

# A Punctuation Proficiency Model in Student Writing

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## **Abstract**

This study examined the punctuation proficiency of Grade 9 students in using commas, colons, and semicolons, identified recurring error patterns, and developed the Martinez' Punctuation Proficiency Model (MPPM) as a basis for improving writing instruction. The study was anchored on Generative Grammar, Cognitive Load Theory, the Zone of Proximal Development, Error Analysis Theory, Interlanguage Theory, and Surface Strategy Taxonomy. It involved 320 Grade 9 students selected through simple random sampling from public secondary schools in Catbalogan City and nearby areas in Samar, Philippines. Students completed written compositions assessed using an adapted and modified instrument and analytic scoring rubrics, with punctuation errors classified as addition, omission, misinformation, and misordering. Results showed that 99.1% of respondents performed below the proficient level in comma usage, while no student reached the Proficient or Advanced level in colon and semicolon usage. Colon usage presented the greatest difficulty, followed by semicolons and commas. Overall, 62.5% of students performed below the Satisfactory level, demonstrating limited mastery and difficulty applying punctuation rules in actual writing. The MPPM was consequently developed to organize punctuation instruction, application, assessment, error analysis, feedback, and targeted intervention. The study recommends explicit and vertically aligned punctuation instruction, practice-based writing activities, teacher development, and use of the model to strengthen students' writing mechanics. The study supports SDG 4 – Quality Education by addressing writing competence and opportunities to improve English language instruction. Its sustainability impact is primarily educational and institutional, as the findings and model may support more systematic and targeted approaches to developing students' written communication skills.

**Keywords:** Error Analysis; Grade 9 Students; Punctuation Errors; Punctuation Proficiency; Surface Strategy Taxonomy; Writing Competence

## **1. Introduction**

Punctuation is essential to clear and coherent written communication because it organizes ideas and prevents ambiguity (Crystal, 2019). Proper punctuation also facilitates comprehension of written language (Shweba & Mujiyanto, 2017). However, punctuation misuse remains common among students and may affect their ability to communicate ideas accurately (Myhill, 2016). This study examines students' proficiency and errors in using commas, colons, and semicolons as a basis for developing a punctuation proficiency model.

Students need to understand the specific rules and functions of punctuation marks (Nurwahyuni, 2017). Commas are frequently misused because of their multiple functions (Smith, 2020), while differences between Filipino and English sentence structures may contribute to errors among Filipino learners (Garcia & Reyes, 2019). Colons are also incorrectly used or omitted (Jones, 2018), with some Filipino students avoiding them because of unfamiliarity with their functions (Dela Cruz, 2022). Similarly, semicolons are often confused with commas or periods (Taylor & Brown, 2022) and remain among the least understood punctuation marks among students (Lopez, 2020).

Punctuation errors can result in misinterpretation, reduced readability, and weaker written argumentation (Hancock, 2017). Among Filipino high school students, errors involving commas, colons, and semicolons have affected the construction of coherent essays (Ramos, 2023). Despite available grammar resources and instructional interventions, difficulties in applying punctuation rules persist (Miller, 2023; Fernandez, 2021). Students must therefore understand punctuation rules and apply them appropriately in actual writing (Batur et al., 2016).

English serves as a medium of instruction and communication across Philippine education (Quibol-Catabay, 2016). Nevertheless, punctuation errors remain evident in students' academic writing, as reported by Catabay (2016). Nationally, approximately 70% of Grades 7–12 students were reported to struggle with accurate punctuation, affecting writing fluency and comprehension (DepEd, 2023). Locally, the researcher observed that Grade 9 students at Samar National School in Catbalogan City experienced difficulty identifying and correctly applying punctuation in written English tasks. Limited understanding, exposure, motivation, and practice were observed to contribute to these difficulties, providing the local rationale for examining students' punctuation proficiency.

The study draws on Chomsky's Generative Grammar (1957) to explain punctuation in relation to sentence structure and meaning; Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1988) to explain cognitive demands during writing; and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978) to emphasize scaffolding and guided instruction. Corder's Error Analysis Theory (1971) considers errors as indicators of learning difficulties, while Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (1972) explains errors arising from developing second-language systems. Dulay et al.'s (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy provides the primary framework for classifying errors as omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. Conceptually, the study relates students' profiles to their proficiency and errors in using commas, colons, and semicolons. These components provide the basis for developing a punctuation proficiency model designed to support students' writing development.

Despite punctuation instruction and available learning resources, students continue to experience difficulties in applying punctuation correctly (Miller, 2023; Fernandez, 2021). Existing evidence also shows that punctuation errors can affect coherent writing (Ramos, 2023). The study therefore examines students' profiles, proficiency in commas, colons, and semicolons, and specific error patterns to provide a basis for developing a punctuation proficiency model. Its objectives specifically address student characteristics, punctuation proficiency, error identification, and model development.

