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An Analysis of Mechanics in Written Essays of Ghanaian ESL Students: A Focus on the Problems of Punctuation Marks

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Abstract:

Appropriate punctuation in written texts contributes significantly to the understanding of the message; however, issues of punctuation appear to be under-researched, particularly through qualitative approach. This study therefore adopts the descriptive qualitative study and presents the findings of written essays of ten (10) ESL Ghanaian students, who were purposively sampled. The paper aims to identify and explain the punctuation problems discernible in the students' written essays. The main question of this study is what problems are discernible in ESL students' written essays in terms of punctuation marks? The findings of the study reveal that in terms of punctuation, the students have problems with the use of comma, which is the commonest and the most abused punctuation mark. Thus, analysis of the students' essays reveals the omission of comma where necessary, redundant use of the comma and confusion of comma with other punctuation marks. Again, the problem of capitalization is shown in the study, as two levels are identified – discursal and lexical. Another problem discernible in the students' written essays has to do with the apostrophe, as the students confuse the contracted form of the verb is in the expression it is, as in it's with the third person possessive determiner, its. It is therefore suggested that teachers of English language should be aware of the punctuation problem and as such, engage students in a lot of exercises and practices in punctuation matters in order to enhance students' writing skills.

Keywords: Writing problems, English as a second language, punctuation, students' essays

1. Introduction

Writing forms an integral part of the human communication system, hence, writing in the human society, particularly in the educational sector is of great importance. As Elashri (2013) puts it, writing is invaluable because it makes information lasting and easily portable, and that writing is linked to learning in many ways. He continues that writing influences thinking and encourages creative thinking; it helps one learn differently to develop one's thought. Through writing, communication is enabled through great distances, and also people are able to leave records of their achievement or accomplishment to generations yet unborn.

In the light of the foregoing, Pak-TaoNg as cited in Ghabool, Mariadass and Kashef (2012), conceives of writing as a part of obligatory course work. This conception of writing is unequivocal in that the majority of tasks, most especially academic tasks, in most parts of the world are accomplished by different forms of writing in the English language. English, in our contemporary life, makes a strong contribution to education, for example, textbooks, hand-outs, examination and others are all written through the use of English language. According to Pak-TaoNg as cited in Ghabool, Mariadass and Kashef (2012), writing comprises a lot of activities like the process of thinking about the topic, notes gathering, data collection, and these processes of writing result in understanding. Quite apart from these activities, writers in English language are supposed to be mindful of paragraphing, organization, Grammar, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation and the others. These activities of writing make writing a laborious and cumbersome piece of work for academic writers, particularly English as a second language writers.

Writing in a second or foreign language has been described by most researchers as a "Gordian knot" (Tangpermpoon, 2008; Negari, 2011; Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014). In the view of Negari (2011), writing in a second or foreign language seems to be the most difficult language skill for language learners to acquire in academic contexts. The complexities and difficulties of writing in English language account for the appalling and devastating nature of the written language of most L2 students, particularly Ghanaian students. It is against this backdrop that despite the plethora of contributions and significance that English language serves in Ghanaian social, political and academic lives, as it enables socio-economic mobility and serves as the lingua franca and official language for inter-ethnic communication, its proficient

use in academic writings still remains a hurdle. The problems associated with writing seem to explain the several complaints about the falling standard of English language at all levels of education in Ghana. The low standard of English language in Ghana has been postulated by many researchers (Amua-Sekyi, 2010; Akampirige and Apam, 2014; Chief Examiner's report, 2018). While literature seems to be replete with a countless number of students' writing problems in terms of Grammar, it appears that students' problem of writing regarding punctuation marks is under-researched. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the writing problems of ESL Ghanaian students' by focusing on punctuation marks.

2. Literature Review

This section seeks to provide literature review on punctuation marks. According to McCaskill (1998), punctuation is placed in texts to make meaning clear and to make reading easier. McCaskill (1998) further outlines the four functions punctuation marks perform: separation of sentences (period), grouping or enclosing of extraneous information (parentheses), connection of a unit modifier (hyphen), and imparting of meaning (question mark may make an otherwise declarative sentence interrogative). It is crucial to note that the necessity of the type of punctuation mark regarding its usage in any construction should be determined by the rules governing its use. Moreover, McCaskill (1998) has argued that the modern tendency is to punctuate to prevent misreading (close style) rather than to use all punctuation that the grammatical structure will allow (close style); and he furthers that a well-punctuated report is only a matter of consistency in the author's or editor's subjective decision since the modern style of punctuation is more subjective and arbitrary as in the case of comma and hyphen. Kirkman (2006) has also identified the difficulties and misreading caused by lack of punctuation. He, thus, justifies the challenge caused by lack of punctuation with an extract from some writers, which is given below.

