

Improving the problems of using punctuation marks in paragraph writing skills: the case of first year Sociology department students at Dambi Dollo University

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Abstract

This action research was conducted on the topic of “Improving the problems of using punctuation marks in writing skills of 1st year Sociology students” at DambiDollo University. The basic questions of this action research were do the students tell the meanings of punctuation marks? Do the students mention the uses of punctuation marks and can the students identify the types of punctuation marks? The main objective of this action research was improving the problems of using marks in writing skills and its specific objectives were to identify whether the students tell the meaning of punctuation marks; to identify whether the students describe the use of punctuations and identifying whether the students can list the types of punctuation marks. The main purposes of this research were to give awareness for the students to develop their skills on the meaning and use punctuation marks and to give direction for the teachers on the gap of the students’ knowledge. This research was an action research that conducted through qualitative method. The source of data for this action research was the students of first year Sociology department in Dambi Dollo University and the sampling techniques used for this action research were through purposive sampling. The data were collected through testing system. The collected data were organized in a paragraph and analyzed by qualitative method. As the result shows the students have no knowledge of using punctuation and they can’t identify the types of punctuation as all. Depending on these results we gave additional tutorial for all students. Then, we test them again. As we evaluate most of the students change their understanding of using punctuation. So, finally as a recommendation we gave the following points. First, for the future to understand what they read and to make clear communication in writing all the students have to understand the uses of punctuation mark; next, to teach punctuation mark, the teachers have to use different methodology such as discussion methods and teaches it in sentence and paragraph. Then, all stake holders such as students, teachers and others have to take punctuation as a part of writing and use it wisely and finally, the teacher should have to give immediate feedback (make corrections) for the students on the error of students on using punctuation marks.

1.1 Introduction 1.1. Background of the Research

Language is a way of communication. That means it is important to human being to share their idea. As most scholars says, language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols which permits all people in a given culture or other people who have learned the system of that culture to communicate or to interact. It is a system of communication by sound operating through the organs of speech and learning among members of a given community and using vocal symbols possessing arbitrary conventional meanings (Verman 2005).

The other scholar defines language as the following. As he says, language is the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs, or written symbols in human society for communication and self expression (Crystal 1994). As this text shows, language is important to communicate and self expression. So, we can communicate with others through sounds and written symbols.

Writing is a method of communication. It uses marks that we see and understand. The marks we use to write are the letters of the alphabet. They stand for sounds. At a very young age, we

memorize the letters of our alphabet and their sounds. Once we done that we can combine the marks in to sentences. Other people can understand them. We can understand what other people have written. We also can write down our thoughts just for ourselves.

Zemach E. & Rumiset A. (2005), explained the purpose of writing as the following. As they define, "Writing is a very important part of your university study. You will write assignment that may range from one paragraph to several pages long, and will write answers on tests and exams that may be a few sentences long or a complete essay. This idea shows that writing is very important in academic writing. So, to use writing in academic writing we have to know the necessary points in writing process.

A paragraf is a group of sentences about a single topic. Together the sentences of a paragraph explain the writer's main idea (most important idea) about the topic. As in Encarta (2009), a paragraph is a piece of writing that consists of one or more sentences, begins on a new and often indented line and contains a distinct idea or the words of one speaker. As the above text indicated paragraph is a piece of writing that has one main idea and developed by different supportive ideas. When we write a paragraph we have to consider punctuation, capitalization, spelling and others.

Punctuation is the use of signs to help readers understand and express written matter. It includes things like capital letters, commas, indented first lines of paragraphs, and spaces between words. Punctuation (formerly sometimes called pointing) is the use of spacing, conventional signs, and certain typographical devices as aids to the understanding and correct reading of handwritten and printed text, whether read silently or aloud.