The study aligns primarily with SDG 4 – Quality Education by addressing students' writing competence and identifying specific punctuation difficulties that may guide improved English language instruction. The proposed punctuation proficiency model can support more focused teaching strategies and the development of effective written communication skills.

Writing is an important skill that requires competence in punctuation, spelling, and grammar (Mahmood, 2021). The study contributes to educational and institutional sustainability by providing evidence that can help students recognize their learning needs, assist teachers in developing targeted instructional strategies, and support educational institutions in strengthening writing instruction. Its findings may also provide a foundation for future research on punctuation proficiency and related writing difficulties.

## **2. Material and methods**

### **2.1 Research Design**

The study assessed students' punctuation proficiency through written compositions and identified errors in the use of commas, colons, and semicolons. The errors were systematically analyzed using Dulay's Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which classifies errors into omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. The design enabled the researcher to determine students' proficiency levels and recurring punctuation error patterns.

### **2.2 Locale of the Study**

The study was conducted in selected public secondary schools in Catbalogan City and nearby areas in Samar, Philippines. The participating schools represented different school types under the Department of Education (DepEd), offered secondary education, and included English as a core subject across grade levels.

### **2.3 Respondents of the Study**

The respondents were 320 Grade 9 students enrolled during School Year 2024–2025. They came from heterogeneous sections across different curricular programs and were taking English 9 for four one-hour sessions per week. Their native language was Waray-Waray, while English was taught as their second language, making them appropriate respondents for assessing punctuation proficiency in ESL writing.

## 2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

A total of 320 Grade 9 students were selected through simple random sampling. Some respondents belonged to Grade 9 English classes taught by the researcher. Data collection was conducted in classrooms or designated testing areas under controlled and distraction-free conditions to ensure consistency in test administration.

## 2.5 Research Instrument

The research instrument was adapted and modified from Huda (2019) and anchored on Dulay's Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The essay prompts were revised to align with Grade 9 Standard Essay Requirements under the K-12 English curriculum. Alignment of assessment tasks with curriculum standards supports content validity and accurate measurement of learners' competencies (Brookhart, 2018; DeLuca & Bellara, 2020), while developmentally appropriate and contextually meaningful writing tasks can generate more authentic and reliable writing performance (Graham, 2019; Hyland, 2022). Students selected one of three writing topics: The Challenges of Being a Student Today, How I Balance My Studies and Screentime, or A Conversation with My Future Self. They produced three to five paragraphs, allowing punctuation to be assessed across different sentence structures and contexts (Zhou & Carroll, 2017). Standards for essay writing were also considered in relation to Department of Education writing activities (DepEd, 2023). The analytic scoring rubrics were adapted and synthesized from Garcia's (2027) writing assessment framework, iRubric (2023), the DepEd English 9 Curriculum Standards (2023), Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL, 2024), Rizki (2018), and DepEd Region-based and National Scoring Guides. The rubric assessed punctuation accuracy and classified errors involving commas, colons, and semicolons according to omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. This provided a systematic basis for evaluating punctuation proficiency and identifying recurring error patterns.

## 2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent, followed by a request to the concerned School Principal. The writing test was then administered to respondents at Samar National School under controlled classroom conditions. Completed compositions were retrieved immediately after the activity. The written outputs were independently evaluated by three qualified English Master Teachers from Samar National School using the validated rubric. The raters had professional experience in English instruction, journalism, and language assessment. They identified and classified errors involving commas, colons, and semicolons. Completed rating sheets were subsequently reviewed for completeness, and the data were consolidated, tabulated, and prepared for statistical analysis.

## 2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive statistical techniques, particularly scale interpretation and percentage computation, were used to determine students' punctuation proficiency and error patterns. A proficiency scale adapted from Garcia et al. (2017) and modified for the study categorized performance according to percentage scores derived from correctly used punctuation marks. Punctuation errors were classified as addition, omission, misinformation, and misordering based on the error analysis taxonomy by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982). The frequencies and percentages of these errors were determined to identify the most prevalent difficulties involving commas, colons, and semicolons. Percentage computation was also used to determine the distribution of respondents according to proficiency level.

# 3. Results and Discussion

## 3.1 Profile of the Student-Respondents

### 3.1.1 Demographic and Academic Profile

Of the 320 Grade 9 respondents, 72.2% were aged 14–15 and 65.6% were female. Most (88.8%) belonged to the Revised Basic Education Curriculum (RBEC), while 11.3% were enrolled in Special Classes. In English 8, 57.5% obtained Excellent ratings, 30.9% Above Average, 10.0% Average, 0.9% Below Average, and 0.6% Failing. Most respondents (71.9%) were from urban schools, while 27.8% came from rural schools. Despite the high proportion of students with Excellent English 8 ratings, their punctuation performance revealed weaknesses in actual writing mechanics, indicating a mismatch between general English achievement and punctuation mastery, echoing recent concerns in Philippine English Education (Cabansag, 2024).