As the machine develops the forms we use to record data from past projects will be amended ... (Kirkman, 2006, p.3).

Clearly, the extract above creates difficulty as most people are likely to interpret the statement in different ways. Therefore, the meaning of the statement becomes clear when a comma is introduced after 'develops'. Similar other challenges have been identified by researchers in the texts of some other writers, predominantly with students. For example, Akampirige and Apam (2014), dwelling on the errors in the use of punctuation marks among polytechnic students in Ghana, have identified that students of the polytechnics still have great challenges in identifying punctuation marks in written text and also, they use the punctuation marks inappropriately in their own free writings. Using the test item of unpunctuated passage as an instrument, the study revealed that an overwhelming majority 63% of the students drawn for the study could not identify the colon as well as the semi-colon. Msanjila (2005) has equally noted among other grammatical areas of writing, the problem with the use of punctuation among Kiswahili students in Tanzanian. From the study, 51% of the students under study used punctuation marks inappropriately. According to him, the commas which are used extensively in order to convey the intended meaning in long sentences were not adequately used in the students' essays. This actually encumbers understanding and accuracy in students' written texts. The study further revealed that the students seemed not to appreciate the use of the semicolon and the colon in places where these two punctuations are absolutely necessary. Ghabool, Mariadass and Kashef (2012) adopt the mixed methodology in investigating the writing problems of Malaysian students. The study disclosed that Malaysian students have problems using the question mark, colon, semicolon, apostrophe, and commas while writing essays. It appears from these researchers (Kirkman, 2006; Msanjila, 2005; Mariadass and Kashef, 2012) that the comma, colon and semicolon are the most problematic punctuation marks as noted in the foregoing discussion.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. Process Approach

Hyland (2003) has noted that the process theory focuses on how a text is written instead of the final outcome. Further, he has indicated that the process approach enables writers to comprehend the nature of writing and how writing is done. With the process approach to writing, as pointed out by Hedge in Alfaki (2015), there is emphasis on salient procedures such as pre-writing, drafting, evaluating and revising. There are two components of process writing pedagogy, as proposed by Susser (1994). These are awareness and intervention. Awareness ensures that students become cognizant that writing is by nature a process so that even simple messages are the result of a writing process, which includes choosing vocabulary, considering audience, and judging format' (Susser, 1994). With respect to intervention, he adds that teachers can intervene at points in the writing process that could do writers good—as they are actually engaged in the act of writing. Thus, teachers could help writers to *write*, not just learn to *repair the damage*. These components address the issue of process approach such that writers must be well informed as to what they are writing and that teachers must offer help in the writing process.

This approach replaced product approach as the dominant writing methodology in the 1980s, following its ability in ensuring that students make clearer decisions about the direction of their writing by observing certain procedures (Jordan cited in Alfaki, 2015). Arndt's (1991) process writing and Hedge's (1998) writing helped popularize the process approach in the 1980s until 1990s when it began to face fierce criticisms (Davies cited in Alfaki, 2015). One of such criticisms is that the processes that students go through to be able to produce a text is time consuming and hence it becomes difficult to apply it under examination condition (Davies cited in Alfaki, 2015). The suitability of this theory lies in the fact that it ensures that punctuation, the focus of this study, forms part of the processes of writing, as writers are expected to choose the appropriate punctuation marks so as to bring out the intended meaning of the message.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study, which allows an in-depth description, analysis and interpretation of a text (Snape & Spencer, 2003; Ogah, 2013). The study employs the documentation method. This is to allow for a comprehensive analysis of the students' writing skills as they are made to write an essay. Focusing on purposive sampling technique, 10 compositions written by form three students of Sunyani Senior High School were obtained as raw data. These students were in their final year and were ready to write their final exams. Therefore, these students have had enough writing practices as they have gone through most of the pertinent issues regarding writing, and in fact, they were deemed to do well in English language writing. Therefore, if such students, who are noted to do well in English language writing are faced with writing problems, then it is logical to assume that the problems these students exhibit in writing would be replicated by students who are conceived to perform averagely or below average. It can therefore be logically explained that the problems found in the written essays of the selected students would be found in the written essays of the other students in Sunyani SHS. Three essay topics were directly taken from the English past questions, and they were asked to select one essay question from the three (3) different topics. The students were expected to write a full length essay.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Analysis of ESL Students' Punctuation Problems

