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PUNCTUATION ERRORS in WRITING in ENGLISH

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the punctuation errors that the students made in the process of academic writing in English, to discuss the reasons underlying these errors, and to suggest some remedies for these errors. The data collection procedure was accomplished through 56 English essay papers written by the participants as a final assignment in the writing course. After their errors were identified, quantified, and categorized as intralingual and interlingual, the reasons for the errors were also discussed in terms of literature background. The findings demonstrate that the students frequently made errors in using a comma, and that the students had a tendency of committing interlingual errors, although their errors were also caused by their target language. In the light of the findings, it is recommended that punctuation marks should be taught in the target language in detail, and both differences and similarities between native and target language should be pointed out in teaching punctuation.

Keywords: Error Analysis, Punctuation Marks, Writing.

İngilizce Yazma Becerisinde Noktalama Hatalarıⁱⁱ

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı İngilizce olarak yazılan akademik yazılarda yapılan noktalama hatalarının çözümlenmesi, bu hataların altında yatan nedenlerin irdelenmesi ve bu hatalar için düzeltici önerilerin sunulmasıdır. Veriler, katılımcıların yazma dersinde dönem sonu ödevi olarak yazdıkları 56 İngilizce makaleden elde edilmiştir. Bu yazılardaki noktalama hataları belirlendikten, yüzde ve sıklık olarak hesaplandıktan ve dil içi ve diller arası hatalar şeklinde sınıflandırıldıktan sonra, hataların altında yatan nedenler de açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları öğrencilerin İngilizce olarak yazdıkları akademik yazılarda en sık hata yaptıkları noktalama işaretinin virgül olduğunu göstermiştir. Hata çeşitleri açısından sonuçlara bakıldığında daha çok diller arası hataların yapıldığı ve ana dilinden kaynaklı hataların yanı sıra hedef dilden kaynaklı hataların da yapıldığı görülmüştür. Bu bulgular ışığında, noktalama işaretlerinin yabancı dil öğretimi sürecinde hedef dilde öğretilmesi gerektiği düşünülmektedir. Ayrıca öğretim sürecinde noktalama işaretleri konusunda anadili ile olan benzerlik ve farklılıkların altının çizilmesi önerilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hata Çözümü, Noktalama İşaretleri, Yazma.

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Introduction

Writing is a complex skill that requires various knowledge such as orthographic, semantic, grammatical, syntactical, textual, spelling and punctuation. Of course, the correct usage of grammar is very essential for writing. However, the correct usage of punctuation is also significant in writing because punctuation makes writing easily understandable for readers. It is a defect that writing courses do not contain the knowledge of punctuation. Since the students fall short of transmitting their ideas and using grammatical sentences, they make errors in using punctuation. Yet, good punctuation is crucial for successful writing (Elkılıç et.al., 2009, p. 280).

Errors are significant as well as they are inevitable during learning a language. Corder (1967) and Brown (2000) claim that errors of language learners are important since they demonstrate the state of the learners' knowledge. Therefore, examining language learners' errors is an indispensable part of teaching. If the sources of these errors are clearly understood, teachers can have an idea about how to treat these errors (Alhaysony, 2012).

There are various studies identifying errors of students in writing (Yalçın, 2010; Zheng and Park, 2013; Tizazu, 2014; Sermsook et.al., 2017; Lay and Yavuz, 2020; Sürüç Şen and Şimşek, 2020; Terzioğlu and Bensen Bostancı, 2020). There are also some studies focusing on definite types of errors (grammatical, lexical, mechanical) in writing (Golshan and Karbalaeei, 2009; Elkılıç et.al., 2009; Awad, 2012; Murshidi, 2014; Wati, 2014; Samhon and Abdall, 2016; Zafar, 2016; Kırmızı and Karıcı, 2017; Husada, 2018; Polat, 2018; Taşçı and Aksu Ataç, 2018). However, there is limited research examining only punctuation errors in writing English. To contribute to the understanding and treatment of errors, this study aims to identify only punctuation errors which students made in the process of writing academically and to have an idea about the reason underlying these errors. It might also present the students' needs in terms of punctuation. This study is considered important since punctuation is neglected by the curriculum designers and students during teaching and learning process. With this aim, this study tries to find answers to these research questions:

