

THE MOST COMMON COMMA ERRORS MADE BY THE EFL LEARNERS AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL: A SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

The importance of correct use of comma in writing is vast. A correct use of comma not only ensures the readability of writing but also confirms the clarity of meaning and the effectiveness of writing. Unfortunately, many EFL learners fail to use it correctly in their writing that prevents them from developing their writing skills and eventually negatively affect their overall language learning process. The goal of the present study was to find out the most common comma errors made by the EFL learners at undergraduate level. By using a questionnaire, the study conducted a survey among 298 undergraduate students at Bangladesh Agricultural University and found that the use of comma with certain expressions like e.g., i.e., etc.; in address and date; after introductory phrase; with non-defining subordinate clause; with interrupters like however, after all, in fact, etc.; with parenthetical elements; between independent clauses when joined by connectors like and, or, but, etc.; with appositive; in quotation; with the list of phrases/clauses; etc. are the most frequent comma errors made by the learners. The study basically attempted to make the learners aware of their comma errors, so that, they can minimize the errors in their writing, and can make their writing more meaningful, clear, and cohesive.

KEYWORDS: Comma Mistakes, Comma Rules, EFL Learners & Writing Skills

1. INTRODUCTION

Comma is one of the most frequently used punctuation marks in written English. The purpose of a comma is to separate clauses within a sentence, phrases within a clause or words within a phrase, in order to succinctly and unambiguously express meaning (Lingard, 2016). A comma, however, not only plays a significant role in conveying the meaning precisely to the reader, but also in providing intended meaning to the written words. By signaling pauses at appropriate positions, a comma helps a reader to properly read a sentence and understand the meaning. Proper comma placement can lead to faster reading times and reduce the need to re-read entire sentences (Israel et al. 2012). It also helps a reader avoid confusion by organizing phrases, ideas, and items of a sentence in a logical way, and accordingly clarifying the possible ambiguities in the meaning of the sentence. A comma also helps in emphasizing certain parts of a sentence by separating them from the other parts of the sentence, and in explaining how the separated parts are interconnected. A proper use of comma thus ensures clarity of meaning and effectiveness of writing. An inappropriate use or placement of comma, on the other hand, can entirely alter the meaning of a sentence. Let us consider the following two sentences for example:

Hang him, not let him free.

Hang him not, let him free. (Adapted from Singh, 2015)

In the above sentences, just changing the position of the comma has completely changed the meaning of the sentence. Sometimes, even an absence of comma can make a sentence completely nonsense. For example,

Let us eat, daddy!

Let us eat daddy! (Adapted from Singh, 2015)

Although both the sentences are composed of similar words, an omission of a comma in the second sentence has converted the sentence to complete non sense. Indeed, the right use of comma is absolutely necessary for a meaningful, clear, and cohesive writing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a review of error typologies by Leacock et al. (2010) as in Israel et al. (2012), comma usage errors are the fourth most common error type among non-native writers in the Cambridge Learner Corpus (Nicholls, 1999), which is composed of millions of words of text from essays written by learners of English. The problem of comma usage is not limited to non-native writers; six of the top twenty error types for native writers involve misuse of commas (Connors and Lunsford, 1988 as in Israel et al., 2012). Comma errors, as mentioned by Awad (2012), come up frequently in student writing, and the most common mistake that students make when using commas is thinking that a comma goes wherever one hears a pause in a sentence. That's not true at all, he further mentioned, and this assumption is likely to lead to comma errors.

According to Lingard (2016), many of us struggle to know where exactly to put commas. Regarding comma placement, he asked, "Do you treat commas like salt, sprinkling them over your writing according to your personal taste? Or are you an adherent of the 'breathing' rule, inserting commas wherever a reader might need an O₂ break?" Rules and conventions about when to use and not to use commas are legion (Yagoda, 2012). According to David Crystal (2015) as in Lingard (2016), variation in comma use is neither infinite nor totally idiosyncratic. Although most of the rules of comma insertion are definite, there are a few like the rule of inserting Oxford comma that are ambiguous and vary from style manual to style manual, writer to writer. Because not all commas contribute to grammaticality; some are more tied to stylistic rules and preferences (Israel et al., 2012).

Some studies (e. g. Alley, 1987; Al-Mutib, 1989; Wilde, 1992; Khalil, 2000; Gaines, 2002; etc. as in Awad, 2012) were conducted previously to find out most common punctuation errors including comma errors. According to the findings of the previous researches, wrong placement of comma, personal preferences in comma use, superfluous comma, omission of comma, Oxford comma, comma splice, etc. are some of the most common comma errors made by the EFL learners. In the present study, however, we are going to consider only those most common comma errors that belong to the definite comma rules. Given below is a list of most frequently used comma rules compiled from different popular EFL/ESL websites.