Students' difficulty in handling punctuation as can be identified in their composition is pitched on the use of comma, capitalization and apostrophe.

4.1.1. The Problem with the Use of Comma

It can be discovered from ESL students' written essays that they have a challenge using the comma. This problem deals with the omission of comma where necessary; the redundant use of the comma and the confusion between the use of the comma and colon as well as the semi-colon. Examples of these difficulties are discussed below.

4.1.1.1. Example 1: Omission of comma where necessary

- Recently Doctor in the various hospital has discovered the disease to be cholera...
- With this situation people have being dying and losing a lot of money on drugs.
- Since this disease have been killing a lot I would like you to help us to reduce this disease.
- When done put it on fire and continue with your soup.

Clearly, the sentences above show the difficulties ESL students have with recognizing where it is vital to introduce the comma. In examples *a*, *b*, *c* and *d*, the students' omission of comma is as a result of their inability to appreciate that the comma separate introductory adverbs, adverbial clauses, and prepositional phrase (Sekyi-Baidoo, 2003; Kirkman, 2006). Thus, in example *a*, the student fails to recognize that *recently* is an introductory adverb and so, a comma must be introduced after it; in *b*, *with this situation* serves as the introductory prepositional phrase and thus a comma should be placed after it. Also, in both examples *c* and *d*, the students fail to introduce comma after the adverbial clauses beginning with *since* and *when*, and end with *a lot* and *done* respectively.

4.1.1.2. Example 2: Redundant use of comma among students

Another problem that can be identified in the students' essays in respect of the use of the comma has to do with using the comma where it is not necessary, resulting in constructions like:

- I have come to realise that, I prefer my former school
- I remembered that, you're a darling.

Clearly, in the examples above, the students' redundant use of the comma is explained by their inability to recognize that when *that* occurs in *that nominal clauses* as captured in Quirk and Greenbaum (1990), we do not introduce a comma after it.

4.1.1.3. Example 3: Confusing with other markers with the use of comma

The students could not determine where the semi-colon, colon, and the question mark should be used. This results in constructions like:

- I received your letter, this is why I am writing to you.
- It is my duty to write to you discussing disease outbreak, the causes and some effect of it on the society.
- How are you doing Dad, I hope by the grace of God you are as fit as a fiddle...

In example *a*, the semi-colon should be replaced by a colon following the position of Sekyi-Baidoo (2003) on the premise that the semi-colon is used to separate clauses where one would otherwise use such conjunction as *and* or *but*; he refers to the use of the semi-colon in this way as a weak full-stop since these clauses that are joined by the semi-colon are independent and can exist as separate sentences as in the case of example *a*. In example *b*, the student seems to be confused with the use of comma and the colon. Thus, the part of the sentence after the comma provides specific areas about the outbreak that the writer is going to talk about; and therefore, cannot be separated from the main point with a comma. For this reason, Sekyi-Baidoo admits that the colon is a pointing mark which indicates that the items which follow it are an addition. Hence, the comma should be replaced by a colon. Obviously, in example *c*, the student seeks to ask a question with *How are you Dad*, and so must end with a question mark instead of the comma. Akampirige and Apam (2014) have equally found the use of the comma to be a challenge for students. Thus, focusing on an unpunctuated essay as

a test with the use of 17 commas, they identify that 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 only 3% of the students scored between 16 and 17 marks.

4.1.2. Students' Problem with Capitalization

Capital letters are useful for sentence initials, the beginning of important words in topics and headings. However, learners have problems in using proper capitalization (Kroll cited in Alfaki, 2015). Therefore, complementing the position of Kroll, the study further reveals that ESL students have problem using capital letters as discussed below.