Another description is: "The practice, action, or system of inserting points or other small marks into texts, in order to aid interpretation; division of text into sentences, clauses, etc., by means of such marks." So as this text shows, using punctuation is important to understanding and

correct reading handwritten and printed text. **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.** action research/punctuation.html

Generally, in this action research we focused on the use of punctuation in paragraph writing i.e. improving the problems of using punctuation in writing skills in DambiDollo University 1st year Sociology students'.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Writing is a medium of human communication that represents language and emotion with signs and symbols. In most languages, writing is a complement to speech or spoken language. Writing is not a language, but a tool used to make languages be read. Within a language system, writing relies on many of the same structures as speech, such as vocabulary, grammar, and semantics, with the added dependency of a system of signs or symbols. The result of writing is called text, and the recipient of text is called a reader. Motivations for writing include publication, storytelling, correspondence, record keeping and diary. Writing has been instrumental in keeping history, maintaining culture, dissemination of knowledge through the media and the formation of legal systems. (www:///C:/Users/action%20research/mean%20of%20writing.html). As the above idea shows, writing is a medium of communication or the way of communication. It represents language and emotions with signs and symbols.

When we write a paragraph we have to consider on the idea that we want to deliver. To delivered full idea/ information our writing must be prepared in good way. Unless, we communicate with our readers'. Because of this, in this action research the researcher try to improve the punctuation problems of Sociology students.

So, the basic questions of this action research were:

1. Do the students tell the meanings of punctuation?
2. Do the students mention the uses of punctuation?
3. Can the students identify the types of punctuation?

1.3.Objectives of the Research

1.3.1. General Objective of the Research

The general objective of this research is “Improving the problems of using punctuation marks in writing skills of 1st year Sociology students”

1.3.2. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this research were:

1. To identify whether the students tell the meaning of punctuation;
2. To identify whether the students describe the use punctuations;
3. Identifying whether the students can list the types of punctuation.

1.4.Significance of the Research

Every research has its own purpose. That means, research is conducted to solve the problems, to add new theory and so on. When the research is conducted different stake holders get benefit from the research directly or indirectly. So, when we see this research it has its own purpose especially for the students and teachers. The main purposes of this research were:

1. It gives awareness for the students to develop their skills on the meaning and use punctuation.
2. It gives direction for the teacher on the gap of the students' knowledge.

1.5.Delimitation of the Research

Research is delimited because of time and budget. It needs much time and many costs to conduct. So, it must be delimited depending on the above reason. This research is also scoped depending on place and content. In place it specified on Sociology department among the DambiDollo University which found in Oromia region KellemWollega Zone DambiDollo town. In the other way it specified depending on content. In nature action research is a short time research. That means it must be completed in a short period of time. So this research is specified on punctuation use in writing skills.

1.6.Limitation of the Research

The problem faced us were shortage of time to discuss on the topic and shortage of reference materials to complete the research on time. But, the researchers use their time wisely and try to made discussion. To the reference the

researchers use the material they get through internet and can concluded the work as follows.

1. Review of Related Literature

1.1. Introduction

In many African countries, the language, which the people use to communicate with each other, is not English rather they have their own language (their mother tongue). As a result, let alone writing, speaking by itself is a little bit hard. Bringing this issue to our country, students who join any university are students from different area that speaks different languages other than English. However, since they join a university the medium of instruction and the language they are expected to use in classroom is English.

We know that the students have been taking English as one course starting from the lower grade and even more in high schools. However, both in most high school and in the lower grades the English teachers teach English in the students' mother tongue. As we have said in the beginning, those students have not been practicing the language because of different reasons. As a result, when they join university they face different kinds of difficulties like listening, understanding and responding to the instructors. What is more, they have no idea how to write a paragraph. Accordingly, whenever we give them an assignment, they apply many faulty sentences in the paragraph but more specifically, they use a wrong way of capitalization, spelling and punctuation marks.