## 3.2 Punctuation Proficiency Levels of the Student-Respondents

### 3.2.1 Comma Proficiency

The results showed that 53.13% of respondents were at the Developing level and 45.94% at the Beginning level in comma usage. Only 0.94% reached the Proficient level, while none attained Advanced, indicating that 99.1% performed below the proficient level. Omission errors were the most frequent, consistent with Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) framework. Students also frequently substituted commas for periods, producing comma splices and run-on sentences that reflected difficulty recognizing sentence boundaries and independent clauses. Similar concerns have been reported in broader assessments of writing performance (SEA-PLM, 2019). These findings suggest that comma difficulties reflect weaknesses in syntactic awareness rather than isolated mechanical errors.

### 3.2.2 Colon Proficiency

Most respondents (82.19%) were at the Beginning level in colon usage, while 17.81% were Developing. No student reached the Proficient or Advanced level, making colon usage the least mastered punctuation skill examined. Misinformation errors were the most frequent (Dulay et al., 1982), particularly when students placed colons before incomplete clauses, after verbs or prepositions, or confused them with semicolons. Similar difficulties were noted by Graham (2018) and Montecillo (2021), while the interchange of visually similar punctuation marks supports Flores and Santos' (2020) observation. As Guinto (2019) notes, proper colon use requires a clear understanding of sentence structure and clause relationships.

### 3.2.3 Semicolon Proficiency

For semicolon usage, 72.19% of respondents were at the Beginning level and 27.81% were Developing. No respondent attained either the Proficient or Advanced level, demonstrating a substantial mastery gap. Students frequently substituted semicolons with periods, commas, or colons and inserted them incorrectly within dependent clauses. These errors align with Dulay et al.'s taxonomy, particularly the misordering category, and indicate difficulty distinguishing semicolons from other punctuation marks. The findings support Manalastas (2021), who observed that semicolons are often underemphasized in instruction, leading to avoidance or misuse.

## 3.3 Specific Punctuation Errors

The punctuation errors were classified as addition, omission, misinformation, and misordering based on Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which continues to be widely applied and validated in current studies (Alahmadi, 2020; Nguyen, 2022; Habtoor, 2023). Their interpretation was grounded in recent writing-assessment literature (Ferris, 2019; Hyland & Jiang, 2021; NCTE, 2022; CEFR, 2020).

### 3.3.1 Comma Errors

Omission was the most frequent comma error at 39.69% (127), followed by misinformation at 28.75% (92), misordering at 16.56% (53), and addition at 15.00% (48). Students commonly failed to insert required commas, placed them incorrectly, or inserted unnecessary commas. The classifications of addition, omission, misinformation, and misordering were based on Dulay et al. (1982) taxonomy and updated applications by Nguyen (2022) and Habtoor (2023). The identified structural errors are consistent with recent applications of the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Alahmadi, 2020; Habtoor, 2023). Omission reflects limited awareness of clause boundaries and sentence structure (Ferris, 2019), while misinformation may result from overgeneralizing punctuation rules (Hyland and Jiang, 2021). Although substantial, comma errors were less severe than colon and semicolon difficulties, consistent with evidence that commas are generally mastered earlier (NCTE, 2022; Graham et al., 2020).

### 3.3.2 Colon Errors

Misinformation was the most frequent colon error at 44.06% (141), followed by omission at 29.06% (93), misordering at 21.25% (68), and addition at 5.63% (18). Students frequently confused colons with semicolons, placed them after verbs or prepositions, or omitted them when introducing lists and explanations. The analysis was based on Dulay et al. (1982) taxonomy and updated applications by Nguyen (2022) and Habtoor (2023). Colons require control of logical relationships within sentences (NCTE, 2022; CEFR, 2020). The predominance of misinformation reflects misconceptions about sentence structure and clause boundaries (Ferris, 2019), while misordering demonstrates difficulties in appropriate placement (Habtoor, 2023; Nguyen, 2022). Overall, the findings support research indicating that colon mastery requires advanced grammatical awareness (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; CEFR, 2020).

### 3.3.3 Semicolon Errors

Misordering was the most frequent semicolon error at 32.19% (103), followed by misinformation at 27.19% (87), omission at 16.25% (52), and addition at 4.38% (14). Students commonly misplaced semicolons or confused them with commas and periods, demonstrating difficulty recognizing appropriate clause boundaries. Semicolons require precise judgment in connecting clauses and maintaining cohesion (Ferris, 2019; ETS, 2023) and are challenging because of limited exposure and their complex grammatical function (Ferris, 2019; Bitchener & Ferris, 2022; Kim & Park, 2021). Misordering reflects difficulty identifying syntactic boundaries (Crossley et al., 2017; Ferris & Kurzer, 2019), while misinformation indicates misunderstanding of the requirement for independent clauses (Kim & Park, 2021). Semicolons require advanced sentence-level decision-making (Hyland and Jiang, 2021) and explicit instructional reinforcement (NCTE, 2022; WIDA, 2020).

