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A STUDY ON THE DIFFICULTIES FACED BY LIBYAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN USING PUNCTUATION MARKS IN ENGLISH WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The correct use of punctuation is a key skill in writing. It forms an important part of written language and plays a very important role in giving intended meaning to the language. The use of a wrong mark of punctuation or even a wrong placement of mark of punctuation can change the meaning of the sentence completely and lead to confusions. The present study aims at investigating the problems faced by Libyan university students in using punctuation marks. It presents the method which includes a questionnaire for teachers and tests for students after teaching students the use of punctuation marks by the new method of using colours. Data was collected both from the questionnaire and the results of tests given to students. The results showed that the Libyan university students had difficulty in identifying punctuation marks in written text. Eventually it led them to use them inappropriately in written text. It was, moreover, identified that the teaching method could be changed and improved so as to make the students understand. At last, the students showed improvement in their understanding of punctuation and its application after they learnt punctuation marks through the new teaching method.

Keywords: Punctuation marks, colours, Libyan university students, tests

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INTRODUCTION

Punctuation is one of the most important and difficult lessons to teach to students learning English as a second language. Punctuation has always been debated at large in different places except in classroom. Students writing formal papers need to have, at least, a cursory understanding of the rules of punctuation. According to Oxford English Dictionary (1999: 618), punctuation 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 mark." According to the researcher's previous observation as a student and then as a teacher in teaching English to university students in Al-Jilat College in Libya, the researcher noticed that students had neglected and misused the punctuation marks in their writing which led to misunderstanding. This experience was supported by other English teachers at the

university. Moreover, Texts of Arabic, the first language of Libyan university students, are read from right to left and written in a cursive script. No distinction is made between upper and lower case, and the rules for punctuation are not as strict as that in English. The influence of Arabic is seen obviously when they use punctuation marks in their English writing. In this respect, the study investigates the difficulties encountered by Libyan university students and makes the students aware of the importance of punctuation marks. It helps them to take more care about using punctuation marks in their writing. On the other hand, this study helps and encourages the teachers to find new strategies to teach punctuation marks by a different and a more effective way. English language uses fourteen punctuation marks, but this study concentrates on common punctuation marks such as: comma, full stop, colon, semicolon, question mark, exclamation mark, quotation mark and apostrophe.

Methodology

It is suggested that the teacher changes his/her way in teaching punctuation mark by using colours. The methodology in this study gave pre- and post-tests to the students. Test papers were given to fifty (50) college students of the English department at Al-Jilat College. They were of age group from 18 to 23.

Pre-test: Students are assessed for their level of competency in using punctuation marks before the teacher teaches the use of punctuation marks by the new method and the results will be recorded. The researcher identified the errors related to punctuation marks from the answers of students' pre-test.

Teaching Punctuation Marks

Two groups of students were taught for one month.

First group

This group was taught punctuation marks by the usual method. In the beginning, the teacher taught students names of punctuation marks and their definition. Then he/she explained the types and uses of each mark with examples. i. e. what each mark does.

Second group

Another group was taught punctuation marks by the new method. This new method involved using colours. The teacher taught names of punctuation marks and their definitions with specific colours for each mark. Then the teacher explained the use of each mark with examples. The teacher used specific colours instead of punctuation marks in his examples. After that the teacher gave a paragraph to the students in which specific punctuation marks have been replaced by specific colours. The students then were asked to read the paragraph and then asked to write the right punctuation marks in place of the colours. Also the teacher associated the meanings of colours in traffic signals in the roads with the function of same punctuation marks.

Colours replace punctuation marks as following

Full stop = red

Comma = green

Colon = yellow

Question mark = maroon

Semicolon = grey

Apostrophe= blue

Quotation mark = purple

Exclamation mark = orange

Post-test

After one month of teaching by using colours instead of punctuation marks, the evaluation was done. Students were tested again. The questions for the test were prepared including the following points the students progress, level and their ability to use punctuation marks in the correct way.

Results

The researcher identified the errors related to punctuation marks from the answers of students' pre-test.

The results showed that there were errors in using punctuation marks. They are listed below.

