

# Developing Writing Skill in English: A Tool Based Approach

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## Abstract

Writing is often the difficult task for students of English as a Second Language. Some reasons for this situation are the importance given to other skills, lack of students' interest in writing and teachers' writing competence, etc. However, it is essential for a student to produce the advanced written English which he can develop in different ways. One of them is the study and use of punctuation. Used properly, punctuation helps students achieve clarity and emphasis in their writing. Used improperly, it does just the opposite. Thus, this paper focuses on developing the writing skill with the help of the knowledge of punctuation through an innovative method. The participants of this study were the first year students of B.A. in English at Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL). Further, a student-friendly innovative tool, known as Punctuation Booster, was developed by using the computer language Visual Basic 6, to facilitate the technology-incorporated learning and testing of punctuation. Then the students' knowledge in punctuation was tested through pre-test (with paper) and post test (with tool). The results after the analysis of both tests revealed that the post test as an innovative method had shown a good result than the result in pre-test as a traditional method. Thus, the study concludes that the students develop writing well by the utilization of the innovative methods than the traditional ones.

**Keywords:** writing skill, punctuation, traditional method, innovative method, Visual Basic 6.

## Introduction

Punctuation is one aspect of written English. When a student writes, he puts his thoughts into sentences. To show where his sentences begin and end, and how they should be read, he needs punctuation. The scholars, Richards and Schmidt (2010), state that punctuations are the graphic marks such as *commas, semicolons, dashes and periods*, which are to clarify meaning in written sentences or to represent spoken sentences in writing. According to Garner (2016), "punctuation is an elaborate cuing system by which writers signal to their readers how to move smoothly through the prose". Further, the scholars Kuiper and Luke (1992) also state that "punctuation consists of cue marks for joining and separating words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. The purpose of punctuation is to clarify what otherwise would seem vague or confusing to a reader". For instance, while comparing the sentences 1 and 2: '1. *The criminal, says the judge, should be hanged.*' and '2. *The criminal says, the judge should be hanged.*', it is more apparent that the omission and the place of punctuation change the meaning of the sentence upside down, i.e. the first sentence says that the criminal should be punished; and when one of the commas is omitted and the other comma is positioned at a different

place, the meaning of the second sentence is that the judge should be punished. Then consider another set of sentences 3 and 4: '3. *Let us eat, Daddy, before we go.*' and '4. *Let us eat Daddy before we go.*'. In the third sentence, *Daddy* is being called for dinner. However, in the fourth sentence, *Daddy* himself has become an item to be eaten. Omission of comma in this case has converted the third sentence into a complete nonsense, i.e. the fourth one. Thus, it is noted that a properly punctuated sentence will help the reader understand the text and the writer's intention clearly.

Further, when we speak, we make ourselves better understood by changing the tone of our voice, pauses, using hand gestures, and facial expressions. The grammarians, Ellsworth and Higgins (1985), also point out that 'we use the pauses and stops in speaking instead of most punctuation marks'; but in writing, punctuation is an equivalent method for emphasizing or clarifying what we mean. Therefore, the understanding and usage of punctuation is a systematic linguistic process and it plays a greater role in the development of English, especially in writing skill.

### Punctuation Marks

Punctuation marks, i.e. the delimiting symbols, clarify both grammatical and semantic aspects of a text (Bussmann, 1996). Carrol and Wilson (1995) state that no universal rules of punctuation cause the problems in students' writing. But learning the existing rules is inevitable for them to improve their writing ability. Punctuation marks include *Capital letter, full stop (period), question mark, comma, apostrophe, colon, semicolon, parentheses, brackets (square and curly), hyphen, dashes, ellipsis, exclamation point, quotation marks (single and double)*, etc.

### Capital Letter

A Capital letter is used in the following circumstances.

- to begin a sentence: *The Eastern University, Sri Lanka was established in 1980.*
- for the pronoun 'I' wherever it comes in the sentence: *I think she is punctual.*
- for all proper nouns - names of:
  - people (*Sidney Greenbaum*)
  - countries (*Sri Lanka*)
  - languages (*Tamil*)
  - religious festivals (*Diwali*)
  - firms (*Professional Couriers*)
  - organizations (*International Committee of Red Cross*)
  - historical periods (*the British period*)
  - days of the week (*Wednesday*)
  - months of the year (*July*), but not usually the seasons
- to begin an adjective derived from proper nouns: *a Sri Lankan artist, Indian law*

However, the capital is dropped when the connection with the proper noun becomes lost: *danish pastry* (i.e. a particular sort of pastry, but not from Denmark.)

