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Punctuation Marks as an Aspect and Cause of Poor Performance in the English Language

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Abstract

This essay investigated the role of punctuation marks as an aspect and cause of poor performance in the English language especially at St. Francis College of Education, Ghana. The essay outlined various aspects of punctuation marks i.e. the colon, the exclamation mark, the comma, the question mark, the full stop and the semi-colon on how they influence performance in English Grammar. In the analysis of this essay, previously published works were used to establish the relevance and the need for such basic punctuation marks in writing. It is clear and evident that most students write English language works without adhering to commands in punctuation marks. This is basically a glaring error that cannot be ignored as it could be quite detrimental to serious academic works. The punctuation mark is just like traffic symbols in road traffic usage, which cannot be neglected. This is not in any way different in the writing process. It is against this background that this essay seeks to investigate the causes of poor performance in English grammar.

Keywords: *English, grammar, performance, punctuation marks*



1.0 Introduction

The role of English language in the academic life of students of Colleges of education and other levels of education in Ghana cannot be over-emphasized. Being the lingua franca in Ghana, English language is used at all levels of education in the country. Currently, it is a policy of the Ghana Education Service (GES) that English language is used as a medium of instruction from primary four, while from Kindergarten to primary three; it is supposed to be used together with the local language. Throughout the history of education in Ghana, English language has always been a core subject as it stands currently. It is believed that a good grasp of the concepts of mechanics is a ticket to good performance in English language and other subjects. Grammar is one of the most integral parts of the English language which needs to be given the necessary attention. One main aspect of grammar which poses a lot of problem to students is punctuation marks, which falls under “Mechanical Accuracy”. It is for this reason that I have decided to delve deep into how the teaching and learning of punctuation mark can be made interesting, especially to students of colleges of education in Ghana, in order to enhance their grammatical competence in the basic schools they may find themselves. My experience as a teacher of English language at the Primary, Junior and Colleges of Education and my interactions with my other teachers at school reveal to me that “mechanics” is a problem right from the Primary School through to the University level. The above problem is not only limited the Ghanaian child, second language learning is problem worldwide. No wonder (Jeff Rubin, 2004). The Punctuation Man, and founder of National Punctuation Day in America, explains that “without punctuation one would not be able to express one’s feelings in writing not to mention know when to pause or stop or ask a question or yell at someone and without punctuation you would not be able to separate independent clauses and show an example of how a business lost millions because of an errant comma so **don’t** forget the most important punctuation mark OK so a dollar sign isn’t a punctuation mark but its important **don’t** you agree”. National Punctuation Day, the holiday that reminds America that a “semicolon is not a surgical procedure,” celebrates its fifth anniversary September 24. What started as a clever idea to remind corporations and professional people of the importance of proper punctuation has turned into an everyday mission to help school children learn the punctuation skills they need to be successful in life. Allan Edgar Poe (1809-1849), though known as a poet and short story writer, was also a notable editor and critic. He saw the need for effective punctuation and has this to say: “That punctuation is important all agree; but how few comprehend the extent of its importance! The writer who neglects punctuation, or mix-punctuates, is liable to be misunderstood--this, according to the popular idea, is the sum of the evils arising from heedlessness or ignorance. 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. For the want of merely a comma, it often occurs that an