The sentence is the basic unit of academic writing. This may seem obvious, but in informal spoken English, people often use incomplete sentences. Sentences in essays and assignments must always be complete. A complete sentence is a complete thought and always has (at least) two components: a subject and a predicate. The subject is the person or thing at the centre of attention; the predicate tells the reader something about the subject: Often, though not always, the predicate can be further divided into a verb and an object. The verb is the 'doing or being' word, and describes the action. The object (if there is one) tells you who is on the receiving end: Sentences in academic books and

journals can be quite complex, made up of one or more subordinate clauses joined in various ways, including conjunctions or relative pronouns or linked through punctuation (please see below for more on each of these topics). The basic rule remains the same, however: one complete idea, one complete sentence. www.kent.ac.uk/learning

1.2. Writing

Writing is a medium of human communication that represents language and emotion with signs and symbols. In most languages, writing is a complement to speech or spoken language. Writing is not a language, but a tool used to make languages be read. Within a language system, writing relies on many of the same structures as speech, such as vocabulary, grammar, and semantics, with the added dependency of a system of signs or symbols. The result of writing is called text, and the recipient of text is called a reader. Motivations for writing include publication, storytelling, correspondence, record keeping and diary. Writing has been instrumental in keeping history, maintaining culture, dissemination of knowledge through the media and the formation of legal systems.

As human societies emerged, the development of writing was driven by pragmatic exigencies such as exchanging information, maintaining financial accounts, codifying laws and recording history. Around the 4th millennium BC, the complexity of trade and administration in Mesopotamia outgrew human memory, and writing became a more dependable method of recording and presenting transactions in a permanent form. In both ancient Egypt and Mesoamerica, writing may have evolved through calendric and a political necessity for recording historical and environmental events. Means for recording information

H.G. Wells argued that writing has the ability to "put agreements, laws, and commandments on record. It made the growth of states larger than the old city states possible. It made a continuous historical consciousness possible. The command of the priest or king and his seal could go far beyond his sight and voice and could survive his death".

Alphabetic writing is a frequent category in human communication. The major writing systems methods of inscription broadly fall into five categories: logographic, syllabic, alphabetic, features, and ideographic (symbols for ideas). A sixth category, pictographic, is insufficient to represent language on its own, but often forms the core of logographs.

Among these categories, an alphabet is a set of symbols, each of which represents or historically represented a phoneme of the language. In a perfectly phonological alphabet, the phonemes and letters would correspond perfectly in two directions: a writer could predict the spelling of a word given its pronunciation, and a speaker could predict the pronunciation of a word given its spelling.

As languages often evolve independently of their writing systems, and writing systems have been borrowed for languages they were not designed for, the degree to which letters of an alphabet correspond to phonemes of a language varies greatly from one language to another and even within a single language. <file:///C:/Users/Dell/action%20research/meanwriting.html>

1.3. Paragraphs

A paragraph is a collection of two or more sentences developing a single topic, theme, or idea. All the sentences in a paragraph should thus be related in some way, and tell the reader something more about the key idea. So a complete paragraph would be something like: The doctor saw the patient. The patient came into the surgery looking extremely anxious, so the doctor spoke quietly and tried to put the patient at ease. The patient sat down. For a brief moment, there was a heavy silence in the room. In fact, the expectation that all the sentences in a paragraph are related is so strong that readers will often force a connection, even if there isn't one. Besides, it is free of most disturbing advertisements and games that may hamper learners' attention and learning (Mills & Chandra as cited in Shams-Abadi et al., 2015, p.

91). This tool can help teachers in their teaching, delivering the content and sharing the files that learners can easily access. Not only documents or files teachers can upload, but they can share digital videos that can enrich the course content. Other organizational features of this platform for teachers are monitoring students' interaction, making quizzes, assignments, posts, notes, polls and award badges. Once posted, students can read, reply or solve the quizzes or assignments electronically anywhere and anytime. Added to that, quizzes can be graded and submitted automatically to every student in a secure way (Bayne, n.d.). Edmodo offers a mobile website which can be easily accessed through smart mobile phones and tablets. This allows easy access to posts, quizzes and notifications. Copyright © The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology

As stated in Encarta (2009) paragraph is a piece of writing that consists of one or more sentences, begins on a new and often indented line, and contains a distinct idea or the words of one speaker.

1.4. Punctuation

It's important to know the rules of English punctuation when you write, as using the wrong punctuation may lead to misunderstandings. Using the correct punctuation is especially important when you are writing to impress, such as when you are applying for a new job, or when you are writing to a customer

Punctuation is the use of signs to help readers understand and express written matter. It includes things like capital letters, commas, indented first lines of paragraphs, and spaces between words all the routine devices that help readers decipher prose quickly and accurately. Because the idea of punctuation arose long after the invention of writing itself, ancient texts lack most of the aids to comprehension that we take for granted:

1. How to improve your English punctuation?
2. Why are some people able to explain things clearly when they speak, but are not able to do so when they write?