1. Which punctuation marks do the students frequently commit errors in their academic writing?
 - 1.1-) Is there a difference between the female and male students in terms of frequently misused punctuation marks?
2. What types of errors do the students frequently commit in using punctuation marks?
 - 2.1-) Is there a difference between the types of errors committed in using punctuation marks by the female and male students?
3. What is the underlying reason for the students' mostly committed errors in using punctuation marks?

Theoretical Background

Second language research supports the idea that errors are a tool to understand the learning process since the 1960s as Gass and Selinker (2008) claim that errors supply evidence about the learner's level in the target language. Firstly, Contrastive Analysis is used for the analysis of errors. Contrastive Analysis compares "the target language with native language and identifies errors. According to this theory, learners can transfer the rules of their native language into the target language" (Gass, Behney and Plonsky, 2013). In this analysis, the sources of errors can be found in the first language of learners. However, in language learning, there are mistakes that cannot be explained by native language interference. Then, a paradigm shift has occurred and Error Analysis focused on comparing errors in the target language with the target language forms. According to Error Analysis, the sources of errors can be either native language or the target language system. Errors are thought to give clues about the learner's internal system and second language knowledge (Gass et. al., 2013).

Richards and Schmidt (2002) define Error Analysis as "a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms of a language in the production data of someone learning either a second or foreign language". In other words, learners' errors are observed, gathered, examined and discussed in Error Analysis. There are many reasons to apply Error Analysis, but Richards, Platt, Platt and Platt (1993, p. 96) summarize them as "finding out how well someone knows the language, finding out how a person learns a language and obtaining information on common difficulties in language learning". Error Analysis supplies benefits for all participants of learning process. Errors inform teachers about the nature of learners' difficulties and help learners correct their errors by themselves (Ellis, 1985). Moreover, Error Analysis has also a theoretical advantage as Corder (1981) claims that "it provides an insight about the process of the second language acquisition".

Although many researchers suggest various stages in Error Analysis (summarized in Table 1), they are basically similar. Some experts claim 6 stages in this analysis process while some suggest only 3 stages as seen in Table 1. When the stages are examined in detail, it is understood that some stages can be detailed in a few substages. For instance, gathering errors can be in the form of collecting, identifying, defining or recognizing errors. It can be proposed that analysis is mainly composed of gathering, classifying and analyzing the errors.

Table 1. *Stages of error analysis*

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Corder (1967, 1981) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collection of sample errors 2. Identification of errors 3. Description of errors |
| Sridhar (1981) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collection of data 2. Identification of errors 3. Classification into errors types 4. Statement of relative frequency of errors 5. Identification of areas of difficulties 6. Therapy remedial drills, lessons, etc. |

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Ellis (1985) | 1. Defining a corpus of language 2. Identifying errors in the corpus 3. Classifying the errors 4. Explaining the errors |
| Brown (2000) | 1. Identification of the errors 2. Classification of the errors 3. Tabulating the errors |
| Gass-Selinker (2008) | 1. Collecting data 2. Identifying the errors 3. Classifying the errors 4. Quantifying the errors 5. Analyzing the sources of the errors 6. Remediating |
| Khansir-Ahrami (2014) | 1. Recognition of the errors 2. Collection of the errors 3. Explanation of the errors 4. Evaluation of the errors |

Errors are divided into two in terms of their sources as intralingual and interlingual errors. Interlingual errors are thought of as “*negative interference from the learner’s first language habits*” (Selinker, 1972, p. 215). Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 103) describe interlingual errors as “*those which can be attributed to native language*” and intralingual errors as “*those that are due to the language being learned*”. Richards (1984, p. 174) defines intralingual errors as “*...those which reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply*”. Furthermore, students’ carelessness and lack of concentration cause errors when they are writing (Darus and Ching, 2009). Students sometimes assume some aspects of language unimportant and do not bother themselves to pay attention to these aspects. Punctuation is considered as one of these aspects. Therefore, punctuation errors can be sourced from carelessness at the same time.