axiom appears a paradox, or that sarcasm is converted into a sermonoid". (2010 About.com, a part of *The New York Times Company*). My experience in teaching the English language, giving exercises, and scoring them, participating in external marking of students' scripts reveal all sorts of errors students commit as far as punctuation is concerned. The fact that almost all subjects at all levels of education in Ghana are taught in English language makes it imperative for both the teacher and the learner of the language to develop positive attitude towards the language. Teachers of the language, especially at the pre-tertiary level, must constantly develop new methods and techniques that will make their teaching more practicable and interesting to the learners. In spite of the fact that students are generally aware that English language will be used in almost all spheres of their lives as Ghanaians, most of the students of St, Francis College of Education, Hohoe, have poor attitude towards the study of the language, especially the grammar aspect. This problem was diagnosed through observation, interviews, class exercises and the use of questionnaire. The poor attitude of the students towards the study of grammar manifests itself in several ways: Firstly, students are hardly seen conversing in English. Secondly, a good number of them absent themselves from English grammar lessons from time to time. Thirdly, interviews conducted revealed that 81% of the students are uncomfortable during English language lessons because they simply dislike the subject. Fourthly, 66% of the students obtained below 40% in assignments. The above problems seriously affect student performance and job placement, the result is that greater number of students' complete school and they are not able to further their education. Part of the problem can be attributed to the students while some teachers also share part not forgetting others like parents not performing their roles in terms of supervision and provision of basic needs like textbooks, food and paying school fees on time for their wards. The government is also partly blamed in terms of failing to provide good schools, quality language teachers, and the provision of the needed textbooks among others.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

Many people have expressed concern about the poor standard of English at the various levels of education in Ghana today. In America, for example, because of the serious concern they have about the said problem September 24 has been declared as National Punctuation Day (NPD) since 2004. This falling standard in the learning and use of the language writing is attributed to a number of factors, among which are the inappropriate methods used in teaching the subject and the use of pidgin English, which has become very common among students,. Also, in most cases, teachers of the language are themselves not adequately prepared in terms of training, for the task of teaching the language as a subject. Improving the quality of teaching and learning of English grammar especially "mechanics" focuses largely on the teacher who is considered as a pivot in bringing about good quality teaching and learning of the

language, which is a prerequisite for a successful teaching and learning of the language. A lot however also depends on the learner's readiness and attitude to learning the language. To succeed in education and live average life in the years to come depends largely on quality education, which demands that language and learning and acquisition, which a tool for communication in both written and speech production, needs to be given much attention. It is against this background that this essay seek to investigate the causes of the poor performance of students of St. Francis' College of Education in English grammar in the use of punctuation marks, and to design an intervention aimed at rectifying the situation.

3.0 What is Punctuation?

Crystal, D. (1999), defines punctuation as the part of language's system which provides clues to the way a text is organized. According to him, early writing systems made no use of punctuation; rather, some conventions organize the text into grammatical or semantic units, such as paragraphs and words (spaces) sentences, and phrases (full-stops, comma, colon, and semicolon). Other conventions, according to Crystal, carry meaning of their own: the question mark, he said, identifies a sentence type, while the apostrophe marks possession (John's) and contractions (I've, must've) Murray L. (1749), cited in Partridge, E., (1964:4), said punctuation is the art of dividing a written composition into sentences, or parts of a sentences, by points or stops, for the purpose of marking the different pauses which the sense, and an accurate pronunciation require. Barr E.S. and Alfred G.T. et al (2000), said punctuation refers to the standardized marks inserted in written material to clarify meaning and to separate structural units of words, phrases and clauses and sentences. Punctuation marks serve many purposes, and most marks can be used for more than one purpose. For example, they may connect or separate sentence material, or they may end sentences. Kirkpatrick, B. (2007), explains punctuation marks as "the use of certain established marks (*punctuation marks*) or symbols within a piece of written text. *Punctuation* prevents a piece of text from being just a string of words by breaking up the string of words into meaningful units and by making the text more fluent. Basically, punctuation marks can be seen as symbols which are used to separate and join units of language into a cohesive text." She conceded that modern writers tend to punctuate much more lightly than their older counterparts did. This she explains, goes hand in hand with the modern tendency to use less formal language and a plainer style. However, the importance of punctuation, even in these less formal modern times, should not be underestimated. Betty goes on to add that appropriate punctuation creates order in what might otherwise be a piece of linguistic confusion. In all the above definitions, the authors conceded the importance of the punctuation marks which is indispensable in a written text. It means therefore, that improper punctuation

in written text(s) can bring about serious ambiguity and conflict of thought and ideas. The following authors give the uses of the following punctuation marks:

3.1 Comma (,)

Wiredu J. F. (1998) sees two main uses of comma. First, it separates certain parts of sentences. Among several categories of this uses of comma are; it separates words, or groups of words in a list: Mansah sells oranges, apples, mangoes, and tomatoes. It may also be used to separate a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence: Khadija aid, "The food is delicious." Gordon (1986) says comas separates part of sentences thereby marking the pauses made in speeches. He does not see only two uses of it but rather gives several examples and situations in which commas are used. Sekyi-Baidoo Y. (2003) states that that the comma can be used to separate Independent Clauses joined by conjunctions such as and, but so then. This used of the comma is optional but it helps to show that the clauses are Independent. It also helps us to observe international break when reading:

The dog was starved for ten days, and it died.
We trusted on his word, but he failed.

The Comma also separates Phrases and Clauses which are contrasts especially where the last phrase is a negation:

Doku stayed in Accra and Takoradi, never in Tema.
Musa and Karim are friends, not relations.

The Comma also borders off the solution of a letter, and the fraternal phrase in the complementary close:

Dear Sam, Hi Joe, Dear Madam,
Yours ever, Sincerely, etc.

In a *Time* magazine essay, "*In Praise of the Humble Comma.*" author Pico Iyer, compares the comma to "a flashing yellow light that asks us only to slow down." But when do we need to flash that light, and when is it better to let the sentence ride on through without interruption? Here we'll consider four main guidelines for using commas effectively. But keep in mind that these are *only* guidelines: there are no unbreakable rules for using commas--or any other marks of punctuation. He offers the following suggestions as to how to go about the use of the comma:

3.1.1 Use a Comma before a Coordinator

Use a comma before a coordinator (*and, but, yet, or, nor, for, so*) that links two main clauses:

"The optimist thinks that this is the best of all possible worlds, **and** the pessimist knows it."

"You may be disappointed if you fail, *but* you are doomed if you don't try."

However, do *not* use a comma before a coordinator that links two words or phrases:

"Jack *and* Diane sang *and* danced all night."

3.1.2 Use a Comma to Separate Items in a Series

Use a comma between words, phrases, or clauses that appear in a series of three or more: "You get injected, inspected, detected, infected, neglected, and selected." "It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them." Notice that in each example a comma appears before but not after the coordinator.

3.1.3 Use a Comma after an Introductory Word Group

Use a comma after a phrase or clause that precedes the subject of the sentence:

"*When you get to the end of your rope*, tie a knot and hang on."

"*If at first you don't succeed*, failure may be your style." However, if there's no danger of confusing readers, you may omit the comma after a *short* introductory phrase: "*At first* I thought the challenge was staying awake, so I guzzled venti cappuccinos and 20-ounce Mountain Dewes."

3.1.4 Use a Pair of Commas to Set Off Interruptions

Use a pair of commas to set off words, phrases, or clauses that interrupt a sentence:

"Words are, *of course*, the most powerful drug used by mankind." "Literature is all, *or mostly*, about sex." But don't use commas to set off words that directly affect the essential meaning of the sentence: "Your manuscript is both good and original. But the part *that is good* is not original, and the part *that is original* is not good." It is expected that teachers handle the use of commas involving the examples given, for at least, pupils need them and they are not beyond the children's capabilities to use them.

3.2 The Full Stop (.)

According to Wiredu J. F. (1998), the full stop has a two-fold function. Thus, apart from marking the end of a full sentence, as in Albert is a god friend of mine. Please, be quiet. It is as well used to abbreviate words or groups words. Examples: Mr. –

Mister, B.sc – Bachelor of Science, St. – Street etc. Gordon I. (1986) does not depart from the above opinion except that he extends the uses of the period mathematically with its employment to indicate decimal places or points. Examples: a. 303 rila, \$25.75, 67.98m etc. Sekyi-Baidoo Y. (2003) went further to state that full stop is used to punctuate the end of greetings e.g.

