

EXPLORING SPELLING AND PUNCTUATION ERRORS AMONG ESL LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY OF SSC STUDENTS OF THE KOHAT BOARD, KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA



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Abstract: *This study investigates the use of spelling and punctuation in the writing of SSC high-achieving students from BISE Kohat. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the research combined qualitative error analysis with quantitative measures to examine the frequency and patterns of errors in students' written responses. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires from randomly sampled students who secured 90% or above marks in the SSC Annual Examination 2020. The analysis is grounded in Corder's (1971) Error Analysis framework, which views learner errors as a valuable source of insight into second language development. The findings revealed that punctuation errors occur far more frequently than spelling errors, indicating a gap in students' writing competence. Common issues included incorrect or missing capitalization, improper or absent use of commas, and limited awareness of basic punctuation conventions. In contrast, spelling errors appear comparatively moderate and consistent. The results also suggest that high academic achievement does not necessarily correspond to accuracy in writing, thereby raising concerns about current assessment practices. This study recommends structured practice, explicit teaching of writing conventions, and more effective feedback mechanisms to improve students' overall writing proficiency.*

Keywords: spelling and punctuation, BISE Kohat, Examination 2020, Assessment.

Introduction

The elements of good writing include grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Knowing the norms and standards can make writing easier to grasp and more enjoyable for readers (Cruz, J. P. 2014). It goes without saying that correct spelling and punctuation marks play an important role in making texts understandable. They assist both the writers and the readers in making clear understanding of the

writing. The misuse of any punctuation mark or incorrect spelling of a word has a negative impact on the overall sense of writing. Therefore, it is necessary for both teachers and students to have a thorough understanding of how to spell words correctly, as well as a lot of practice and proficiency with punctuation is also required. Spelling errors are an inherent and normal part of the writing process. In writing, the importance of spelling cannot be overstated. A correct spelling of a word helps in effective

communication (Fitria, 2020). It makes things simpler to comprehend. It clears the text of all ambiguity. Spelling mistakes, poor punctuation literacy, and misplaced punctuations can make the entire text unclear and ambiguous. It has the potential to make the text's entire meaning ludicrous. They hamper comprehension and conversation. Readers will get a negative impression of a document that has spelling errors or have misplaced punctuations. These mistakes can occur at any moment, and there is no simple and easy approach to learning how to spell. The only way to avoid making spelling errors is to pay close attention while writing word spellings. Even the tiniest aspect of a word's spelling must be carefully scrutinized by a writer. Writing is a fundamental skill in academic contexts, and its effectiveness largely depends on clarity, coherence, and accuracy. Among the essential elements that contribute to effective writing, punctuation holds a central position. Punctuation refers to the system of symbols used in written language to organize ideas, indicate pauses, and clarify meaning. Although these marks are small and often overlooked, they play a crucial role in shaping the structure and interpretation of a text. As noted by Ginting (2018), punctuation enables writers to present their ideas in a clear and logical manner, while also helping readers understand the intended meaning of a text.

In English writing, punctuation marks such as commas, periods, question marks, apostrophes, colons, semicolons, and hyphens are used to separate sentences and their components. Their correct use ensures that a message is conveyed accurately. Kirboga (2020) emphasizes that punctuation guides readers by indicating where to pause and what to emphasize. Even a minor error in punctuation can significantly alter the meaning of a sentence, sometimes making it confusing or entirely illogical. Therefore, accuracy in punctuation, along with correct spelling, is essential for producing meaningful and effective written communication. Despite its importance, proper use of spelling and punctuation is often neglected. Both teachers and students tend to give limited attention to these fundamental aspects of writing. In many