Methodology

Research Design

In this case study, a qualitative research design was employed to determine the students’ errors in the usage of punctuation marks in writing in English. Document analysis was used to collect the data. 56-English-papers written by the participants were examined as the document of the study and punctuation errors in these essay papers were identified and categorized.

Participants and Setting

The study was applied to the first-year students studying in the Department of English Translation and Interpretation at a state university in Turkiye during the spring term of 2018-2019. The total number of the participants was 56. Out of these participants, 37 students were female and 19 students were male. They were all native speakers of Turkish and their foreign language was English.

The students were asked to write an academic essay on a topic they chose with the help of the Process Writing Approach. The process entailed training, practice and evaluation. The

study group was trained about punctuation marks for about 4 lesson-hours, including constructing the rules of punctuation and doing exercises. After a while, they produced their essays according to the stages of the Process Writing Approach. Meanwhile, the study group was warned to be careful about punctuation when they were at the edition stage of the Process Writing Approach. After they had a chance of editing and getting their papers edited during Process Writing Approach, they handed in their final papers.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection for the analysis of punctuation marks in writing was accomplished through collecting 56-English-papers written by the participants as a final assignment in the writing course. The analysis of the data was accomplished through document analysis. During document analysis, this study follows the steps of Error Analysis specified by Gass and Selinker (2008: 103). Firstly, the students' papers were gathered and examined in terms of the usage of punctuation marks in order to identify the errors by the researcher. All punctuation errors were placed on a list that was prepared according to the rules of punctuation marks. Secondly, the number of errors on punctuation was counted for quantifying the errors. Following Cresswell's (2008) suggestion, the frequency and percentage of errors were calculated. Thirdly, the errors were classified by making a distinction between intralingual and interlingual errors. Then, the reason why the students made errors in using punctuation marks was discussed according to the sources of errors. Finally, some remedies for these errors were suggested.

Findings

As depicted in Table 2, a total of 688 punctuation errors were captured. Comma accounted for 589 errors in the students' writing. Thus, comma is the punctuation mark which the students frequently made errors (85,6%). The students made far fewer errors in other punctuation marks; for instance, full stop is the next most frequent error comprising 5,4% of the total percentage of the punctuation errors identified. It is followed by quotation mark, semicolon, hyphen, apostrophe, parentheses and dash as seen in Table 2.

As for the gender, while 217 of these 688 errors were made by the male students, the remaining, 471 errors, belonged to the female students (see Table 2). Therefore, it can be asserted that there is a difference between the female and male students in terms of punctuation errors with a percentage of 68% and 32%, respectively. It is clear that comma is again the punctuation mark which the female and male students made the most frequent errors, being repeated 414 and 175 times with a percentage 87,9% and 80,65%. However, it is surprising that the frequency of other punctuation errors is different for the female and male students. Quotation mark is the next frequent error for the female students with a percentage of 4,88% whereas full stop is for the male students with a percentage of 11,5%. The third frequent error is on using semicolon for both genders although the frequency is a bit lower in favor of the female students.

