



THE EFFECT OF TEACHING PUNCTUATION MARKS EXPLICITLY ON OMANI EFL LEARNERS WRITING ABILITIES

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Abstract:

This is a research study about teaching punctuation marks explicitly and its effects on EFL learners' writing abilities. To do this, 40 Omani EFL learners at intermediate level from Sohar College of Applied Sciences, Oman were selected. Ministerial placement test homogenized students according to their level of proficiency. A pretest was applied to ensure students similar knowledge on the basis of punctuation marks. Then, treatment was provided for the experimental group of learners and finally another writing test as a posttest was applied to measure the results. Results revealed that teaching punctuation marks explicitly doesn't have any effect on the learners' writing abilities in that college.

Keywords: punctuation marks, explicit teaching, Omani EFL learners, writing abilities

1. Introduction

Today's punctuation system was not outlined by a gathering of etymologists or architects however rather continuously advanced more than a few centuries on account of skilled workers. It was outlined, by the essayists themselves, the copyists and later professionals who associated with the printing exchange, progressively observed some approaches to make reading more effective and justifiable by adding signs to the language they were making observable. Taking a gander at the way punctuation advanced may offer some knowledge into what they were looking to achieve by including signs with the goal that anyone may better comprehend its uses today (Krah, 2014).

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1.2. Purpose of the Study

Writing is one of the hardships encountering foreign language learners' way to express what do they want to translate from their first language. For this reason, it's vital to consider a way to present writing in a useful way for EFL learners, apart from mind mapping which is a great help in writing as well as organization, spelling, vocabulary knowledge and sentence construction which all considered as important constituents to produce a well-organized piece of writing. In such doing, a deeper look at punctuation was given to equip them as a basic component in writing. In other words, giving more attention on the use of punctuation to write sentence more carefully, express ideas with greater writer voice (Duistermaat, 2016).

It is axiomatic that the principles of punctuation cannot be reduced to systematic, sensible use while they are not being understood, and also they can't be understood while not having been learned first. In use of points and marks two ways existed which tolerable accuracy can be learned. First by rules and the second one is through observation. While the former one is applicable through principles of grammar, the latter one need trained eyes and analogical perception (Abdeljalil, Ammar, 2014).

So as it mentioned in the above paragraphs, the matter of punctuation marks and their important roles to write very well-prepared compositions require a deeper look and understanding of the subject matter. In order to achieve this goal, the present investigators of the study tried to introduce punctuation marks to the EFL learners in a simple and understandable language through examples in and out of the context during one educational semester. And also to determine the degree of improvement on the EFL learners' writing after treatment.

1.3. Research question

The present study aimed to find the answer for this research question: *"Does the explicit teaching of punctuation marks have any effect on Omani EFL Learners' writing abilities?"*

1.4. Research hypothesis

On the basis of above question, the following research hypothesis is formulated:

HO: Teaching punctuation marks explicitly doesn't have any significant effect on the improvement of EFL learners' writing abilities.

2. Theoretical Background

Using proper punctuation marks is a mean to communicate properly. While speaking, many tools like gestures, voice pitch, and body language are helpful to be understood. Except phone call or conference, there is a similar ground and all these tools are at work. Usually in speech usage of complete sentences are happened rarely so the speech will be shattered, in this case when the sentences or phrases are not understood clearly, a clarification can be immediately done (Waugh, 1998).

There is a dim difference between writing and speech. For instance, in lecture or presentation, sometimes difficulties happen in communication process, or you are using

a phrase which is hard to transfer it and make it understandable. It may be less genuine and prepared carefully. It also can be changed according to the content, tone and gesture as a response to the audience reactions. In contrast, writers suffering from lack of such opportunities, since they cannot change their writing regularly, except web-based publications. As soon as publication of a piece of writing, the chance of revision is very low (Waugh, 1998).

To communicate precisely in writing, consideration of punctuation as an effective element is essential. Punctuation is further than reciting some chunks or applying some rules and principles. Punctuation allows some words, phrases and clauses to be highlighted and meaning can be changed slightly or majorly. So, similar words may carry various meaning on the basis of different punctuation marks (Waugh, 1998).

There are not such fix rules of punctuation. Like spelling and pronunciation which changed over the time, punctuation did either. Some punctuation marks can be correct or false, but the complicated usage may be on the premise of selection and style. There are times that choosing among full stops, commas, colons, and semi-colons are in our hand. We can also select when to use exclamation mark and when to decide for the substitution of brackets for dashes (Waugh, 1998).

Punctuation is helpful for readers and writers. For readers, it helps to elicit meaning from the text and for writers allow to convey their meaning precisely. It divided the text to meaningful sections, it creates different grammatical boundaries and it connects to grammatical features inseparably. The most impressive methods of teaching punctuation are through the context and its linkage to grammatical structure (Lawely Primary School).

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Participants

The population from which the participants of the present study were drawn included 40 Omani males and females Intermediate EFL learners at Sohar College of Applied Sciences. They were studying their first semester at Foundation Department. These learners were divided to two groups of 20 for the purpose of being control and experimental groups. Their age range was between 18 and 19. These students were homogenized according to the Ministry of Education`s placement test.