cases, teaching practices focus more on completing the syllabus rather than developing students' writing skills. As a result, students rely on rote learning and pay little attention to accuracy in spelling and punctuation. This lack of focus can negatively affect the clarity and quality of their written work. Given this situation, it becomes necessary to examine students' competence in using correct spelling and punctuation. This study specifically investigates the performance of SSC students of the Kohat Board in this regard. It aims to identify the frequency of spelling and punctuation errors in students' writing and to assess whether the marks awarded to them accurately reflect their writing ability. Furthermore, the study seeks to highlight factors that may affect the reliability of these marks. The findings of this research are expected to emphasize the importance of accuracy in writing and to draw attention to the need for improved teaching practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is a multifaceted process that includes linguistic, visual, spatial, auditory, and gestural elements (Fisher et al., 2012). Writing has the power to mould one's personality (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). It also promotes intellectual inquiry and curiosity (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Writing is considered as a stepping stone to adult employment and higher education, as it is an important component of literacy (Daffern, 2016). Writing is for all for the purpose of verbal communication, and it is done through words which are formed from the good arrangement of letters and spelling is especially important for the purpose of communication (Stirling, 2011, Westwood, 2005, & Fitria, 2020). Vowel and consonant combinations are used to create spellings (Carney, 2008). It is the ability to arrange letters in a word in English (Fitria & Pratiwi, 2020). It is a difficult talent to master, yet mastery of it is required to learn English.

Writing provides rules that govern how to describe speech sound symbols and define the relationship between speech sound symbols, as well as how to express the relationship between symbols in a language, which is either separation or merging. It's just as vital to spell a word

correctly as it is to pronounce it correctly. The word would not be comprehended if it was not spelled correctly (Fitria, 2020). According to Perveen and Akram (2014), spelling is a study of phonics because it pertains to the grouping of words for spelling. Poor spelling might hinder students' academic achievement (Westwood, 2018).

According to ancient manuscripts, writing did not feature phenomena such as stopping, pausing, increasing or decreasing the tone, which explained or modified the meanings of the sounds in ancient times. As a result, we give the first examples of the current punctuation marks (Karboga, 2020). Punctuation marks are subtle, sometimes unnoticed signs that play an important role in transmitting the meaning of phrases. As a result, for clear communication, the writer must pay special attention to punctuation marks with content that affects communication (Ginting, 2018). Punctuation marks are employed in writing to help people understand what they're reading. Punctuation marks are used to distinguish pieces of a sentence, embedded sentences, dependent phrases, and parenthetical sentences, as well as to define the emphasis, intonation, and pauses in a sentence (Karboga, 2020). Punctuation marks, according to Hengirmen (2007), are like traffic indicators that lead the reader through an article. Spelling and punctuation are two elements that require a great deal of attention and are essential for learning the English language. As a result, both children and adults may struggle with poor writing. The usage of spelling, grammar, and punctuation are all clear indicators of the written material's quality. Written writings containing a lot of spelling mistakes have been demonstrated to be "less effectively organized, less comprehensible, less engaging, and less remembered" by even primary school kids than texts with correctly spelt phrases (Varnhagen, 2000).

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

According to Botley and Dillah (2007), spelling errors are widespread because, despite years of drilling and training in schools, spelling errors still appear in large numbers in student work. They used a corpus of university students'

writings to look at spelling errors and determined that omission of letters was the most common form of error among the students they surveyed. Mechanical flaws include punctuation, spelling, and capitalization.

Errors are an important part of language learning, according to Ali (2012), he noted that second language learners' language is systematic, and that their mistakes are evidence of rule-governed activity rather than random blunders. Scholars have tried to come up with ways to help both students and teachers overcome the problem of language learning mistakes. Students' errors can be studied using two methods: Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA) (EA). Applied linguistics encompasses both of these fields. The goal of error analysis, according to Ali (2012), is to reveal that learners' errors are produced by something other than their native language.

Likewise, Baleghizadeh and Dargahi (2011) investigated the use of spelling methods by students in the early stages of English learning. They compared how well-versed and average spellers utilized these strategies to how poorly they were employed by weak spellers. The participants in this study were 32 Iranian youngsters who were learning to spell and were classified as low, average, or above average spellers. Participants utilized retrieval the most frequently, followed by sounding out and analogy, according to the data. When the researchers looked at the employment of strategies in good, average, and poor writing, they discovered that the most common spelling procedures were used more often by good and average writers and less often by poor writers.

