

INVESTIGATING ERRORS OF PUNCTUATION MARKS IN ENGLISH ESSAY WRITING BY UNDERGRADUATE SECOND LANGUAGE (L2) LEARNERS IN DISTRICT CHITRAL

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ABSTRACT

In the current study titled “Investigating Errors of Punctuation Marks in English Essay Writing by Second Language (L2) Learners in District Chitral,” the aim is to investigate errors related to the use of punctuation marks by second language (L2) learners and to count the frequencies of these errors in students’ writing. The study employs a descriptive research approach using a survey to uncover both the most and least common punctuation errors. Convenience sampling is used to select individuals for the study. A hundred undergraduate students from three different educational institutes were selected from the Chitral district. Written essays and proficiency tests are utilized as research instruments. The Corder (1975) ’s error analysis model is used to identify and describe students’ punctuation errors in essays and proficiency tests. Finally, the frequency and percentage of errors are measured using SPSS software to identify the most and least common punctuation errors, which are the two main objectives of this study. The findings reveal that the most frequent punctuation error in essays is the incorrect use of commas. Commas are the most frequent punctuation errors, with 75% being incorrectly used. While the least frequent punctuations error is using a period. According to the results, the period is the punctuation mark with the lowest error frequency, at 31%. Regarding proficiency tests, the most frequent error is the incorrect use of semicolons, with 68.4% of the students (39 out of 57) using them incorrectly, while the least common error involves the use of apostrophes, with only 10.5% of the students (6 out of 57) omitting them in their sentences.

Keywords: Punctuation Marks, Signs, Errors, Essays, Learners, Frequency, Percentage, Error analysis, UOC, GDC, Chitral.

INTRODUCTION

There are five countries in the world that speak English as their first language, namely, United Kingdom, America, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (Rintaningrum, 2018). English has become an international language that is used worldwide for multicultural communication, business, and research. Approximately, 400 million people speak English as their mother tongue and 2 billion as a

second or foreign language (Heinrich, 2007, as cited in Nuriska, 2021). The importance of English can be assessed by its widespread use in various fields. English serves as a repository for a diverse range of scholarly information across disciplines such as science, humanities, and technology (Sharma, 2019).

Writing Skill

Writing is an essential skill in successful language development. Writing is a unique feature of the human language. According to Sharhan and Al-Abedi (2020), writing is one of the oldest skills invented by Sumerian people to share and convey their daily occurrences. Writing preserves religious rituals, cultural values, traditional norms, family information, and individual experiences.

According to Donald Grave (2008), the writing process encompasses five steps: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

Punctuation Marks

In Western culture, modern punctuation marks were first used in the sixth century and standardized in the fifteenth century by William Caxton (Sülükçü and Kirboğa, 2020). Punctuation plays a vital role in the interpretation of a certain text and helps readers comprehend the message clearly (Suliman et al., 2019). Punctuation marks enhance the overall quality of written work, making it clear, readable, and understandable.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000) defines punctuation as marks and signs used to separate sentences and phrases in writing. Punctuation is as necessary for writing as water is for human life because it provides quality to written work (Harmer, 2004, as cited in Fayyaz et al., 2022, p. 1071). Let's see an example:

Let's eat Grandma.

Let's eat, Grandma.

The above two sentences have two completely different meaning just because of the comma. The former sentence has correct sentence structure but the meaning is awkward and non-sensical, but the latter has clear and vivid meaning and conveys the concept clearly. Kane (2008) argues that punctuation marks can enhance or alter the meaning of a sentence.

Literature Review

Students at all levels encounter problems using punctuation marks in their writing. Some of this punctuation, like full stops, question marks, and exclamation marks, is easy to understand and use in writing. But in hyphens, colons, and semi-colons, they are hard. According to Awad (1996), argues that punctuation has three major functions.

Phonetic function:

These signs show rhythm, pause, and tone in written documents; every written document has a tone. Which is controlled by commas, semi-colons, and colons? Most of the time, these tones are neglected by readers, which ultimately leads to misunderstanding of a written piece of work.

Grammatical function: punctuation marks are used in writing to emphasize, form interrogation, and formulate the structure of simple sentences, complex sentences, and so on.

Semantic function: the most important function of punctuation marks is to guide and facilitate the reader's understanding of the meaning of the written document.

Lauchman (2010) defines punctuation marks as "code, used by writers, and are often necessary for meaning and emphasis, and show pauses, stops, and inflection of speech." Both writers and readers should understand it and pay attention to it.