### Full Stop

Full stop is just a dot (.), but it has one of the biggest jobs to do (Butterworth, 1999). It is normally used to mark the end of a sentence; and also used in abbreviations. It is called 'full stop' in British English (BrE) and 'period' in American English (AmE). For example:

- Sri Lanka is known as the pearl of the Indian Ocean.*
- Swedish Geneticist, Svante Paabo, has won the Nobel Prize for medicine in 2022.*

- My mother gets up at 5 a.m. daily.*

However, in modern BrE the full stop is often omitted after abbreviations. For instance, *Mr and Mrs Perera are running a small business at home in Sri Lanka.* Further, the full stop is differently pronounced at different usages, i.e. when it separates a unit from a decimal in figures, it is pronounced *point* (e.g. 12.6 is pronounced as *twelve point six*); and it is called 'dot' when used to separate internet protocol addresses and name web addresses. For example, *yahoo.com* is pronounced as *yahoo dot com*.

Sometimes, students may commit a common mistake in sentences by using a comma in the place of a full stop.

### Question Mark

The question mark (?) is called 'end punctuation' and also known as 'special full stop' as it comes at the end of a sentence which is a direct question. For instance:

- What is the capital city of Sri Lanka?*
- Is "truth" a single word?*

If the question is a direct quotation, repeating the speaker's exact words, a question mark is needed: *"How many of you study in the morning?"* inquired the teacher. But a question mark is not used in an indirect question, in which the speaker's exact words are not repeated: *The teacher asked how many of us studied in the morning.*

### Comma

The comma (,) is an important punctuation in writing and it makes the sentences easier to read. Further, it is so powerful to change the meaning of a sentence quickly, and sometimes the meaning may be absurd, i.e. the comma is the most commonly used and abused punctuation mark. For example, look at the following sentences:

- I took silver, paper, plates, and water.*
- I took silver paper, plates, and water.*
- I took silver, paper plates, and water.*

The shifting of comma by just one place in the above sentence completely gives us the different shades of meaning.

The rules for using comma in a sentence are really simple. For example, a comma is never preceded by a space and always followed by a space. The comma attempts to enhance the clarity by separating and grouping words, phrases, and clauses into meaningful units. It marks a brief pause, usually at a point where you will

pause to take a breath when you are speaking rather than writing. The following are some of the rules of comma:

Commas are used to separate three or more items in a list or series.

Commas are used when an introductory subordinate clause comes before the main clause.

Commas indicate that the adverbials of time moved from the end of the sentence.

Commas are used to separate independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions such as *for*, *and*, *but*, etc.

A comma can be used to separate two or more adjectives if you pause between them.

A comma is used to separate the name of a city from the name of a state or country

A comma is used to separate a date from a year.

A comma is used before and after an appositive.

A comma is used to set off a non-restrictive phrase or clause.

A comma is used before and after a parenthetical expression.

*He bought fish, chicken, crab, and prawn for lunch.*

*When we went to the movie, it had started.*

*In the moon light, she looked like another moon.*

*Parents advise their children, but most of them have deaf ears.*

*The guest stayed in a small, neat room.*

*I am living in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka.*

*Noam Chomsky was born on December 07, 1928.*

*Dr. Hilary E. Silva, the former Director General of SLIATE, helped the staff for their academic progress. Sigiriya, which is in Sri Lanka, has been included in the world heritage list. His Ph.D. supervisor, of course, is very intelligent.*

*book*, etc. To form the possessive of a plural noun ending in 's', an apostrophe is added after the 's': *my sisters' wish, the girls' school*, etc.

The most important use of apostrophe in English is to show the contraction in writing. Some commonest examples are given below:

it's = it is or it has

we'll = we will or we shall

they've = they have

can't = cannot

he'd = he would or he had

isn't = is not

aren't = are not

won't = will not

An apostrophe is not used with possessive personal pronouns like *\*yours*, *\*his*, *\*hers*, etc. Here, the asterisk (\*) shows that the form is ungrammatical.

Sometimes, parts of long names or phrases are left out and replaced with apostrophe to save space. For instance:

- Liverpool = L'pool
- 6 of the clock = 6 o' clock

### Colon

The colon (:) is a special punctuation mark and it can be really used easily and correctly. It is never preceded by a space, and it is always followed by a single space in normal use. The uses of colon are as follows:

A colon is used to introduce a list or an explanation

*Students are requested to bring the following items to one day excursion: breakfast, lunch, water, note book, and medicines.*

In BrE, the first word following a colon is always in lower case, but in AmE it is the upper case.

*I have a good news: the graduates are going to be recruited into government service. (BrE)*

*I have a good news: The graduates are going to be recruited into government service. (AmE)*

Colons are also used for speech in scripts.