Table 2: The frequency (f) and percentage of errors in punctuation

| Punctuation marks | All | | Female | | Male | |
|-------------------|-----|-------|--------|-------|------|--------|
| | f | % | f | % | f | % |
| Comma | 589 | 85,6% | 414 | 87,9% | 175 | 80,65% |
| Full Stop | 37 | 5,4% | 12 | 2,5% | 25 | 11,5% |
| Quotation Mark | 25 | 3,6% | 23 | 4,88% | 2 | 0,92% |
| Semicolon | 20 | 2,9% | 12 | 2,55% | 8 | 3,69% |
| Hyphen | 9 | 1,3% | 8 | 1,70% | 1 | 0,46% |
| Apostrophe | 6 | 0,9% | 1 | 0,21% | 5 | 2,30% |
| Parentheses | 1 | 0,1% | 1 | 0,21% | 0 | 0 |
| Dash | 1 | 0,1% | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0,46% |
| TOTAL | 688 | 100% | 471 | 100% | 217 | 100% |

The findings reveal that the highest frequency of punctuation errors are sourced from interlingual with a percentage of 66,7% (see Table 3). That's to say, interlingual errors are higher than intralingual errors. This is because the students used to think their first language system when they used punctuation marks in writing in English. As for the distribution of the errors according to gender, it is clear that the female students had a tendency of committing interlingual errors (70,4%) whereas the frequency of interlingual and intralingual errors of the male students are closer to each other (58,5% and 41,5%). It can be concluded that the female students made more errors because of their native language whereas the male students made errors because of both their native language and target language.

Table 3: The frequency (f) and percentage of errors sources in punctuation

| Error Sources | All | | Female | | Male | |
|---------------------|-----|-------|--------|-------|------|-------|
| | f | % | f | % | f | % |
| Interlingual errors | 459 | 66,7% | 332 | 70,4% | 127 | 58,5% |
| Intralingual errors | 229 | 33,3% | 139 | 29,6% | 90 | 41,5% |
| Total | 688 | 100% | 471 | 100% | 217 | 100% |

The abovementioned findings prove that the students' punctuation errors are usually in using a comma, with a percentage of 85,6%. Although the students had training on using punctuation marks and had a chance to edit their papers, the reason why they made errors in using a comma with a frequency of 589 times is important for the aim of the study. Therefore, the students' errors in using a comma should be analyzed in detail. Various sources (Carey, 1960; Partridge, 1964; Gowers, 1973; Kane, 1983; Quirk et.al., 1985; Nash, 1986) identify how to use a comma in English as follows and the students had a chance to study and practice all of these usages:

1. between 3 or more words in a series (also before the usage of etc.)
2. with independent sentences with a conjunction
3. to separate the parts of a compound sentence
4. to set off an introductory words or phrase
5. to set of parenthetical words or phrases
6. to set off nonrestrictive clause
7. before such expressions such as "too, especially"
8. to set off the items in an address, on a date
9. to separate thousands

10. with direct quotations
11. to set off a tag question

The analysis demonstrates that the students committed errors in the abovementioned usage of a comma except for the last four usages with a frequency of 470 out of 589. The most frequent error was committed with the first usage as seen in Table 4. This usage of a comma is valid in Turkish, too. But there is a difference between two rules in English and Turkish. If there are 3 or more words in the list in English, a comma is also used before “and” at the end, but this is not the case in Turkish. It is seen that the students did not use a comma before “and/or” at the end of a list. Also, a comma is used before “etc.” in a list in English, which is not used before the equivalent “vb” in Turkish. It is seen that the students did not use a comma before “etc.” at the end of a list. Therefore, it can be said that the students made negative transfer in using a comma for this usage.