Research on Punctuation Marks in Global Context

In another study conducted by Catabay (2023), discusses the errors of second language learners in English composition writing. The study used Corder's (1974) error analysis method to identify the errors made by second language learners in their composition writing. The method comprises five steps: collecting the data, identifying the errors, explaining the errors, and evaluating the errors. The researcher has employed mixed-method research, and questionnaires and written essays are data collection tools. The participants of the study are university-level students, and the purposive sampling technique was used in the study. The study found many errors in grammar, capitalization, punctuation marks, and subject-verb agreement. The researcher claims that lack of knowledge and lack of practice in writing are the major findings. The study recommends more exposure to writing tasks to develop good writing skills.

Research on Punctuation Marks in the Context of Pakistan

In their paper, Fayyaz et al. (2022) emphasize improving the punctuation skills of secondary school

students in their writing. The main purpose of this research was to assess the students' knowledge of punctuation. Punctuation is an important aspect of English grammar, and ignorance leads to the distortion of the structure and meaning of a piece of writing. In their paper, the research focuses on certain numbers of punctuation marks, particularly semi-colon, and colon, as these are very difficult for secondary students. The students were given a pre-test to check their knowledge of punctuation, and then they were shown a movie and then a written dialogue and asked to put punctuation marks in the right place. They were then given a post-test to check their competence. The finding shows that there was a great difference in students' performance in the post-test as compared to the pre-test. The paper suggests that paying attention to punctuation at an early stage can develop students' punctuation skills.

Research Methodology

The present study employs Corder's (1974) error analysis approach to analyze and examine the errors made by second language learners in their language learning process. The error analysis method is a commonly used approach to identify students' errors in the language learning process and to address pedagogical issues. Error analysis is a methodology used by researchers and teachers to describe learners' errors in the language learning process. It entails the data collection, identification of errors, description of errors, classification of errors, and evaluation of errors based on their seriousness (Ellis, 1997: 50-57). Corder's approach involves the following steps to analyze the errors:

- Collection of the data
- Identification of the errors
- Description of errors
- Categorization of errors
- Explanation of errors
- Evaluation of errors.

Participants

The participants of the present study include the undergraduate students at the University of Chiral, Government Degree College (boys), and Government Degree College (girls) in Lower Chiral. A sample of 100 students was selected for the study through convenience sampling techniques and data were collected from them through written essays and proficiency tests.

Research Design

A survey descriptive design is an approach employed for the collection and analysis of numerical data in a study. Descriptive research is aimed at describing the sample and variables without manipulating or altering any of the variables (Siedlecki, 2020). Moreover, the present study employs Corder's (1974) error analysis approach to analyze and examine the errors made by second language learners in their language learning process.

The Research Instrumentation

The tools used in this study for data collection include a written test and a proficiency test, comprising unpunctuated sentences. A total of 43 written essays were collected. Moreover, to complete the sample, a proficiency test was distributed among 57 students to complete the sample size, in all three educational institutions. The proficiency test consisted of nine (9) sentences, and the punctuation marks were also given below the sentences. The students were required to use proper punctuation marks in the appropriate and given places.

The Data Collection Technique

The study utilized a convenient sampling technique for data collection because it is a fast, convenient, and cost-effective data collection method. In a convenient sampling technique, there is no probability or chance of selecting each member of the study; only those members who are willing to participate and who are easily accessible to the researcher are included (Obilor, 2023).

The Data Analysis Techniques

The present section addresses the quantitative analysis of the data. Within this portion, the punctuation errors made by the students in essay writing and proficiency tests are displayed using tabulation and bar charts. This section also presents the analysis of individual tables and bar charts. The errors were identified first by applying Corder's (1974), which consists of five steps: collection of samples, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and lastly, evaluation of the errors. The frequencies and percentages of errors using SPSS software to identify the most and least frequent errors. The present section also presents the most and least frequent

punctuation errors using tables and bar charts, which are the two objectives of the study.

chart represents the errors in a specific group or category.

The Data Presentation Technique Tabulation

The organization of data into a tabular form is referred to as tabulation. The tabulation is a systematic method of presenting classified numeric data in rows and columns. It facilitates investigators to compare and simplify statistical analysis. It simplifies and makes the raw data comprehensible. It is used to bring related information in proximity, which enhances statistical analysis and interpretation of data.