3.2. Instruments

Regarding this research, there was not a special instrument to get information or update students with it. Using internet to get some information, examples and worksheets on the basis of punctuation marks was one of the instruments and the other source of study included a book called `A Dash of Style -The Art and Mastery of Punctuation` by Noah Lukman (2006).

3.3. Procedures

To lead the study, following steps have been followed during the semester.

1. At the beginning students were homogenized according to the Ministry of Higher Education's Placement test. So students were almost at the same level of proficiency. Later on, the present investigators of the study divided learners in two groups of control and experiment ones and in each group located 20 learners.
2. There was a writing session as the pretest of this study. Students wrote approximately 150 to 200 words about a short vacation during Oman National Day's holiday.
3. The study happened during one educational semester which is almost 4 months. Every week there were two writing sessions guided by the investigators of this study. During these months and in writing sections, punctuation marks were introduced to the learners followed by extra examples and some worksheets to make the understanding better. The covered punctuation marks are as follow:

The basic signs of punctuation are as follow:

- a. The comma (,)
 - b. The full stop (.)
 - c. The exclamation mark (!)
 - d. The question mark (?)
 - e. The semicolon (;)
 - f. The colon (:)
 - g. The apostrophe (')
 - h. The quotation marks ("")
 - i. Brackets () or []
 - j. The slash (/)
4. There was a writing session as posttest at the end of presenting all necessary punctuation marks. Again, learners were asked to write about the same topic which they tried at the beginning of the semester.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Pretest

The first stage during the statistical analysis of the findings of the study was to scrutinize the results of the pretest in order to check the degrees of similarity at punctuation knowledge of participants in writing and later on to determine the impacts of treatment when post-test is compared with the results of the pretest. A writing task was administered to both groups of participants and the following data was gathered:

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pretest

Pretest		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	experiment	20	18.40	4.672	1.045
	control	20	18.05	4.501	1.006

According to the table 1, the distinction between two groups of control and experiment in pretest is really trifle, but in order to investigate it clearly an independent t-test was applied to the mentioned data and following results appeared:

Table 2: Independent Samples Test for Pretest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Score	.069	.795	.241	38	.811	.350	1.451	-2.587	3.287
Equal variances assumed			.241	37.947	.811	.350	1.451	-2.587	3.287
Equal variances not assumed									

It is shown that at 38 degrees of freedom, the amount of level of significance is .811 and since 0.811 is bigger than *P* value which is 0.05, then there is no remarkable distinction between performance of control and experimental groups in pretest.

4.2. Posttest

In this section, a writing test with same topic like pretest was held in order to assess the participants' progress as a result of treatment. Also, the purpose of posttest was to determine the amount of score dispersion in presence of treatment specifically. The following information was gathered from the posttest.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of posttest

Writing		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	experiment	20	18.50	2.724	.609
	control	20	18.80	2.118	.474

According to Table 3 and its comparison with participants' means in pretest, a little improvement can be observed in students writing but the amount of this difference is

not remarkable. To gain more information about posttest, an independent t-test was applied on learners' outcomes and the following results were revealed:

Table 4: Independent Samples Test for Posttest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Score Equal variances assumed	.888	.352	-.389	38	.700	-.300	.772	-1.862	1.262
Equal variances not assumed			-.389	35.820	.700	-.300	.772	-1.865	1.265

The Table 4 determined that there is not a treatment effect on the groups' performance, since in 38 degrees of freedom with the amount of *P Value* of 0.05 the significant level is 0.700 and since this amount is bigger than level of probability so there is no significant difference in learners' performance after treatment.

As mentioned previously, the present study aimed at providing answers to the research question of "Does the explicit teaching of punctuation marks have any effect on Omani EFL Learners' writing abilities?" The findings of the data analysis revealed that explicit teaching of punctuation markers doesn't have any remarkable effects on students writing skills.

5. Conclusion

This research tried to find an answer for the following question: Is there any improvement in students writing abilities in case of explicit teaching of punctuation marks? To do this, a treatment includes punctuation marks were taught to the learners for one educational semester. The results of study were not out of expectation but in order to gain deeper understanding toward the topic, some independent t-tests applied on the learners writing assignment in pretest and posttest. After that, the results came true that there is not any significant difference in writing abilities of learners before and after the treatment toward following punctuation mark rules.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

Examining the results and statistics of the present study, there are some implications for English teachers, students and educational institutes. Teaching punctuation marks explicitly may have a little improvement in students writing to follow some

punctuation marks; but, the investigation showed that in many sentences of their writing, learners were confused with the function of these markers and they misused them.

Students are aware that there are many punctuation marks including basic and advance which need to be followed if they are looking for a well-organized writing. Students also need to improve their grammar and spelling during writing process.

Since punctuation considers as a challenging factor in writing, it can have its own weight among other items in writing correction rubrics. Educational institutes and people who are responsible for rubric designing should have a separate score for the punctuation marks.

5.2. Suggestions for further research

- Given the small number of sample size, it is difficult to generalize the finding of the study to other EFL learners` writing.
- This study was done with intermediate level students who joined to the college immediately after high school. Suggestion can be offered if researchers do the same explicit teaching of punctuation markers with students of higher levels and those who spent some semesters at foundation level before involving in any research.

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