Moreover, Mohammadi and Gorjian (2015) looked at the impact of contextualized spelling activities on high school students' interactive writing errors including sounds and symbols. 45 third-graders were randomly assigned to one of three experimental groups, each with 15 students: contextualized, decontextualized, and sentence level. The contextualized group beat the decontextualized and sentence level groups, according to statistical analysis. Their findings demonstrated that contextualized spelling rules can help students improve their spelling in

English by encouraging interactive sound/symbol writing.

Al- Bulushi and Al- Seyabi (2016) were interested in learning more about the spelling strategies used by EFL students in Oman. Their study focused on determining the frequency with which students in grades four and ten used the techniques, as well as the differences in their use between the two grades. The study included 757 students in grades four through ten, who represented Oman's cycle one and cycle two departure levels. Their findings demonstrated statistically significant variations in the use of the approaches based on gender and educational attainment levels.

Likewise, Ar and Keray (2012) conducted study 8th grade students. They noticed that students made fewer mistakes on multiple choice questions but more mistakes on the dictation technique after collecting data from their participants and analyzing it. In a study of 9, 13, and 17-year-old students conducted by Arthur, Applebee, Judith Langer, and Mullis (1987), the researchers discovered that 25% of 9-year-old youngsters produced no punctuation problems. They also noticed that as people became older, their mistake rate decreased. This demonstrates that students gain control over the usage of punctuation over time and develop punctuation skills. Ozkar and Izci (2013) investigated the relationship between reading attitudes and punctuation marks in 5th grade students. They arrived at a stage when they disclosed the findings of their research and asserted that there was a strong correlation between students' reading attitudes and punctuation marks (Sülükçü, 2020). Moreover, Karagul (2010) sought to investigate how punctuation marks are used in writing. He was curious about how pupils used punctuation marks in their papers. After conducting the study, he observed that the students were unable to achieve the appropriate level of punctuation mark usage in accordance with the guidelines.

In a study conducted by Avc (2006), the researcher used eighth grade students as the research population. He was curious as to how well these students used correct punctuation marks in their essays. Following his analysis, he

was dissatisfied with the results and came to the opinion that learners are careless with punctuation and make a variety of punctuation errors (Sülükçü, 2020). After analyzing the data collected from the students, the researcher came to the conclusion that learners in the classes lacked basic punctuation skills.

METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

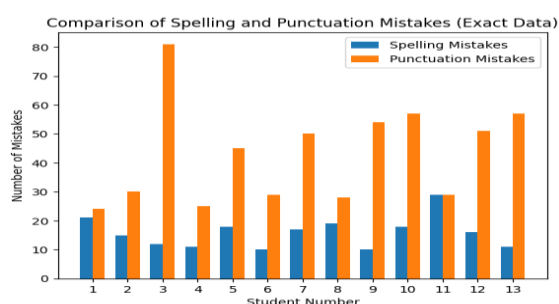
As far as the conceptual framework of the study is concerned it draws on the Error analysis (EA) introduced by Corder (1971) which highlights how important mistakes are to L2 learners' interlanguage system. According to Corder (1971), children can increase their language skills by making mistakes. He is adamantly opposed to the term "mistakes," and uses the word "errors" since mistakes and errors are not the same thing when it comes to language learning. There are three reasons why the word "errors" matters. The teacher is the first to identify mistakes made by the student learning a second language and to provide advice on how to correct them. Second, it gives the researcher reliable proof of how a language is picked up or taught in terms of methods and approaches. The third is directed at the students themselves. Second-language learners view the mistakes they make as a tool that helps them through the learning process. To construct a new language system distinct from the target and second language systems, new language norms have been developed (Brudhiprabha, 1972). Any mistakes committed by students demonstrate their proficiency in the target language as well as their learning stages. The learner's mistakes provide insight into a systematic language at the moment of usage. Using this as a conceptual framework, this study employed mixed methods research design that uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. An open-ended questionnaire was used as a research instrument in this study. Furthermore, data was collected using a random sample technique for SSC brilliant students, with 90 percent of marks in the BISE Kohat Annual Exam 2020 being chosen at random. The data was then subject to analysis using descriptive statistics that was quantified and visualized using tabulations, pie charts, and

graph charts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following table 1 contains students' identity, their total marks on SSC examination, their marks in English paper, total words they wrote as responses to an open-ended questionnaire, and the spelling and punctuation mistakes they made.