Cluster Bar Chart

A clustered bar chart is a graphical representation of data that displays multiple variables and categories. It is an extension of a simple bar chart that enables comparing data with more than one variable or condition. The clustered bar chart comprises two axes, namely the x-axis and the y-axis. The x-axis of the chart represents the categories of errors, while the y-axis of the chart represents the frequencies of errors in written responses of participants (Whitaker & Jacobbe, 2017).

Simple Bar Chart

A bar chart is a graphical representation employed for displaying and comparing errors pertaining to various groups and categories.

A simple bar chart consists of rectangular bars, where the length of each bar represents categories of errors in each group or category, and the height of each bar indicates the count of errors or frequencies of errors in responses of participants (Whitaker & Jacobbe, 2017). The current study employs a simple bar chart to illustrate the distribution of errors in students' written responses. Each bar in a simple bar

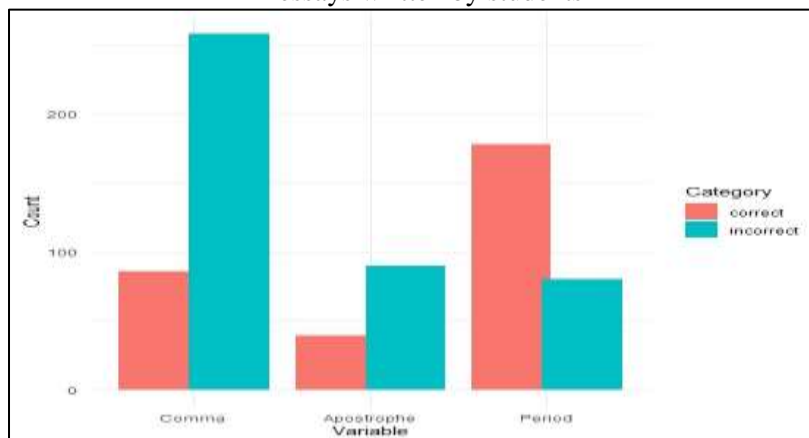
Data Analysis

In this chapter, the collected data have been analyzed using error analysis method and determine the frequency and percentage of errors made by students in their writing and tests using while SPSS software. After collecting the sample, the researcher carefully analyzes it to identify the errors in punctuation marks. Moreover, the percentages and frequencies of errors of punctuation marks in students in essay writing and proficiency tests were presented in a simple bar chart and a cluster bar chart.

Table 4.1 Frequency and Percentage of Correct and Incorrect Use of Punctuation in Essays Written by Students

	Correct	Incorrect	Correct %	Incorrect %	Total
Comma	86	258	25%	75%	43
Apostrophe	39	90	30.2%	69.7%	43
Period	178	80	68.9%	31%	43

Figure 4.1 Graphical representation of the frequency and percentage of correct and Incorrect use of punctuation in essays written by students



The results presented in Table 4.1 and Graph 4.1 illustrates the performance of students in using punctuation marks in their writing. The students have only used these punctuation marks in their essays since they were asked to write them. The above results also show the most and least frequent punctuation marks used by students in their writing. A total of 43 essays were collected from the students. Afterward, the essays were manually analyzed using Corder’s (1974) error analysis method. The frequency and percentages of errors were then identified using SPSS software. The table and the graph above indicate that students primarily use commas in their writing. It also shows that the most frequent punctuation error occurs with the use of a comma. The total number of commas used in essays is 344. Commas indicate 258 (75%) errors, while 86 (25%) are used correctly. The students have made this error in various contexts, but primarily after transitional phrases and conjunctive adverbs. The