Good morning.

To punctuate the endings of punctuated addresses.

Department of English,

University of Ghana,

Legon.

He went ahead to state the wrong uses of full stop.

UNO, ILO, SMC

To punctuate units of measurement – feet, yards, miles, grams, kilograms etc.

To punctuate abbreviations or acronyms of worlds political or government agencies

According to Kirkpatrick, (2007) the full stop or the period has the following functions:

It is one of the most important punctuation marks, and the most emphatic, because its main function is to mark the end of a sentence and so separate one sentence from another. She added that only sentences that are either *questions* or *exclamations* do not end in a *full stop*. Instead, they end respectively in a *question mark* or an *exclamation mark*. The following are examples of sentences ending in a full stop:

The children behaved very well.

They are getting married next week.

We are moving house soon.

The car broke down.

You can choose the restaurant. I went by bus.

Betty, however, has this to say about the full stop:

The full stop is also used to mark the end of a group of words which is not actually a sentence, but which is complete in itself, as in the following underlined words:

‘When do we leave?’

‘Tomorrow morning.’

The *full stop* has another function. It is used with certain types of *abbreviation*, although the modern tendency, particularly in British English, is to use full stop with abbreviations for less than was formerly the case. For example, abbreviations involving initial capital letters are generally written without full stops, especially in British English,

as *TUC*, *BBC*, *USA*. In such cases full stops should definitely not be used if one or some of the initial letters do not belong to a full word, as *TV*. *TV* is the abbreviation for television and the letter *V* is simply the initial letter of the second syllable of the word, not that of a new word. There are usually no *full stops* in abbreviations involving the first and last letters of a word (*contractions*), as *Dr*, *Rd*, *St*, but whether they are used or not can be a matter of taste. The important thing is to be consistent in whether you use *full stops* or not in such cases. Abbreviations involving the first few letters of a word are the most likely to have *full stops*, as *Feb.* for February, *Sept.* for September.

3.2. | The full stop in email and website addresses

The *full stop* is also used in *email addresses*, as in

Example: name@metro.net

info@sampleaddress.co.uk

www.sample-url.com

The inclusion or omission of a full stop, and also its placing, is very important in email and website addresses. Failure to get this right can prevent the successful sending of an email or the accessing of a website. Students are already familiar with the use of periods after complete sentences and probably its use for decimal point. However, they mostly ignore the full stops with the use of abbreviations. Most children as well ignore the use of full stops in all situations. It behoves teachers to take notice of this.

3.4 The Semicolon (;)

As explained by Wiredu J. F. (1998) and Gordon I. (1986), the semicolon is a stronger separator of words than the commas, but weaker in the same function than the full stop. First, it separates one independent clause from another, which is closely related. Example: Some girls like playing football; others don't like it. It is also used in itemizing groups of different things. Example: We found the following properties; a television sets, two; gas cookers, three; refrigerators, four; video cameras, five. It is also employed in situation when we are using sentence connectors such as; besides; moreover; nonetheless; so; yet; etc. The use of semicolon is not common at all especially, with pupils as they confuse them with commas, colons and even the full stops. Kirkpatrick, (2007) has this to say about the semicolon:

3.4. | The semicolon as a link

The *semicolon*, written as; is a rather formal form of punctuation. It is mainly used between clauses that are not joined by any form of conjunction, as in

We had a wonderful holiday. Sadly they did not
He was a marvelous friend; he is much missed

The part before the *semicolon* and the part after could both be sentences in their own right. The *semicolon* is used to show a closer link between the two parts of the sentence. *It* has the force of a strong comma. A *dash* (Kirkpatrick, 2007: 201) is sometimes used instead.