## 3.4 Comparative Punctuation Errors and Overall Proficiency

### 3.4.1 Frequency of Comma, Colon, and Semicolon Errors

Colon usage showed the greatest difficulty, with 72.8% of students having frequent errors and a mean of 89.3. Semicolon usage followed, with 65.3% having frequent errors and a mean of 86.6. For commas, 38.1% had frequent errors, with a mean of 73.5, making commas comparatively less problematic. Colons and semicolons

pose greater challenges because they are less familiar and require more sophisticated syntactic awareness, whereas commas are generally acquired earlier and practiced more frequently (Ferris, 2019; CEFR, 2020; Hyland & Jiang, 2021). The weak punctuation performance despite strong overall English achievement also reflects Cabansag's (2024) findings, where students were proficient in grammar but weak in writing mechanics.

### **3.4.2 Overall Punctuation Proficiency**

Overall, 32.5% of the respondents were classified as Needs Improvement, 30.0% as Poor, 23.4% as Satisfactory, and 14.1% as Good. No student attained the Excellent level. Thus, 62.5% performed below the Satisfactory level, indicating limited mastery of punctuation conventions in academic writing. The absence of respondents at the Excellent level indicates difficulty consistently applying punctuation across writing contexts. Punctuation proficiency is closely linked to syntactic awareness and writing quality (Graham & Rijlaarsdam, 2016; Hyland & Jiang, 2021). Similar weaknesses in writing mechanics have been identified internationally and regionally (OECD, 2019; ETS, 2023), particularly with punctuation requiring higher-level grammatical judgment (Bitchener and Ferris, 2022). The results also support integrating mechanics within authentic writing instruction rather than treating them as isolated drills (NCTE, 2022).

## **3.5 Martinez' Punctuation Proficiency Model (MPPM)**

### **3.5.1 Development and Components of the MPPM**

The Martinez' Punctuation Proficiency Model (MPPM) was developed from the identified weaknesses in comma, colon, and semicolon usage. It follows a structured, cyclical process consisting of Input, Process, Output, and Feedback and Intervention stages. The Input Stage addresses punctuation rules; the Process Stage focuses on accuracy, variety, and appropriateness; the Output Stage measures punctuation-specific and overall proficiency levels; and the Feedback and Intervention Stage uses error analysis to guide targeted remediation. The model reflects the finding that punctuation mastery requires direct and systematic instruction rather than rule memorization alone. High omission and misinformation errors demonstrate gaps in foundational knowledge, while weaknesses in colon and semicolon usage indicate difficulty applying advanced punctuation appropriately. Through addition, omission, misinformation, and misordering analysis, teachers can identify specific difficulties and provide targeted intervention. Overall, the model emphasizes continuous instruction, guided practice, assessment, feedback, and reflective correction as a systematic approach to improving students' punctuation proficiency.

## **4. Conclusion & Recommendations**

The study concluded that Grade 9 students demonstrated greater familiarity with basic punctuation but experienced substantial difficulty with more complex marks, particularly colons and semicolons, indicating uneven and underdeveloped punctuation proficiency. Frequent omission, misformation, and misordering errors reflected limited mastery of punctuation rules and difficulty understanding their role in meaning, organization, and coherence. Overall, the findings revealed a gap between students' theoretical knowledge of punctuation and their ability to apply punctuation rules accurately in actual writing.

The study recommends strengthening punctuation instruction through coordinated curriculum and classroom interventions. The Department of Education should provide explicit and vertically aligned instruction in writing mechanics, incorporate theme-writing activities, and strengthen teacher training in writing instruction, assessment, and feedback aligned with the MATATAG Curriculum. Teachers should use practice-based activities and the developed Punctuation Proficiency Model to improve students' application of punctuation rules, while students should actively assess and improve their punctuation accuracy, variety, and appropriateness. Parents should provide encouragement and guidance at home, while future researchers may examine other punctuation marks and additional factors associated with punctuation errors.

The study was limited to Grade 9 students and focused specifically on their proficiency and errors in using commas, colons, and semicolons in written compositions. Other punctuation marks and additional factors that may influence students' punctuation errors and broader writing proficiency were beyond the scope of the study.

## **5. Compliance with ethical standards**

The author declares no conflict of interest. This study received no external funding. The researchers acknowledge the Grade 9 student participants and Samar National School for their participation and institutional support. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and data were collected through non-invasive written activities while maintaining confidentiality and ensuring that no identifying information was disclosed.

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