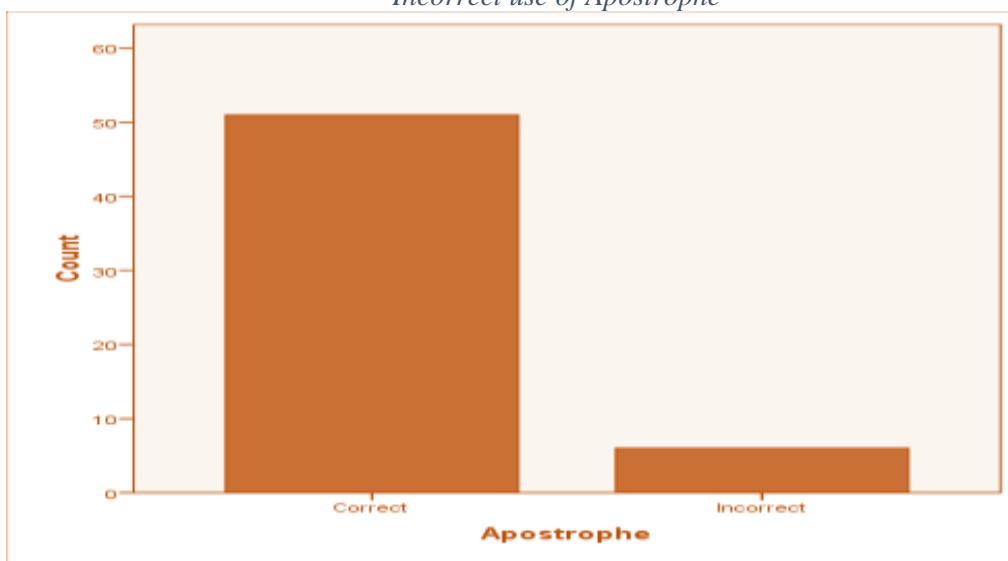
second commonly used punctuation mark by students is period. The total number of period used in essays by students is 129. Apostrophes are used correctly by 39 (30.2%) and incorrectly by 90 (69.7%). The students have made errors in showing possession, both singular and plural. The third punctuation mark commonly used by students is a period. The period is a commonly used punctuation mark, which is why students’ performance in using periods is good compared to other punctuation marks. The total number of periods used in essays is 258. Out of these, “period” is used correctly 178 times (68.9%) and incorrectly 80 times (31%). The students have missed using punctuation marks after a complete thought, which has led to run-on sentences. From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the most frequent punctuation mark error in essays written by second language learners is with commas, while the least frequent punctuation mark error is with apostrophe.

Proficiency Tests Analysis

Table 4.2 Frequency and Percentage of Correct and Incorrect Use of Apostrophe

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Correct	51	89.5	89.5	89.5
Incorrect	6	10.5	10.5	10.5
Total	57	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 4.2 Graphical representation of the frequency and percentage of correct and Incorrect use of Apostrophe



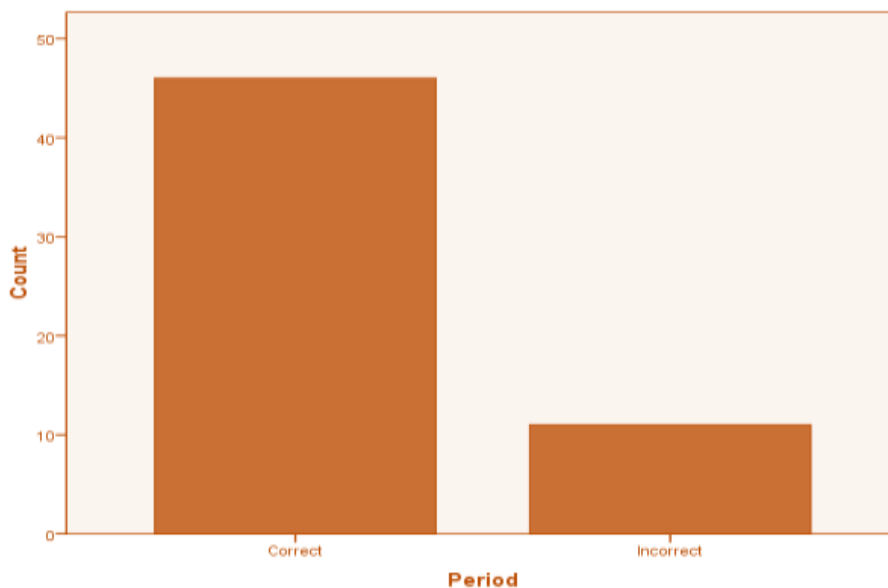
The results given in Table 4.2.1 and Figure 4.2.1 show the performance of participants in placing apostrophes in the sentence. Among the 57 participants, 51 (89.5 %) correctly placed the

apostrophe in the sentence, while 6 (10.5 %) incorrectly placed it. From the results, we can conclude that students are more familiar with this punctuation mark.