4.1.2.1. Example 4: Students' discursal and lexical capitalization problems

Owing to the students' problem with capitalization, two levels are identified – the discursal, and the lexical. By structure, the students are unable to determine that by virtue of the position of a word in the organization of the word of discourse or speech, the first letter of a word is capitalized. Students fail to appreciate that words beginning sentences, begin with capital letters except proper nouns. Sometimes, this problem arises as a result of an introductory prepositional phrase and in some other times, the confusion between what qualifies as proper noun or common nouns as in:

- To begin with, In Ghana, there are so many dish that we eat.
- My favorite dish is Groundnut Soup.

In the first sentence, the student, after the introductory prepositional phrase, *to begin with*, begins with a capital *I* as in *In*, which is inappropriate. In the second example, the student considers the favorite food to be a proper noun, and so capitalizes the initial letters, thereby exemplifying the discourse problem of capitalization.

By lexical capitalization, Sekyi-Baidoo (2003) has explicated that the social significance or function of the word or expression is what decides the use of the initial capital letter. Nouns considered as proper begin with capital letters irrespective of their position in the sentence. However, students find it difficult identifying which word qualifies as a proper noun and hence begin with a small letter; the result of such problem is: *I had already taken you for a lost till i got the letter. By the way there are many Ghanaian dishes i eat but the one I like most is cake.* Judging from this extract, it can be said that the students fail to determine that the personal pronoun *I* is considered a proper noun unlike the other pronouns and so, must begin with a capital letter regardless of where it appears in a sentence. Similarly, the use of the small letter *g* in *Ghanaian* suggests the student's challenge of determining that *Ghanaian* is a proper adjective and so must begin with a capital letter irrespective of where it is located in a sentence. Gowere et al (as cited in Alfaki, 2015) believe that the problem of capitalization exists because the rules of capitalization are not universal and classifying nouns as proper and common nouns is difficult for students.

4.1.3. Students' Problem with the Apostrophe

Again, the analysis reveals that the students are unable to use the apostrophe appropriately in their writings. A careful examination of students' essays reveals that this problem arises from the confusion between the contracted form of the verb *it is* as in *it's* and the third person possessive determiner, *its*, which results in construction as discussed below.

4.1.3.1. Example 5: Confusion of the use of its with it's

- After that, put in your tinned tomato and stir it until its evenly mixed.
- The sieved unboiled palm soup is added to the sauce pan on fire together with its content.

In the first sentence, the student fails to recognize that a letter has been omitted and so, there is the need to introduce an apostrophe whereas in the second sentence, the student rather chooses to bring the apostrophe, forgetting that it is a possessive pronoun. This result, however, is opposite to the result of Akampirige and Apam (2014), who focusing on the punctuation problems of students identified that the apostrophe is not a problem to students.

5. Conclusion

This paper sought to provide an account of the problems discernible in ESL Ghanaian students' written essay in terms of punctuation. The significance of this study lies in its pedagogical impetus, as it brings out the lapses in the processes of students' written texts in respect of punctuation. Indeed, the above discourse has provided ample evidence to suggest that students have challenges with punctuation when writing an academic essay. These problems border on comma, which is the commonest and the most abused punctuation mark, capitalization and apostrophe as earlier studies have elaborated. Thus, analysis of the students' essay reveals the omission of comma where necessary, redundant use of the comma and confusion of comma with other punctuation marks. Again, in relation to the students' problem with capitalization, two levels are identified – discursal, and lexical; and regarding apostrophe problem, the students confuse the contracted form of the verb *is* in the expression *it is*, as in *it's* with the third person possessive determiner, *its*. It is crucial to admit that the colon and the semicolon, which are identified by earlier researchers to include the key issues of students' punctuation flaws, are conspicuously missing in this study; only that where the colon and the semicolon are supposed to be used, the students rather use the comma. This implies that the students seem to be clueless as to the uses of the colon and the semicolon, and therefore, do not realize to use them where necessary in their written essays. The conclusion drawn from this study is that the students have not been made to understand and appreciate the tenets and processes of writing regarding punctuation, particularly the comma, capitalization and apostrophe. It is therefore suggested that teachers of English language should be aware of this pedagogical niche and as such, engage students in

more exercises and practices of punctuation, mainly on comma, capitalization and apostrophe in order to enhance the students' writing skills.

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