3.4.2 The semicolon as a separation device in lists

The *semicolon* is also used to separate the items in a long list or series of things so that the said list seems less complex and easier to understand, as

The young man who wants to be a journalist has applied everywhere. He has applied to The Times in London; The Globe and Mail in Toronto; The Age in Melbourne; The Tribune in Chicago.

It is also used in lists in which the individual items are quite long, as in

We tried various ways to raise money. We approached the local bank manager; we asked the local council for a grant; we approached local businessmen for a contribution; and we organized various charity events.

The use of a *semicolon* in this situation resembles that of the *comma* (Kirkpatrick, 2007: 136), especially a particularly strong comma, except that the *semicolon* is more formal and it is more common in more complicated lists

3.4.3 The semicolon as separation device in lists of word groups already containing commas

The *semicolon* is also used to separate items in a list which already contains a number of commas in the individual items in the list, as *Those guests present at the wedding included Mr. and Mrs. Brown and their daughters Mary, Jane and Sue; Mr. and Mrs. Lewis and their sons Tom, Frank and Jack; Miss Taylor and her nieces Liz, Carol and Meg; Ken, Mike and Mark Greene.* To use yet more commas to separate the list of items would cause confusion. Thus, the *semicolon* is used in such a context in the interests of clarity.

3.4.4 The semicolon as a separation device before certain adverbs

The *semicolon* is also sometimes used before such *adverbs* as *however, nevertheless, hence, moreover, furthermore* in such situations where a preceding pause is required, but a pause that is longer and stronger than that can be provided by a *comma*, as in *We have extra seats for the concert; however you must decide right now whether you want them or not. Your notice to quit takes effect immediately; furthermore, you will be escorted from the building and your personal belongings from your desk will be sent on to you.* Educators should device appropriate ways of making it attractive to pupils.

3.5 The Colon (:)

Wiredu J. F. (1998) Gordon I. (1986), explains it as a pointer which indicates that some items are going to be listed. For instance, we will treat the following topics this term: adjective, pronouns, adverbs and verbs. It is also employed to separate chapters from verses in the Bible as in John 8: 2, Acts 2: 23. Glencoe/McGraw-Hill (2000) add that in the business letters, it is employed after the salutation as Dear Editor in Chief., Dear Professor Sanchez: He as well points that it is used to separate hour and minutes when figures are used in writing time. For instance, 2: 36 pm, 6: 15 am. According to Sakyi-Baidoo Y. (2003) the colon functions as separating general statements from their specific: as in, these are his achievements: first Prime Minister, first President and greatest African statesman. All the four writers above saw its use a separator of an introductory statement before a quotation is made. The case in point is; Dr. Nkrumah is noted for his all-time statement: "The independent of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked with the total liberation of Africa". The observations about colons are that, most teachers think they are not so important. Others teachers do not even know about some of the uses of colons. Most children do neither not know its applications nor think that they are not important. Teachers are advised to teach the various uses and the needs to use them their lessons.

3.6 The Question Mark (?)

As the name implies, all Wiredu J. F. (1998), Gordon I. (1986), Sakyi-Baidoo Y. (2003) and. Glencoe/McGraw-Hill (2000), intimate that it functions in giving a direct questions as in; what is your name? When did you come here? As an end mark children find no difficulty to use it. Sekyi-Baidoo Y. (2003) adds that echoes and rhetoric questions are also identified by this mark. It is also very peculiar because whenever someone uses it even the children can identify that a question is being asked. Kirkpatrick, further adds that the *question mark*, sometimes also known as the *query* and written as?, is used to mark the end of a sentence which asks a question(page 36) The following sentences are all questions ending in question marks:

Where are we?

Is that the right time?

Who I that?

Why did they leave so early?

Does he always behave so badly?

Would you pass me the salt, please?

Can I help you?

Whose coat is this?

Betty advises that it is not recommended to use more than one question mark at the end of sentence. When writing college essays or literary interpretations it may be tempting to intersperse your writing with questions. For example:

“So what do we learn from Wordsworth’s view of nature?”

