destroy* with commas. Similarly, in sentence 36, the infinitive phrase, *to pay for the gowns* has been separated from its verb: *told*. Such separation violates the grammatical rule of separating a subject from its verb. Ekah (2018, p.32) citing Hodges & Whitten (1977) agrees that the only period a subject of the sentence is separated from its verb is when there is 'an intrusive element or if there is a momentary confusion through two occurrences of the same word' as in: I know that, that man is a fraudster. In sentences 32 and 33, the comma inserted after *know* and *eat* separates the noun clauses, *who did that* and *whatever she eats* which serve as the objects of the sentence from their verbal elements, *didn't know* and *accepted to eat*. From the sentences, the two main verbs, *know* and *eat* have been used transitively, as such, requires an object. Erroneously, the objects have been separated from the verbs leading to deviant forms. Punctuation errors were also observed in sentences 34 and 35. The subject complements: *that there will be no cooking in the hostels* and *that students cannot afford the textbooks* have been separated from their subjects, *the policy* and *the truth* using a comma after the linking verb: *is*, in which they are co-referential with. In such complementary relationship, the subject and its subject complement refer to the same thing. Therefore, the

structures should not be marked off with commas. The use of comma by the students may have been necessitated by the slight pause or lowering of voice. According to (Hodges & Whitten, 1977 and Kolln & Funk, 2009) cited in Ekah (2018, p.32) 'every instance of pause for breath does not require a comma, unless the unit of grammar in which the pause appears requires it.' Sentences 37, 38, and 39 have two different punctuation errors in each of them. First, in the three sentences, the subjects: *the students*, *the Secretary General* and *students* have been disconnected from their verbs: *elected*, *thought*, and *pass*. Second, in sentence 37, the noun phrase, *the new SUG President* which acts as the object complement has been separated from the object, *Ozieh*. Again, in sentence 38, the verb has been separated from the noun clause, *that we are going to vote against him* which serves as the object of the sentence. Sentence 39 is a restrictive clause because the clause, *who work hard* is essential to understand who is being referred to; therefore, it should not be marked off with a comma. The commas after *students* and *hard* are anomalous and make the sentence ungrammatical.

Comma in Coordinate Structures and Compound Sentences

40 * The lecturers set the CBT exam (,) and record the scores.

41*The students designed the art works on the main campus (,) and painted them.

42* We finished our exams on Monday () and the nation-wide ASUP strike began on Thursday.

43*We have been advised to be more security conscious (,) and we are responding to that challenge.

44* Our institution has enough hostels, yet(,) the students prefer to live off the campus.

45* The students were asked to pay for damages, but (,) they refused.

46* Our computer lecturer came on that day (,) he was ready for the quiz.

Sentences 40 and 41 have errors of wrong insertion of commas. The independent noun clauses in sentence 40, *the lecturers set the CBT exam* and *the lecturers record the scores* have the same subject, *the lecturers*. The purpose of the coordinating conjunction (*and*) is to link the two independent clauses which have the same subject. To this end, there should not be a comma after the first clausal structure. Similarly, in sentence 41, the noun clause, *the students designed the art works on the main campus* and *the students painted them* are of equal grammatical status and have the same subject, *the students*, therefore, it is erroneous separating them with commas. Carter et al. (2011,

p.428) make the point clearer when they express that main clauses joined by and, or, but, are not usually separated by a comma if the clauses have the same subject as in sentences 40 and 41. They further comment that commas should be used to separate two independent clauses that have different subjects. Sentence 42, has two independent clauses with different subjects: *we and the nation-wide ASUP strike*. To this end, it is expected that the clauses should be marked off by a comma which the students have failed to insert after the word, *Monday*. On another note, Greenbaum and Nelson (2002, p.188) comment that a comma is not necessary in main clauses joined by and, but, or, 'particularly if one or more of the clauses is short'. This explains the reason why sentence 43 is judged erroneous. First, the sentence has the same subject, *we*. Second, the second clause appears shorter than the first clause. So, it is anomalous separating the clauses with a comma. Corroborating the position of other scholars, Eyisi (2011, p.261) remarks that the only condition for using a comma in independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction is where the 'subjects are different and the clauses are fairly long'. Sentences 44 and 45 have similar comma problems. The first main clauses: *our institution has enough hostels and the students were asked to pay for damages* have been marked off with commas, which is correct given the fact that the second clauses express contrastive and contrary ideas. The position is made explicit by Greenbaum and Nelson (2002, p.188) who explain that a comma should be used before coordinating conjunctions like (but, yet, or, nor) between main clauses that show contrastive ideas. From the data obtained, the students inserted commas after the coordinating conjunction, *but* and *yet* which is grammatically wrong in the context of usage. In sentence, 46, a comma was used to join two independent clauses instead of a coordinating conjunction or a semicolon.

Errors in Relative Clauses

The particular function of relative clauses is to begin either a structure modifying a preceding noun or nominal group, or a structure for which a nominal group could be substituted. Relative clauses are usually introduced by who, whom, whose, which, that, what and others. However, not all relative clauses are separated by commas.

Defining Relative Clause

47 * The boy (,) who won the essay competition was in the Department of Welding and Fabrication.

48* Students (,) who did not complete the payment of their fees were not allowed to sit for

examinations.

49 * The new rector (,) who always advised students against indecent dressing is from the University of Benin.

50 * The students (,) who jumped through the window were caught.