*Interviewer: How many children do you have?  
Interviewee: Sixteen.  
Interviewer: Sixteen! That's amazing!  
Interviewee: I love my wife very much.*

### Apostrophe

An apostrophe (') is used to show possession or belonging. To show it, an apostrophe and an 's' are added to the singular noun or indefinite pronoun that ends in 'one' or 'body': *The Vice Chancellor's message, somebody's*

Colons may precede direct quotations.

*Many people say: "The hero's daughter in the Tamil film, 'Viswasam', has acted very well".*

### Semicolon

A semicolon (;) marks a bigger break than a comma, but is not as final as a full stop (Butterworth, 1999). A student can impress his readers by the correct usage of semicolon in sentences. A semicolon is used in the following three cases:

To separate two closely related independent clauses or sentences.

*It was his strength; it was his weakness.*

A semicolon is often used before adverbial conjuncts such as *however, on the other hand, otherwise, etc.*

*He is not a good person; however, he has to be welcomed.*

Semicolons are used to separate items in a series where there are already commas.

*He visited Leicester, UK; Chidambaram, India; and Trincomalee, Sri Lanka.*

### Hyphen

A hyphen (-) is used to join two words together to make a new one, as in *back-up*. It must never be used with spaces at both ends. Most obviously, a hyphen is used to point out that a long word has been divided between the end of one line and the beginning of the next. Some uses of hyphen are as follows:

A hyphen is used with compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine and with fractions used as modifiers.

*The conference proceeding consists of hundred and twenty-six research articles. Two-thirds of the voters did not vote in the presidential election.*

A hyphen is used in a compound adjective only when it comes before the word it modifies.

*S.P. Balasubramaniam known as 'Paadum Nila' is a world-famous playback singer.*

A hyphen can be used with the prefixes like *ex-, self-*, etc. and with the suffixes such as *-elect*.

*His ex-wife has become the CEO of his company. Mostly, everybody is concerned with their self-respect.*

A compound phrase uses the hyphen for its clarity.

*The Vice Chancellor-elect is kind.*

Hyphens can change meaning.

*The nine-year-old boy cried for his life in Ukraine.*

*The pregnant lady brought a hot-water bottle.*

*The pregnant lady brought a hot water bottle.*

### Methodology

The tool *Punctuation Booster* was developed by using the computer language VB6. For this tool, the sentences as data were collected from the books and materials relevant to the course B.A. in English. Then, the all punctuation marks were removed from the collected sentences and inserted into the programme (i.e. the tool). While looking at the mechanism of this tool, a student, first time, clicks the *Sentence* button (then *Next* button) to get a sentence without punctuation, for example, "*kasthuri is gandhis wife*". Then the student must have a careful study of the sentence and apply the correct punctuation marks to make it meaningful as "*Kasthuri is Gandhi's wife*". Further, a button *Show Sentence* has been included in the tool to display the punctuation-nil sentence in the box which is provided for writing the sentence with correct punctuation, instead of re-typing the punctuation-nil sentence in the box. After punctuating the sentence correctly, the student is able to check his answers, i.e. he can come to know his strengths and weaknesses by clicking *Check* button. Then, the answers will be displayed in the grid added in the tool.

### Sample Visual of the Developed Tool



### Results and Discussion

The participants of this study were twenty students from the course of B.A. in English at EUSL. Then the tool was used to test the students' existing knowledge in the skill of writing and also boosting the same skill through learning

punctuation. It was observed that the students had utilized the tool enthusiastically and their results were also quite positive. In the discussion, all the participants stated that they were very interested in doing this technology-incorporated writing activity. Further, they all happily voiced that they were able to get the immediate feedback of their every attempt in this e-tool. Thus, it is obvious that technology based tools, i.e. e-tools, especially computer based learning and testing activities stimulate the students' interest in language skills and it is also very helpful for teachers to observe the students' performance and highly motivate them towards their learning mission and vision.

### Conclusion

The students of ESL have to concentrate on punctuation as it plays an important role in the development of English language, especially in promoting the writing skill. In speaking, the pauses and gestures are used to clarify the meaning of the words. In writing, punctuation marks such as *commas, dashes, colons, semicolons*, etc. provide most of these interpretation clues. The well-used punctuation can enhance the clarity of a text. When the students develop the punctuation knowledge, their writing skill improves naturally. One of the twentieth century's major poets, T.S. Eliot, says that if we wrote as we speak, we should find no one to read. Thus, punctuation is an inevitable linguistic unit for developing writing skill. Based on this idea, an innovative method was thought of promoting the knowledge in punctuation, i.e. a computational tool known as *Punctuation Booster* was developed to help the participants of this study in order to master the knowledge of punctuation in English. The tool was tested among the participants and the results evinced that the students could gain more knowledge in punctuation with the help of the innovative methods rather than any other traditional ways.

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