This is too informal for such a composition. It is better to write: “What we learn from Wordsworth’s view of nature is . . .”

However, children are fond of omitting them when they are writing. Teachers therefore need to insist on its usage anytime the children write.

3.7 The Exclamation Mark (!)

Wiredu J. F. (1998), Gordon I. (1986), Sakyi-Baidoo Y. (2003) and Glencoe/McGraw-Hill (2000) had nothing different to say either than its use after an exclamation sentence. Example: What a big eyes she has! What a beauty! Sakyi-Baidoo Y. (2003) in addition, he says that it is also used to mark the end of interjections and sentences which show surprise or excitement: Example: Hey!, Oh! He contends as well that it is employed to emphasise calls and commands as in: Kwame!, Come here, Peter!, Run! This is another punctuation mark which children do not use at all when writing but use very often when speaking. According to Kirkpatrick, B. (2007), the *exclamation mark*, written as!, is used to mark the end of an *exclamation* or sometimes a *directive*. The following sentences are all exclamations or directives ending in an *exclamation mark*:

Run!

Save me!

What a beautiful day!

How marvelous!

Well done!

You must be joking!

Ouch!

Let me go!

Betty gives the following caution:

Be careful not to overuse the *exclamation mark*. It is easy to do so, particularly in a piece of information English. One is enough at the close of a sentence. Overuse of such sentences within a piece of writing can detract from the potential dramatic effect of the occasional use of the mark. It is common for people to overuse them in emails, because the communication is often informal, and because we are often trying to convey points of view and emotions that we would not normally be doing in a formal

piece of writing. It is very easy for learners to use it in writing if they will be constantly reminded.

4.0 Importance of Punctuation Marks

Crystal, D. (1999), said, punctuation plays a crucial role in the modern writing system, yet its significance is regularly underestimated. At least four important functions can be distinguished:

- Its primary purpose is to enable stretches of written language to be read coherently, by displaying their grammatical structure e.g. the use of sentence - ending points clause dividing commas, and paragraph making indentation.
- It also gives the reader clues about the prosody (pg.248) with which a pieces of writing can be read aloud, though such features as question marks, and parentheses. These are especially important when directly representing the intonation and emphasis of spoken language.
- It may highlight semantic units or contrast present in the text but not directly related to its grammatical structure e.g. the choice of colors vs. semi-colors to show the rhetorical structure of a complex sentence and the use of line division and stanzas no poetry.
- It may add a semantic dimension, unique to the graphical medium, which it would be difficult or impossible to read aloud .e.g. the use of ‘scare quotes’ to show that a word has a special sense, or capital letters drawing attention to a very important point.
- Temple W., as reported in The Observer (23 October 1938) cited in Partridge E. (1964:5), said “intellectually, stops matter a great deal. If you are getting your commas, semi-colons, and full stops wrong, it means that you are not getting your thoughts right, and your mind is muddled.”
- Whitaker F., in an address produced to the institute of journalists: in the J.I.J. Jan., 1939 cited in Partridge E (1964: 6) he said “we ought to deplore the growing tendency to use only full stops and commas. Punctuation is in valuable aid to clear writing and there suggests far too little importance is attached to it by journalist.”

5.0 Conclusion

All the authorities quoted above conceded the invaluable nature of punctuation marks. It is clear and evident that most students write English language works without adhering to commands in punctuation marks. This is basically a glaring error that cannot be ignored as it could be quite detrimental to serious academic works. The punctuation mark is just like traffic symbols in road traffic usage, which cannot be neglected. This is not in any way different in the writing process. It is against this background that this essay sought to investigate the causes of poor performance in

English grammar. In conclusion, wrong application of punctuation rules or misapplication of punctuation marks can lead to distortion of information which leads to different interpretation by various readers thus creating ambiguity in sentence construction.

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