It's not a lack of intelligence. If it was, they wouldn't be able to express themselves so well when they speak. It's that they don't know how to translate the sentences they say so clearly and correctly when they speak into what they write onto the page or screen. The main reason for this is that they struggle with using punctuation. In particular, it's using correctly the most important and the most basic structure in punctuation, the sentence that many of us struggle with. Punctuation rules are confusing

3. Why do many of us struggle with using punctuation?

The answer is quite simple; it's how we learnt to use punctuation. The blame for this in most cases is on how punctuation was explained or taught to us (or in some cases, not taught to us) in school. English teachers and linguists have a tendency to overcomplicate things. They often use complicated terms (e.g. complex sentence, simple sentence, main clause, subordinate clause etc...) when explaining the rules of using English. And how they explain how to use punctuation in writing is no exception. As a result, most of us have learnt punctuation by copying what we have seen others do when we read. Although this does help us to use it, it doesn't explain when and why we should use it. Not understanding this is the reason why many of us write confusing and overlong sentences.

To understand how to use punctuation correctly, it's essential that you know why we need to use it. Punctuation reflects how we speak. When we speak, we don't only communicate meaning by the words we say, but also by how we say some of the words and the pauses we use between some of them. When we speak, we often say words in different ways. We sometimes change the pitch (speak in a high voice or a low voice) of how we say a word or change the volume (say some words louder than others). We do this to express different meanings. For example, by increasing the pitch of the voice at the end of a sentence indicates that we are asking a question instead of making a statement.

In addition to changing how we say words when we speak, we also use pauses. These

pauses are used to separate points we want to say/make. We use these pauses to avoid people misunderstanding or being confused about the information we are telling them. And some of these pauses are longer than others. When we translate what we say into written words on paper or on a screen, all the meaning given by the change in how we say a word and the pauses we use is lost. In order to give the words we write the same meaning as they had when spoken, we use punctuation. That's what punctuation was originally designed to do. Each punctuation mark (e.g. commas, question marks etc...) was created to reflect a different part of speech which was not a word. You have punctuation marks which reflect the pauses in speech (e.g. commas, full stops/periods) or punctuation marks which reflect a change in pitch or volume in speech (e.g. exclamation marks, question marks etc...).

Punctuation which reflects a change in pitch or volume is very easy to understand and use. Very few people who have a problem with using a question mark (?), an exclamation mark (!) or even quotation marks (" "). Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the use of the punctuation marks that are used for pauses. Punctuation for pauses, when we speak, we make two different distinct types of pauses: short pauses and long pauses. To reflect these different pauses in our writing, we have two punctuation marks. For shorter pauses, we have commas (.). For longer pauses (where you often take a breath), we have full stops/periods (.).

These are the two main punctuation marks which are used to create the sentences we write. They are also the ones which are most often badly used when people write. A badly placed comma can completely change the meaning of a sentence or make a sentence confusing to understand. And not using enough full stops/periods in a paragraph, makes overlong sentences which are difficult to read. You may be asking yourself if there are rules for using commas and full stops/periods to write good and understandable sentences. You don't really need to learn them to write good sentences, because you already know how to create good sentences. You do it every time you speak.

Write as you speak. The best way to see if you are using commas and full stops/periods correctly (and you aren't writing overlong or confusing sentences), is by reading out what you've written. When you say what you've written, only pause when you come to a comma or full stop.

If you find that what you are reading out isn't like how you would normally say it (it doesn't have the pauses that you would use if you said it), then you know there is a problem. More likely than not, you will probably find that you'll have to add commas to avoid misunderstandings or confusion. You'll probably also find that you'll have to shorten some of the sentences which you have written. The best way to know if a sentence you've written is too long, is when you are reading it out, you feel the need to take a breath before you reach the end of it. When you split one sentence into two, you will often have to rewrite parts of both. When you have split one sentence into two, make sure that you reread both of them to see if it necessary to rewrite them. And that's pretty much what you need to do to improve your use of commas and periods.