Comma Rule	Example
1. After introductory word/phrase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No, you can't do that. Turning back, my friend called me.
2. After dependent clause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After he has completed the training, he will go abroad.
3. With a list of nouns/ interchangeable adjectives/ verbs/ phrases/ clauses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> James went to the zoo to see tiger, lion, monkey, and donkey. There was a big, strong, healthy lion in the zoo. The lion leapt towards James, stumbled, fell down, and roared. James saw the lion, ran towards a tree, climbed up the tree, and sat on the top branch. I searched James, I searched him everywhere, but I found him nowhere.
4. With interrupters like however, after all, in fact, therefore, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tom is, however, stronger than Jerry.
5. With parenthetical elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jerry, unlike Tom, is very clever.
6. With non-defining subordinate clause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The car, which was bought last year, is sold at a very cheap rate.
7. With appositive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tom, the director of CNTV, is my best friend.
8. With contrasting elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> That is my pen, not yours.
9. With a tag question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He can do it, can't he?
10. Between independent clauses when joined by connectors like and, or, but, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> His friend helped him, and he made it possible,
11. In address, dates and large numbers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He was born in New York, USA, on Monday, June 12, 1968. 61,957,113,409 I need to submit the form by 31 May 2016. (Exception)
12. In quotations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He said, "I don't know." "Why," I asked, "don't you know?" "I don't know," he said. "I don't know!" he replied surprisingly. (Exception) "Why don't you know?" I asked. (Exception)
13. With name, relationship word, and directly addressed title	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tom, will you come tomorrow? I need a bike, Dad. Good morning, Doctor.
14. With certain terms/expressions like e.g., i.e., for instance, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After getting married, you need to buy many furniture, e.g., beds, chairs, tables, shelves, etc.

3. RESEARCH PURPOSE

Despite knowing the value of proper use of comma, many students fail to use it correctly in their writing. It is a kind of punctuation mark that is also mostly neglected in students' writing. According to Lingard (2016), the comma is arguably the most misunderstood of punctuation tools. A lot of mistakes are typically found in EFL learners' writing regarding comma use. Here, the indifference that the students show to appropriate comma use and the mistakes they make in their writing regarding comma use, all these evidently hamper their writing skills, and eventually negatively affect their language learning process. It is, therefore, definitely important to find out the mistakes that students usually make in their writing regarding comma use, and make the students aware of correct comma use to help them develop their writing skills.

That will, in return, help students to improve their overall language competence, and the achieved findings will also contribute to the more effective teaching and learning of writing skills in the language classroom.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participants

The participants of the present study were the undergraduate level EFL students belonging to different faculties (Faculty of Veterinary Science, Faculty of Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology, and Faculty of Fisheries) of Bangladesh Agricultural University. A total of 298 students participated in the survey. They were basically selected through the purposive sampling method on the basis of convenience and availability.

4.2 Data Collection

The data for the present study were collected through a piece of paper containing 15 sentences (Appendix-1). The sentences were punctuated with all necessary punctuation marks except commas. The students were only required to put commas in appropriate places. In the punctuation classes, every student was provided with these 15 sentences, and was asked to use commas in right places. The students expressed their knowledge about comma use through these sentences, and the researcher, in return, obtained a clear picture of the most common comma errors by the EFL students.

4.3 Data Presentation

	Use of Comma	Correct Response	Incorrect Response
1.	After introductory phrase	26(8.72%)	272(91.28%)
2.	After dependent clause	241(80.88%)	57(19.12%)
3.	With a list of interchangeable adjectives	157(52.68%)	141(47.32%)
4.	With a list of phrases/clauses	125(41.95%)	173(58.05%)
5.	With interrupters like however, after all, in fact, therefore, etc.	39(13.09%)	259(86.91%)
6.	With parenthetical elements	54(18.12%)	244(81.88%)
7.	With non-defining subordinate clause	28(9.40%)	270(90.60%)
8.	With appositive	72(24.16%)	226(75.84%)
9.	With contrasting elements	156(52.35%)	142(47.65%)
10.	With a tag question	217(72.82%)	81(27.18%)
11.	Between independent clauses when joined by connectors like and, or, but, etc.	57(19.13%)	241(80.87%)
12.	In address and date	12(4.03%)	286(95.97%)
13.	In quotation	96(32.21%)	202(67.79%)
14.	With relationship word	238(79.87%)	60(20.13%)
15.	With certain terms/expressions like e.g., i.e., for instance, etc.	3(1.01%)	295(98.99%)

4.4 Data Analysis

From the survey, it is found that the 1st most common comma error made by the participants (295 out of 298) is the use of comma with certain terms/expressions like e.g., i.e., for instance, etc. This reveals that almost 99% of the participants do not know how to use commas with such terms/expressions. Most of the participants are found using commas only on right side of such terms/expressions instead of using commas on both sides of them.