Table 4: *The frequency (f) and percentage of errors sources in various usage of a comma*

| Usage | Interlingual | | Intralingual | |
|---|--------------|--------|--------------|--------|
| | f | % | f | % |
| between 3 or more words in a series | 185 | 39,36% | - | - |
| with independent sentences with a conjunction | 88 | 18,73% | 28 | 5,96% |
| to set off an introductory words or phrase | 63 | 13,41% | - | - |
| to separate the parts of a compound sentence | 12 | 2,55% | 34 | 7,23% |
| to set of parenthetical words or phrases | - | - | 37 | 7,87% |
| to set off nonrestrictive clause | - | - | 16 | 3,40% |
| before such expressions such as “too, especially” | - | - | 7 | 1,49% |
| to set off the items in an address, on a date | - | - | - | - |
| to separate thousands | - | - | - | - |
| with direct quotations | - | - | - | - |
| to set off a tag question | - | - | - | - |
| Total | 348 | 74,05% | 122 | 25,95% |

It is seen in Table 5 that the students made both interlingual and intralingual errors for the second and fourth usage of a comma. For the second usage, some students did not use a comma between two independent sentences combined with a conjunction because a comma is not used between two independent sentences combined with a conjunction in Turkish. This is an interlingual error with a frequency of 18,73%. There are also some students who used a comma before and after a conjunction or after a conjunction instead of using only before a conjunction since they overgeneralized the rule. This is an intralingual error with a frequency of 5,96%. For this usage, the difference between interlingual and intralingual errors is large, and the students are thought to have committed more errors in using a comma for independent sentences because of their native language. For the fourth usage, a comma is not used to separate the parts of a compound sentence in Turkish, so some students applied this rule when they wrote in English and did not use a comma in English, too, which shows an interlingual error in the fourth usage with a frequency of 2,55%. On the other hand, there are also some students using a comma in a compound sentence with which a comma is not used or using a comma in an incorrect place to separate the parts of a compound sentence. This is an intralingual error with a frequency of 7,23%. As it is clear that the difference between the

frequencies of interlingual and intralingual errors is not very large, it can be accepted that the students committed a few more errors in using a comma to separate the compound sentences because of the overgeneralization of a punctuation rule in English.

Another surprising point in the analysis is that the students also used a comma erroneously in the following different situations which are other than the usages mentioned above:

- a) with independent sentences without a conjunction
- b) after the subject of the sentence
- c) between two words in a list
- d) before some expressions such as “including, such as, like”
- e) before some linking devices such as “as well as, not only ...but also, so ... that”
- f) before or after time expressions
- g) after THAT in a noun clause
- h) after some expressions such as “et al.”

This analysis demonstrates that the students used a comma in some places in their sentences where a comma should not be used with a frequency of 119 times. As seen in Table 5, many of these errors (with a percentage of 70,59%) are because of their native language. For instance, two independent sentences are combined with a comma in Turkish. The students applied this rule in English and made interlingual errors with a frequency of 24,37%. A comma is used after the subject of the sentence if the sentence is very long in Turkish. It is seen that the students also applied this rule in English writing with a percentage of 23,53%. Furthermore, a comma can be used between two words in a list in Turkish whereas “and” is used in English. Thus, using a comma between two words in a list is an interlingual error for English punctuation and at the end of this analysis, it is seen that the students made this kind of error with a percentage of 22,69%.

Table 5: *The frequency (f) and percentage of errors sources in different usage of a comma*

| Usage | Interlingual | | Intralingual | |
|---|--------------|--------|--------------|--------|
| | f | % | f | % |
| with independent sentences without a conjunction | 29 | 24,37% | - | - |
| after the subject of the sentence | 28 | 23,53% | - | - |
| between two words in a list | 27 | 22,69% | - | - |
| before some expressions such as “including, such as, like” | - | - | 18 | 15,13% |
| before some linking devices such as “as well as, not only ...but also, so ... that” | - | - | 7 | 5,89% |
| before or after time expressions | - | - | 5 | 4,20% |
| after THAT in a noun clause | - | - | 4 | 3,36% |
| after some expressions such as “et al.” | - | - | 1 | 0,84% |
| Total | 84 | 70,59% | 35 | 29,41 |

As well as interlingual errors, it is understood that the students committed intralingual errors in using a comma in undefined situations, as seen in Table 5. The most frequent one of them, with a percentage of 15,13%, is about using a comma before some expressions such as “including, such as, like”. There is also another intralingual error with a percentage of 5,89%, which includes using a comma before some linking devices such as “as well as, not only ...but

also, so ... that, thanks to". Moreover, using a comma before/after time expressions is also repeated 5 times with a percentage of 4,20%. Another example is that using a comma after "that" in noun clauses is repeated with a percentage of 3,36%. As the students have not taught these kinds of usage and Turkish does not have these kinds usage of a comma, it can be accepted that they are intralingual errors which are caused by the failure to learn conditions under which rules are applied.