The findings presented in Table 1 shows clear pattern in the use of spelling and punctuation among SSC students of the Kohat Board. One of the most noticeable trends is that punctuation mistakes are higher than spelling mistakes across almost all participants. we can see that spelling errors remain relatively moderate, punctuation errors vary widely, with some students (e.g., Student 3, Student 10, and Student 13) showing particularly high frequencies. This imbalance shows that students have comparatively better control over spelling than punctuation, yet both areas remain problematic. This finding is consistent with Ginting (2018) indicate that learners often develop basic spelling competence through repeated exposure and memorization, whereas punctuation requires a deeper understanding of sentence structure and discourse conventions. Similarly, Kirboga (2020) argues that punctuation is more cognitively demanding because it involves not only mechanical accuracy but also the ability to organize ideas and guide the reader effectively. The high number of punctuation errors in the present study supports this claim, indicating that students struggle with structuring their writing in a coherent and reader-friendly manner.



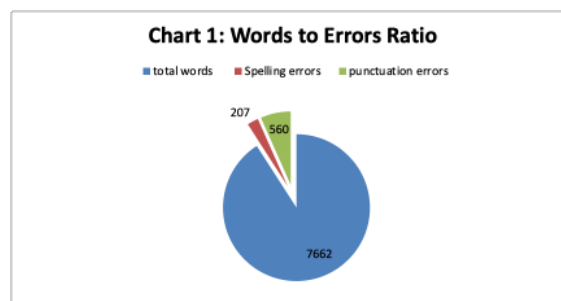
The bar chart shows a clear comparison between

spelling and punctuation mistakes for each student. It is evident that punctuation errors exceeded spelling errors across all participants. Notably, certain students exhibit exceptionally high punctuation errors, indicating inconsistency and lack of mastery in punctuation usage.

Another important observation is that high academic achievers (as indicated by SSC marks) are not necessarily proficient in writing accuracy. For example, several students with marks above 1000 still produced a considerable number of spelling and punctuation errors. This raises questions about the validity and reliability of assessment practices, as high scores do not seem to reflect actual writing competence. This finding aligns with concerns raised in educational research that assessment systems in many ESL contexts often prioritize content reproduction and rote learning over language accuracy and writing skills.

Moreover, the variation in total word count does not show a consistent relationship with the number of errors. Some students who wrote longer responses did not necessarily make more mistakes, while others with shorter responses still demonstrated high error rates. This suggests that the issue is not merely related to writing length but rather to lack of mastery and insufficient practice in fundamental writing conventions.

The following pie chart 1 shows the total words written and total errors in them, followed by further classification of spelling and punctuation errors with their frequency.



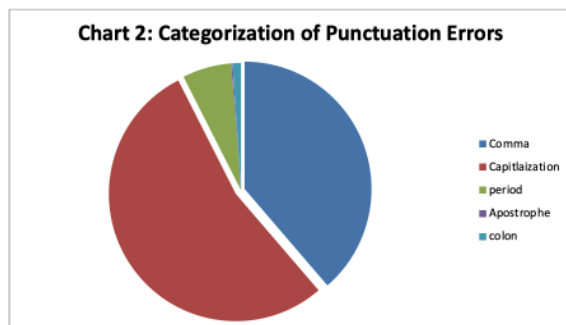
DISTRIBUTION OF PUNCTUATION ERRORS

The following table shows students' identities and the distribution of their punctuation errors

into different types. Moreover, the frequency of each error is also mentioned before the respective student.