51 * The book(,) that she took was not hers.

52 * The Department (,) that she liked was not accredited.

A defining relative clause is closely tied to the word it refers to; therefore, it is not marked off by a comma. Conversely, a non-defining relative clause is not closely related to the noun or nominal group it refers to. It only gives additional information which may be omitted without affecting the structure of the sentence. Non-defining relative clauses are marked off with commas. Erroneously, the students have marked off the defining clauses with commas and the non-defining clauses which were supposed to be marked off with commas were either marked wrongly or ignored completely.

J. Non- Defining Clause

53 * Examination malpractice () which is one of the social ills () has eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigerian educational system.

54 *Mr Ikenwe (,) who is the school orator () was the master of ceremonies.

55 * The truck from the fire station () which came an hour later (,) could not put out the fire.

56 * The two brothers (,) who were in ND II () participated in the competition.

K. Comma in Subordinate and Parallel Clauses

57 * Although she did not complete her project () she went ahead to complete the form.

58 * When the security man asked him to stop () he ran away.

59 * If you do not complete your registration () you will not be allowed to sit for the examination.

60 * Though the Department won the trophy () they were still not happy.

61* While we were running towards the Administrative block (;) the police came.

62* The more we read () the better we become.

When a subordinate clause appears before the main clause, there is usually a comma at the clausal boundary. On the other hand, when a main clause is placed before the dependent clause, the comma is omitted (Carter et al., 2001, p.61). The omissions of commas in sentences 57, 58, 59 and 60 which are independent clauses violated punctuation rules in

English. In sentence 61, a semicolon which joins independent clauses was used to join a dependent clause to a main clause thereby, creating a deviant structure. Sentence 62 has two parallel structures which should have been separated with a comma but has been omitted in the students' writing.

63 * I knew very well (,) that I was correct.

64* The Matric Day is the day I will always remember (,) because I had enough fun.

Main clauses in Sentences 62 and 63 have been marked erroneously, thereby, leading to deviant structures.

L. Comma in Interpolated, Parenthetical, Introductory Expressions and Vocatives

65* She was a student () who () the institution can vouch for.

66* The defence was () on the whole () successful.

67* We noticed () nevertheless (,) that something was wrong somewhere.

68 * Yes (,) the students were asked to pay some money (,) for the party.

69 * Dike () I am afraid will not come to school.

To interpolate means to insert words or texts into a sentence or conversation. Such words give additional information or qualifications to what is being said in the rest of the sentence and are usually marked off with commas before and after which can be equated to the use of parenthesis. Sentence 65 should have commas after *student* and *who*, and in sentence 66, a comma should have been inserted after *was* and *whole* which the students have failed to insert. In sentence 67, there should have been a comma after *noticed* and *nevertheless*. While the comma after *nevertheless* was inserted correctly, the comma after *notice* was omitted. In sentence 68, introductory elements like *yes*, *no*, *too*, should be marked off with a comma which was inserted correctly. However, inserting a second comma after *money* violates the writing convention. In sentence 69, a comma was omitted after the person being addressed directly. Greenbaum and Nelson (2002 p. 198) are of the opinion that 'vocatives must be separated with a comma'.

Research Question 3: How has the misuse of comma and full stop affected effective communication in students' writing?

From the interview granted to 10% (60 students) of the total population used for the study, 80% (48 students) agree that misuse of comma and full stop affect their communication. Their responses show that the misuse affects the structure of the sentence. According to them, correct placement of the punctuation marks indicates the beginning and end of a sentence and

connects all the textual units in the sentence. Again, their responses reveal that improper mastery of punctuation marks affects the conveyance of the exact meaning as intended by the author and retards readers' understanding of the text. More so, from the students' responses, poor knowledge of the punctuation marks creates ambiguity in a written discourse. In sum, the students agree that though they understand the correlation between good punctuation and effective communication, they do not know when to insert the punctuation marks most times.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper examines the misuse of full stop and comma in students' writing. The study identified non-mastery of grammatical rules, poor knowledge of word classes, phrasal and clausal elements and over generalizations as the bane of the errors identified. The study revealed that part of the reason why the comma is misused is as a result of the often-mistaken assumption by most learners of English as a second language that every pause attracts a comma. This singular reason accounts for why the comma is used haphazardly by the group investigated. Students should understand that the use of too many punctuation marks, especially the comma, is as confusing as not using enough punctuation marks. There should be a reason either as a matter of definite rule or meaning for every comma or other punctuation marks used in any discourse. The present research which identified the trouble spots in the two most used punctuation marks will help curriculum developers to re-assess the curriculum. In addition, it will help teachers of English to redefine their teaching methodology.

Based on the above, the study recommends that the traditional way of teaching punctuation marks by listing the uses of such punctuation marks be reviewed. Punctuation marks should be taught as a communicative skill that will help to improve the overall performance of students in their academic work and communicative requirement rather than as abstract concepts in grammar. An in-depth teaching of the various punctuation marks through drilling and more practical and focused approach should be encouraged. Jowitt (2013, p.8) expresses that 'drilling is useful in helping students get their tongues round structures they initially find difficult.' Besides, teachers should take time to explain the errors observed and often allow learners to correct the errors. It is expected that the teacher should intervene where students find it difficult to make such corrections. Besides, group focused discussions should be encouraged in large classes as it will help to encourage collaborations and easy learning among the students.

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