Table 4.3 Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Use of Period

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Correct	46	80.7	80.7	80.7
Incorrect	11	19.3	19.3	19.3
Total	57	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 4.3 Graphical representation of the frequencies and percentages of correct and Incorrect use of Period



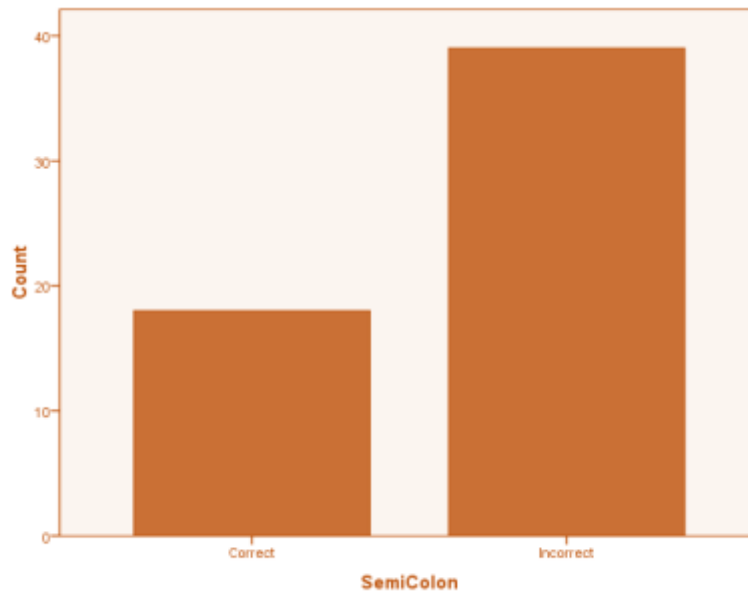
The results given in Table 4.2.2 and Figure 4.2.2 show the performance of students in using periods in sentences. Among the 57 participants, 46 (80.7%) have used the period correctly in their sentences.

While 11 (19.3%) participants were unable to use periods correctly in sentences, this shows the performance of participants in using periods is better and more satisfactory.

Table 4.4 Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Use of Semicolon

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative percent
Correct	18	31.6	31.6	31.6
Incorrect	39	68.4	68.4	68.4
Total	57	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 4.4 Graphical representation of the frequencies and percentages of correct and incorrect use of Semicolon.



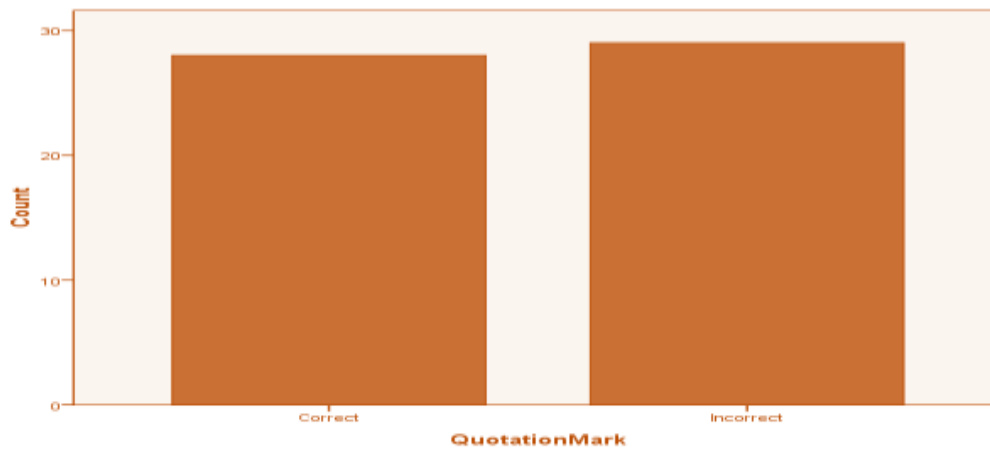
The results given in Table 4.2.3 and Figure 4.2.3 show the performance of participants in using semicolons in sentences. Among the 57 students, only 18 (31.6%) correctly used a semi-colon in the

sentences, and 39 (68.4%) participants used this mark incorrectly. This shows that students face difficulty using semicolons in sentences.

Table 4.5 Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Use of Quotation Mark

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative Percent
Correct	28	49.1	49.1	49.1
Incorrect	29	50.9	50.9	50.9
Total	57	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 4.5 Graphical representation of the frequencies and percentages of correct and incorrect use of Quotation Mark