As mentioned above, the analysis proves that the participants committed errors in using a comma in English because of both their native language and target language. As for the total errors committed in using a comma in writing in English, it is seen that interlingual errors in using a comma accounted for 432 and intralingual errors are 157 out of 589 total errors. Therefore, it is clear that interlingual errors in using a comma in general is more than intralingual errors, with a percentage of 73,34. When female and male students were compared, Table 6 also shows that that female participants (70,28%) committed more errors in using a comma than male participants (29,72). It is also obvious that female students committed more interlingual (70,83) and intralingual errors (68,78) than male students. When types of errors were compared, female students made a few more interlingual errors (70,83%) than intralingual errors, but male students made a few more intralingual errors (31,42%) than interlingual errors.

Table 6: *The frequency (f) and percentage of errors sources in using a comma*

| Error Sources | All | | Female | | Male | |
|---------------------|-----|--------|--------|--------|------|--------|
| | f | % | f | % | f | % |
| Interlingual errors | 432 | 73,34% | 306 | 70,83% | 126 | 29,17% |
| Intralingual errors | 157 | 26,66% | 108 | 68,78% | 49 | 31,42% |
| Total | 589 | 100% | 414 | 70,28% | 175 | 29,72% |

Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to examine the errors committed by the participants in using punctuation marks in writing in English. At the end of data analysis on 56-English-papers written by the participants through Document Analysis, it is generally observed in the study that the students committed errors with a low frequency since they had a chance to practice punctuation. Also, reminding students to pay attention to the punctuation during writing and edition is thought to have an effect on these low frequencies. It can be claimed that students will not ignore punctuation on condition that lecturers give teaching and reminding of it.

In the light of the first research question, the analysis demonstrated that the most disruptive error is in using a comma in the participants' writing. This result is similar to Awad's (2012), Husada's (2018), and Wati's (2014) remarks, which found the most frequent error in English punctuation is in using a comma. Awad (2012) found that gender had no effect on making punctuation errors. However, the present study demonstrates that the female students had higher frequency of making errors than the male ones. It should be noted that

comma is problematic for English language learners, so some techniques to teach the usage of a comma should be developed.

The majority of the errors in punctuation in this study is attributed to interlingual errors. It is clear that the native language of the students played a vital role in their usage of punctuation since it can positively or negatively influence the learning procedure. This finding correlates with the study in which Elkılıç et.al. (2009) found that interference errors are limited on punctuation and suggested that punctuation should be taught explicitly. This study also suggests that both differences and similarities between students' native and target language should be pointed out in teaching punctuation, especially comma.

This paper is also indicative that students' errors in using a comma are not only caused by their native language but also by their target language. The students' incorrect usage of comma reveals that learners overgeneralize the rule or have failure to learn conditions under which rules are applied. Therefore, special interest should be taken to these incorrect usages such as using a comma before some expressions or with some linking devices or after "that" in a noun clause. The whole usage of punctuation marks should be explained, exemplified and practiced in detail.

The present study is restricted to analyzing learners' punctuation errors in academic writing in English. Other aspects of academic writing such as grammar, spelling and organization of ideas are not dealt in this paper. Besides, the views of students on punctuation were not included in this study. Yet, this study is not sufficient for generalization as it is limited with the participants, duration of the process, language and measurement. Future research on students' written productions, therefore, should consider the aforementioned aspects of writing and punctuation.

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