1. Misused comma
2. Misused exclamation mark
3. Missed apostrophe in possessive
4. Missed quotation mark
5. Missed full stop
6. Revealed confusion between colon and semi- colon

From the questionnaire for the teachers the responses of the teachers were also as same as that of students done in pre-test. These responses were arranged in the same sequence as questions in questionnaire.

1. Students sometimes used a full stop at the end of a sentence.
2. Students always used question mark at the end of each question.
3. Students never used an exclamation mark in their writing.
4. Students sometimes used comma properly.
5. Students were sometimes confused between full stop and comma.
6. Students were also confused between colon and semicolon.
7. They sometimes used question marks in dialogues.
8. They sometimes used comma between words in a list of items.
9. They never used apostrophe in contractions and possessives.

After teaching two groups of students for one month, the researcher had to analyse the results of post-test in order to measure the differences between the results of the two tests. In two groups, the results were convergent. In the second group about 40% of the students were able to identify the full stop whereas they were about 32% of the students in the first group. Exclamation mark, on the other hand, was not very easy for students to identify it in the passage. The analysis showed that 82% of the students could not identify it in the second group whereas they were 86% in the first group. 20% of students were able to identify the colon in the second group whereas they were only 7% in the first group. The number of students who were able to insert the semi-colon at the right place was about 26% of the students in the second group, whereas they were 12% in the first group. The use of the comma is another challenging punctuation mark to students. About 30% of students were able to identify it in the second group whereas they were 17% in the first group. The use of the apostrophe is not familiar to many students. So, 94% of the students failed to identify it in both the groups. The reason may be that Arabic language

does not use apostrophe. 70% of the students were able to identify the quotation mark in the second group whereas 66% of the students in the first group. On the other hand, question mark was not difficult to identify it. Therefore, 70% of the students were able to identify the question mark in the second group whereas 61% in the first group.

The above mentioned results of post test showed that the level and ability of students of second group in using punctuation marks were better than the first group though the difference was not very drastic. This means that punctuation marks are not easy to learn and the new method has benefitted them. It is challenging for Libyan university students to improve their writing as they struggle in learning and using punctuation marks. Although there were mistakes in the students' answers in the second group, the students became aware of the importance of punctuation marks in their writing. This may be due to that the students connected the importance of punctuation marks with the importance of colours in traffic signals.

Conclusion

This study revealed the difficulties faced by Libyan university students in using punctuation marks. It highlights the problems of Libyan university students in understanding and using punctuation marks in English writing. In the light of this study, the researcher found that students had problems in using punctuation marks. These problems were due to inadequate learning and ineffective teaching. The need to make punctuation marks an important one in teaching was identified. According to results, 65% of the students who learnt punctuation marks used them inappropriately. Their writing seemed to indicate that those students did not understand how to use the punctuation marks correctly in conveying information accurately and effectively. Some of students used full stop and question marks inadequately and incorrectly. This may be due to the negligence of students. The comma which is used extensively in order to help the readers convey the intended meaning in long sentences was not adequately used. This may be due to the various uses of comma and inability to understand sentence structure. The students who learnt punctuation marks did not seem to appreciate not only the

comma but also the value of using semicolon and colon in places where punctuations are absolutely necessary. This may be due to the inability to understand the uses of semicolon and the students learnt that colon is used only to introduce a list. Most of the students could not identify apostrophe because apostrophe does not exist in Arabic language. Number of the Students used exclamation mark and quotation mark inappropriately also. This may be due to the difficulty to master the exclamation mark without hearing the tone of the speaker. The problem with quotation mark may due to the difficulty to understand direct speech from indirect speech.

All these problems may be summarized into categories: i) grammatical and ii) semantical. The students made the errors in three types; they are omission, addition and misformation. Error of omission is the dominant error in students' writing. On the other hand, though there were errors in using punctuation marks, the progress was noted down clearly when they learnt punctuation marks through this new method.

Recommendations

The researcher presents the following recommendations which may represent some guidelines for teachers of English to the Arab learners.

1. Teachers should give more attention to teaching punctuation marks in English and new strategies should be developed.
2. Punctuation marks should be taught as a part of composition.

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