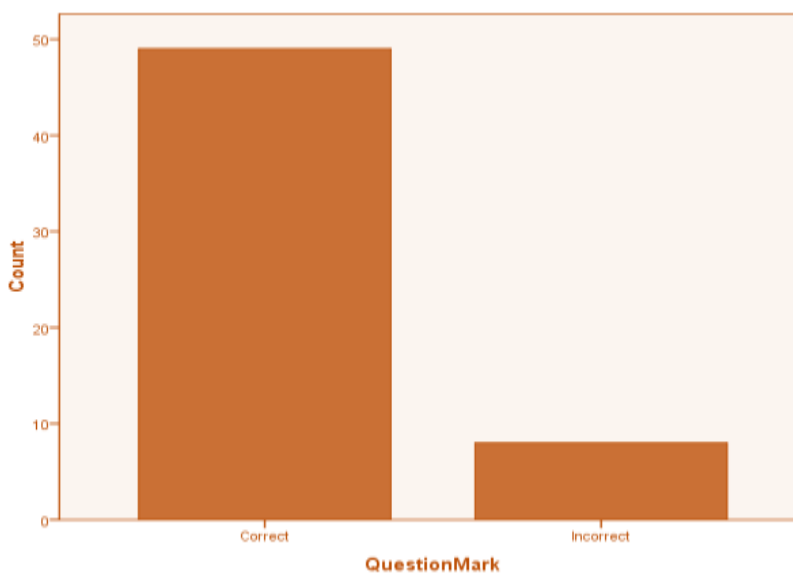
The results are shown in Table 4.2.4, and Figure 4.2.4 shows the performance of students in placing quotation marks in sentences. Among the 57

participants, 28 (49.1%) have correctly placed quotation marks, while 29 (50.9%) participants incorrectly placed quotation marks in sentences.

Table 4.6 *Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Use of Question Mark*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative percent
Correct	49	86.0	86.0	86.0
Incorrect	8	14.0	14.0	14.0
Total	57	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 4.6 Graphical representation of the frequencies and percentages of correct and incorrect use of Question Mark.



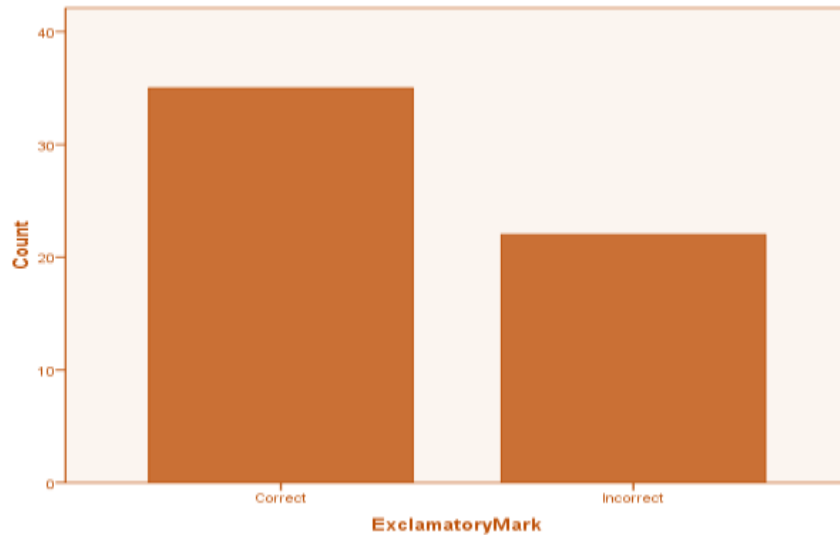
The results are given in Table 4.2.5, and Figure 4.2.5 shows students' performance using question marks in sentences. Question marks are one of the most common and frequently used punctuation marks in English. The above table and chart show that students

have better knowledge of the usage of question marks as compared to other punctuation. 49 (86%) correctly used these punctuation marks, while 8 (14%) participants were unable to use them in sentences.

Table 4.7 *Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Use of Exclamatory Marks*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Correct	35	61.4	61.4	61.4
Incorrect	22	38.6	38.6	38.6
Total	57	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 4.7 Graphical representation of the frequencies and percentages of correct and incorrect use of Exclamatory Marks.