1.5.How to Use English Punctuation Correctly

To use English punctuation correctly, remember to always capitalize the first letter of a sentence, as well as the names of specific people, places, and things. Also, make sure you end a sentence with a period unless the sentence is a question, in which case you should end it with a question mark. If there's a break or pause in a sentence, insert a comma. You'll also want to put a comma in between items in a list if there are more than 3.

If there's a quote or dialogue in a sentence, put a quotation mark at the beginning and end of the sentence. The placement of punctuation marks before or after a closing quotation mark varies. American English always places periods (full stops) and commas inside the quotation marks, "like so." British English generally places the periods (full stops) and commas after the quotation marks, "like so", except in dialogue, where punctuation would go inside the quotation marks: "like so," he said.

Semicolons and colons always go outside the quotation marks, "like so"; the use of question marks and exclamation marks varies depending upon context. If the whole sentence is a question, and the quotation is a word or phrase at the end of the sentence, the question mark goes outside the quotation marks. If the whole sentence is a statement and the quotation is a question, the question mark goes inside the quotation marks. Do you like to watch "The Office"? He shouted, "Where do you think you're going?"

Many grammar experts believe that parentheses and commas are often interchangeable when setting off information. While this is sometimes true, there are some cases where a set of parentheses might be more suitable, such as in indicating one's personal thought. There are exceptions to the hyphen-dash rule. In making compound words, when one of the words is itself composed of two words, use an en dash (–) rather than a hyphen, as in, "He took the Paris–New York route." En dashes are also used between numbers, as in page numbers or years, to denote a range. ("A discussion on personal finance is found on pages 45–62.") In formal writing, try to avoid excessive use of question marks and exclamation points. Most of your sentences should be declarative statements.

If you decide against the serial comma in your work, make sure that the meaning of the sentence can stand without its use. Think about the classic example of a sentence in which the serial comma is needed: "My heroes are my parents, Mother Teresa and the Pope." Although dashes and parentheses have similar uses, remember that parentheses indicate a stronger "side notion" than dashes. Dashes are usually considered to be informal. You might want to replace the use of a dash with a set of parentheses, or even commas. Similarly, limit the frequency of dash use in your writing; it should be reserved to emphasize a limited number of important points.

Never be afraid to have short sentences in your writing by splitting up long sentences that contain several points. Your reader will

appreciate writing that is clear and concise with briefer statements, as opposed to a one-page paragraph with twenty words per sentence. If you write in a professional capacity, be sure to follow any guidelines or style guides provided by your employer. In some cases, their rules can be at odds with what you read here or elsewhere, but their rules should take precedence. For example, some companies use serial commas (a, b, and c) and others do not (a, b and c). If you find that a sentence seems to drag on, find a way to add a comma or two, so that it is easier on the reader's eyes. If a sentence becomes too long, consider splitting it into two or more sentences. (file:///C:/action%20research/punctuation%203.html)

Generally, to use punctuation correctly:

- ➔ Try to distinguish between the punctuation rules of different languages in order to avoid using punctuation incorrectly.
 - ➔ Keep in mind that punctuation should be used to enhance writing and create a more "intelligent" appearance. The whole point of punctuation is to increase clarity.
 - ➔ While using English punctuation appropriately may help your writing to flow more smoothly, don't overdo it. It's better to err by omission than to include superfluous, even confusing apostrophes, commas and other marks.
 - ➔ ➔ Do not use punctuation just because it seems more intellectual.
- So, this research was conducted to give solution of the problem of the students of using punctuation marks in writing.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This is an action research which is focused on the topic called "Improving the problem of using punctuation marks in writing". As many scholars said, this kind of research was conducted to solve immediate problem. It also involves an intervention by a researcher to influence change in any given situation and to monitor and evaluate the results. The researcher, working with a client, identifies a particular objective. The researcher enters into the

situation, e.g. by introducing new techniques, and monitors the results. This research requires active co-operation between researcher and client and a continual process of adjustment to the intervention in the light of new information and responses to it from respondents.