Table 2: Distribution of Punctuation Errors

Student ID	Comma	Capitalization	Period	Apostrophe's	colon	Total
Student 1	11	06	07			24
Student 2	10	19			01	30
Student 3	13	65		01	02	81
Student 4	13	12			01	25
Student 5	18	23	04			45
Student 6	12	17				29
Student 7	16	32	02			50
Student 8	12	15	01			28
Student 9	18	27	09			54
Student 10	26	25	06			57
Student 11	18	10	01			29
Student 12	20	26	05			51
Student 13	30	25			02	57



DISCUSSION

As the goal of this study was to explore spelling and punctuation errors in the work of SSC students; after the collection of data from the participants who scored more than 90% in their SSC annual examination, the data was subject to quantitative analysis where the students' punctuation and spelling error were indentified and quantified. According to the findings tabulated in table 1 and relative frequency of spelling and punctuation errors in pie chart 1, the students wrote a total of 7662 words as their responses on open-ended questionnaire. They were told to cross-check their responses and rectify any error they identify to the best of their linguistic skills. Moreover they were allowed to fill the questionnaire with ease and with their own pace of writing to avoid time constrains and examination hall anxiety that have been reported by the researchers to affect writing proficiency. After minimizing most of the possible intervening factors affecting writing proficiency, the students still made 207 spelling errors and 560 punctuation errors. The least spelling errors made were 10 by student 6, whereas the least punctuation errors were 25 made by student 4. Similarly the highest spelling errors were 29 made by student 11, whereas the

highest punctuation errors were 81 made by student 3. It could be seen that the punctuation errors outnumber the spelling errors thereby suggests that students' punctuation literacy is poorer as compared to spelling errors. This study's findings are consistent with the findings of Karagul (2010), Avc (2006), and Yldrm and Uludag (2016). Their studies also reported poor punctuation literacy of the students studying in different levels from middle upto intermediate level.

Similarly, the researcher gathered information from total of 13 students. All of them misspelled many words in their writings and committed many punctuation errors. The researcher found 29 spelling problems in one of the participant responses. Only four of the thirteen participants had less than ten words misspells in their comments. While 7 of the remaining 9 participants misspell less than 20 words in their questionnaire responses. In their responses, the remaining two participants misspelled over 20 words. The researcher discovered a variety of spelling errors. Some participants spell a word correctly in one area but misspell it in another. This demonstrates that the participants' spelling accuracy is poor. This demonstrated that the kids are unconcerned about using correct spellings. They do not understand the significance of correct spelling in written communication.

After the spelling errors, the researcher focused on the punctuation errors in the participants' work. The researcher reported highest 59 punctuation errors of various kinds in one of the participant responses. There was not a single participant among the 13 who has made fewer than ten punctuation errors. Only two individuals have kept their punctuation errors under 20, while nine of the remaining 11 have kept their faults under 30. In their questionnaire replies, the remaining two participants made 46 and 59 punctuation errors, respectively.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis clearly demonstrated that punctuation errors outnumbered spelling

errors among the SSC students under study. While students show a basic level of control over spelling, their use of punctuation remains weak, inconsistent, and largely underdeveloped. The findings revealed that common errors include the lack of capitalization at the beginning of sentences, incorrect or missing capitalization of proper nouns, and the misuse or omission of commas in various contexts. Moreover, commas are frequently neglected, even where pauses or syntactic boundaries require them. Many participants failed to use commas to separate adjectives, phrases, or clauses, particularly in complex sentences involving dependent and independent clauses. This suggests not only a lack of awareness of punctuation rules but also limited understanding of sentence structure. Moreover, the near absence of other punctuation marks also shows the narrow and inadequate exposure students have received regarding punctuation usage. The widespread and careless use of punctuation indicates that students have not been sufficiently trained or guided in applying standard writing conventions. This weakness affects the clarity, coherence, and effectiveness of their written communication. Therefore, it can be concluded that punctuation is a neglected yet essential component of writing, requiring greater attention. Addressing this issue through improved teaching practices, targeted exercises, and consistent feedback is recommended to improve students' writing proficiency and ensure more accurate and meaningful expression in academic contexts.

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