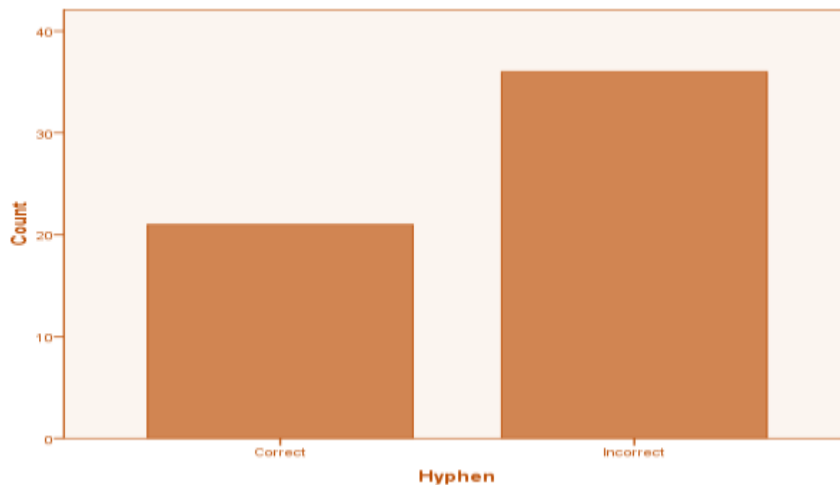
The results presented in Table 4.2.6 and Figure 4.2.6 show the performance of English language students using exclamatory marks in their sentences. It shows that students' knowledge of exclamatory marks is also better. 35 (61.4%) participants have used

exclamatory marks in their sentences correctly, and 22 (38.6%) participants did not use exclamatory marks correctly. The results of students' usage of exclamatory marks are also better.

Table 4.8 Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Use of Hyphens

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Correct	21	36.8	36.8	36.8
Incorrect	36	63.2	63.2	63.2
Total	57	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 4.8 Graphical representation of the frequencies and percentages of correct and incorrect use of Hyphens.



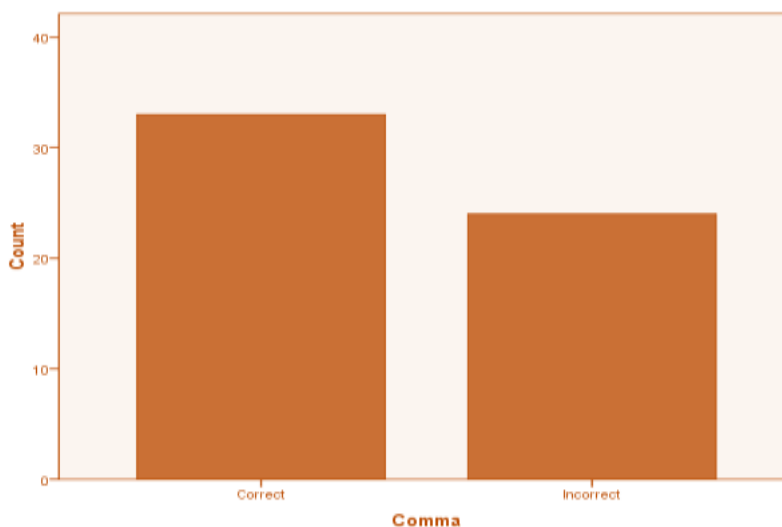
The results given in Table 4.2.7 and Figure 4.2.7 show the performance of students in their usage of hyphens in sentences. A hyphen is not frequently used punctuation mark in English writing. The results show that students' performance is poor when

using hyphens in sentences. Among the 57 participants, only 21 (36.8%) have correctly used hyphens in their sentences, while 36 (63.2%) have used hyphens wrongly.

Table 4.9 *Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Use of Comma*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Correct	33	57.9	59.9	59.7
Incorrect	24	42.1	42.1	42.1
Total	57	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 4.9 Graphical representation of the frequencies and percentages of correct and incorrect use of Comma



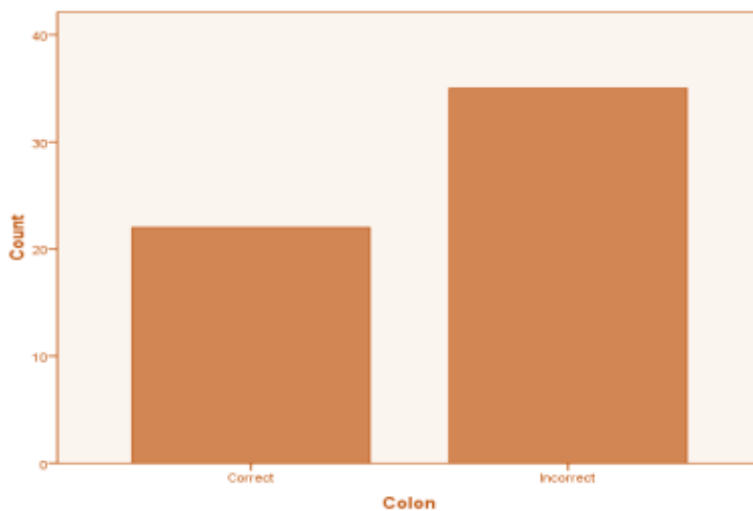
The results given in Table 4.2.8 and Figure 4.2.8 show the performance of students using commas in their sentences. A comma is a basic and frequently used punctuation mark in English writing. Among the total participants, 33 (57.9%) have correctly used

commas in their sentences, while 24 (42.1%) have incorrectly used commas in their sentences. The performance of participants is also poor, because it is one of the basic and commonly used punctuation marks in English.