The 2nd most common comma error, which is made by 286 participants out of 298, is the use of comma in address and date. This exposes that almost 96% of the participants do not know the proper use of comma with address and date in a sentence. Majority of the participants are found omitting commas where they are supposed to be used.

According to the responses of 91.28% (272) of the participants, the 3rd most common comma error is the use of comma after introductory phrase. Most of the participants seem to be unaware of the use of comma after an introductory phrase although they know the use of comma after a dependent clause.

The 4th most common comma error is the use of comma with non-defining subordinate clause. 90.60% (270) of the participants are unaware of the use of comma with non-defining subordinate clause. Like the 1st most common comma error, most of the participants are found using commas only on right side of the clause instead of using commas on both sides of it.

The responses of 86.91% (259) of the participants showed that the 5th most common comma error is the use of comma with interrupters like however, after all, in fact, therefore, etc. In this case, majority of the participants are found using no commas at all with the interrupters.

The 6th most common comma error is the use of comma with parenthetical elements. 81.88% (244) of the participants are found having difficulties with putting commas in the sentence with parenthetical elements. Some of them are marked using commas only on one side while others are found using no comma at all with parenthetical elements in the sentence.

According to the responses of 80.87% (241) of the participants, the 7th most common comma error is the use of comma between independent clauses when joined by connectors like and, or, but, etc. Most of the participants seem to have thought that a comma between two independent clauses when joined by connectors like and, or, but, etc. is unnecessary.

The 8th most common comma error is the use of comma with appositive. 75.84% (226) of the participants are found having difficulties with putting commas in the sentence with appositive. Like the 6th most common comma error, some of the participants are found using commas only on one side while others are found using no comma at all with appositive in the sentence.

The responses of 67.79% (202) of the participants revealed that the 9th most common comma error is the use of comma in quotation. Majority of the participants seem to be unaware of the use of comma in quotation, more particularly in interrupted quotation.

The 10th most common comma error, which is made by 173 participants out of 298, is the use of comma with the list of phrases/clauses in the sentence. This shows that 58.05% of the participants do not know the proper use of comma with a list of phrases/clauses in a sentence. Majority of the participants are found omitting commas where they are supposed to be used.

Finally, the 11th and 12th most common comma errors made by around 47% of the total participants are the use of comma with contrasting elements and with the list of interchangeable adjectives respectively. For the remaining three

sentences (use of comma after dependent clause, with tag question, and with relationship word), since the number of correct responses is pretty high, we are not categorizing them in most common comma error.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Correct comma placement in writing has always been a challenging task for the EFL students. Incorrect use of comma is, in fact, the mostly noticed punctuation error that evidently hampers students' writing skills. Being an English teacher of a university; I find every year a lot of students having a lot of problems and confusions in comma use. Most of the students are also found unaware of it, indifferent to correct comma use, and consequently make frequent mistakes in their writing. In the present study, I tried to find out the most common comma errors made by the EFL students at undergraduate level and also tried to make the students aware of correct comma use. I believe, the findings of the study will help the students develop their writing skills, and contribute to the more effective teaching and learning of writing skills in the language classroom.

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APPENDIX-1

Put Commas in the Following Sentences Where Necessary

1.	Without thinking why I took the decision.
2.	If you can't do it inform me.
3.	The boy I met yesterday was young energetic smart and clever.
4.	He went to the market chose two dresses bargained with the seller and bought one.
5.	I am after all very curious about the matter.
6.	The news I was eager to hear made me happy.
7.	The book which my friend recommended was very informative.
8.	Tom my best friend lives in USA.
9.	It was me not you who made it possible.
10.	I don't know you do I?
11.	I am not a very intelligent student but I always work hard to get good marks.
12.	I saw her last in Paris France on Saturday January 12 2019.
13.	"No" I said "you can't do that."
14.	How are you Dad?
15.	There are many animals in the zoo e.g. tiger lion monkey donkey etc.