As Bruce L. Berg (2001 4th ed.) stated, action research, sometimes referred to as *participatory action research*, is a research framework that evolved from a number of different intellectual traditions. The approach has been described to be a highly reflective, experiential, and participatory mode of research in which all individuals involved in.

Additionally Gay and et al (2009) said, “Action research in education is any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, principals, school counselors, or other stake holders in the teaching learning environment to gather information about the ways in which their particular school operate, the teachers teach, and the students learn”. This text stated that action research was conducted by stake holders to solve a problem faced through their work. So, this research is an action research that conducted to solve the problems of using punctuation in writing.

3.2. Data Sources and Sampling Techniques

The source of data for this action research was the students of first year Sociology department in Dambi Dollo University. The sampling techniques used for this action research were through purposive sampling

3.3. Data Gathering Tools

Data were collected through different tools. Among these questionnaires, interviews, observation, document analysis, focus group discussion and testing. To conduct this research we used testing system. These tests were given to the students who selected as sample among the population/ department students.

3.4. Methods of Data Organization And Analyses

For this research, the data collected from respondents were organized in the paragraph and analyzed by method of qualitative. That means, we score the test given and assess/ analyses the document or note of the students

and then explain it.

4. Data organization and Analysis

To this research, we have three basic research questions. Depending on these research questions we prepared different question and asked students to get their performance. As we collected their response we organized and analysis as follows.

4.1. The Meanings of Punctuation

We asked a question whether they can define the word ‘punctuation’. As we asked them among twenty students five students can define it well. The other students cannot give the meaning of punctuation. That means, 15 (75%) of the students were not know the meaning of punctuation well and 5 (25%) were can define it well. So, these students need help to understand/ identify the meaning of punctuation.

4.2. Uses of Punctuation

The second question asked to the students was to identify whether they can mention the uses of punctuation. Depending on the questions most of the students cannot mention the uses of punctuation briefly. And some of them can mention the uses of punctuation. That means, they can mention the functions of full stops, question mark and comma but they can’t identify the other punctuation to give its uses. So, as we can understand from their responses they need other direction and tutorial to identify the uses of punctuation marks.

4.3. Types of Punctuation

The third question asked to identify the students understandings were about the types of punctuation. We asked them to mention the types of punctuation. As they mention, most of them can mention only six types of punctuation mark and some of them can mention ten and twelve. As we understand from their responses most of the students cannot identify the types of punctuation marks. That means, the teacher should have to take additional tutorial to develop their writing skills and the students themselves have read different material to identify all of punctuation marks with their uses.

5. Action plan

This is what we have to done after identifying the research problem. So, the action that should have to implement were presented as follows.

- ☐ Taking time and teaches or give additional tutorial on the meaning of punctuation.
- ☐ Direct the students to read different material written on punctuation marks.
- ☐ After they can define punctuation then tell them the uses of punctuation marks.
- ☐ Then, teaches them the types of punctuation marks.
- ☐ Lastly, give tests to identify the differences after action plan.

Gay

- ☐ The teacher should have to give immediate feedback (make corrections) for the students on the error of students on using punctuation marks.

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www.kent.ac.uk/learning

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6. Evaluation

To evaluate the difference the tests were given to the students. That means, before the intervention the students can't define the meaning of punctuation, uses and types of punctuation as all. Then, to identify the difference after intervention the tests were given to students.

As the test result shows, most of the students can define/ give clear definition for the punctuation mark. Again they can mention the uses of punctuation mark and can use it in sentence writing. Additionally, they can list the types of punctuation marks independently. So, as the researcher evaluate they can make difference in their understanding of punctuation as the above mentioned.

7. Recommendation

Depending on the result gained from this action research we gave the following recommendation:

- ☐ For the future to understand what they read and to make clear communication in writing all the students have to understand the uses of punctuation mark.
- ☐ To teach punctuation mark, the teachers have to use different methodology such as discussion methods and teaches it in sentence and paragraph.
- ☐ All stake holders such as students, teachers and others have to take punctuation as a part of writing and use it wisely.