Table 4.10 *Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Use of Colons*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Correct	22	38.6	38.6	38.6
Incorrect	35	61.4	61.4	61.4
Total	57	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 4.10 Graphical representation of the frequencies and percentages of correct and incorrect use of Colons.



The results given in Table 4.2.9 and Figure 4.2.9 show the students' performance using a colon in their sentences. A colon is not used frequently, like periods and commas in sentences. It is rarely used by students in their writing, which is why most of the students, even at higher levels, do not have adequate knowledge of the use of colons in writing. Among the 57 participants, 22 (38.6%) have correctly used colons in sentences, and 35 (61.4%) have misused colons in their sentences.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the investigation of the errors in punctuation marks in essay writing by undergraduate second language learners in Chitral, Pakistan. Punctuation marks play a crucial role in giving meaning to expressions in written texts. The current investigation employed Corder's (1974) error analysis model to identify, describe, and explain students' punctuation errors. Data were obtained through convenience sampling techniques using written essays and proficiency tests consisting of unpunctuated sentences as proficiency test. This study was conducted in the district of Chitral in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The sample of the present study consisted of undergraduate second language learners from three different educational institutions. The first research question aligned with the research objective shows that the learners encounter more difficulties in using specific punctuation marks than others. The most challenging punctuation marks for

undergraduate students, according to the results, are the colon and semicolon. These two punctuation marks are not commonly used in writing and are confusing for learners. The results also demonstrate that the learners perform better in using punctuation marks in proficiency tests as compared to their written tests. It implies that the learners know how to use punctuation marks. But, in writing, students often make mistakes. As we are aware, writing is one of the most complex and challenging processes. The examination of written essays and proficiency tests disclose that the learners perform better when using punctuation marks in tests compared to their written essays.

The analysis also bring to light that the most frequent punctuation errors in essays were related to the use of commas. The total number of commas used by students in their writing is 344, out of which 258 (75%) were used incorrectly and 86 (25%) were used correctly. This indicates that commas are the most frequent errors students make while writing essays. Commas serve multiple functions as compared to other punctuation marks, which create confusion and lead to errors in their usage. Concerning the proficiency tests, the most frequent punctuation error was observed when using a semicolon. 39 (68%) participants made an error in using a semicolon in their sentences. So, the most common punctuation errors in written essays were commas while in proficiency test, the most frequent punctuation error was semicolon.

The second research questions aligned with the research objective unveil the least frequent punctuation error. The least frequent punctuation errors in essay were the misuse of apostrophe, Total number of period used by learners in their essays is 258, of those 178 (68.9%) were used correctly and 80 (31%) were used incorrectly. There are several punctuation marks we use most in our daily writings include Commas and Periods. The findings reveal that the learners have performed better in using periods. This indicates that the learners have knowledge about the use of period as we often use period in our daily writing. Pertaining to proficiency tests, the least common punctuations error occurred in the use of Apostrophe. Only 6 (10.5%) students incorrectly used in their sentence and 51 (89.5%) participants use them correctly. This indicates that the learners particularly face difficulties in using punctuation marks in essay writing as relative to proficiency tests. The present investigation concludes two different findings, for essay writing and for proficiency tests. The outcomes are not the same for the essays and proficiency tests. Learners face difficulties in using punctuation marks in creative writing, but when they are given the sentences with options, they do well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As revealed by the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been proposed to enhance writing skills and the correct application of punctuation marks in English writing. Firstly, lessons on punctuation should be included in English classes at all levels for ESL learners. It means that the learners should learn about punctuation while reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Educators should give equal importance to punctuation marks as they do to other aspects of English grammar. The educators should assign punctuation-related exercises to check learners' performance with punctuation marks regularly and provide positive feedback to help students improve their writing skills in using punctuation marks.

Secondly, incorporating materials such as visual aids, mnemonic devices, or memory aids into instructions can help students memorize punctuation and easily recall it during writing tasks. In addition to these activities, regular reading and writing help learners master punctuation skills. By means of focus

and regular practice, learners can develop strong writing skills and overcome challenges related to punctuation mark utilization.

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