

An analysis of punctuation errors in the writing of the 7th Graders: A case of an upper primary school in Oshana region

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find out the challenges faced by learners in using punctuations correctly during writing and the factors hindering the effective teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English as a second language, in Grade 7. The study also explored possible ways that might be used to improve the teaching and learning of punctuation marks. This was both a qualitative and quantitative study, whereby the teachers and learners were purposefully selected as participants for this study. This study used questionnaires, punctuation mark test and an interview method whereby interview guides were used to collect data. This study revealed that most upper primary school learners were struggling to use exclamation marks, quotation marks, commas, and question marks correctly during writing. According to the participants (teachers), inappropriate teaching methods and lack of teaching aids, laziness and ignorance among learners, poor teaching skills and lack of updated teaching and learning resources for English were identified as the main factors hindering effective teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English as a second language. Based on the research findings, the researcher recommended that teachers should incorporate modern teaching and learning materials for English to improve the teaching and learning of punctuation marks. Equally, teachers should make use of the locally available resources to create teaching materials and use them to teach. English teachers should enforce different measures and teaching strategies to assist specifically lazy and ignorant learners in order to improve the teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English as a second language. Moreover, English L2 teachers should be offered in-service training and workshops by the language advisers and other English experts to acquire more skills on teaching punctuation marks. Finally, English L2 teachers should organize team groups and peer observations to help one another on how to teach punctuation marks.

Keywords: *mother tongue, English second language, punctuation marks, errors, teaching, learning*

Introduction

English, as a foreign language, and a “lingua franca” (Seidlhofer, 2013) has been adopted in Namibia for official use in communication since Namibia’s independence in 1990. The language is compulsory and widely used among all Namibian schools in all 14 regions of the country. However, being a foreign language, most teachers and learners, especially in the Namibian rural schools, seem to still not be competent enough in writing English second language effectively. They seem to have difficulties in grammar, inclusive of the usage of punctuation marks. Most English teachers in rural schools in Namibia seem to be failing in English competency activities (inclusive of usage of correct punctuation marks during academic writing), suggesting a quick intervention by the language experts in the training of rural teachers whose responsibility is to teach English second language. Shweba and Mujiyanto (2017) believe that most punctuation errors are caused by lack of

knowledge, lack of balance in the curriculum and the influence of the mother tongue. However, Ali et al. (2020) argue that punctuation errors among learners (during writing) are caused by lack of practice on punctuation marks, lack of frequent teaching of punctuation marks, inadequate assessment of activities related to punctuation marks and inadequate feedback on punctuation errors.

The statistics from the Directorate of Education (2016) has indicated that there seems to have been a consistent decline among upper primary learners’ performance in English second language in Oshana region. This has been a serious concern in the region and has led to teachers, curriculum experts and evaluators to re-evaluate their English language teaching and learning systems especially on the use of punctuation marks when writing longer pieces or essays. After a thorough observation of written tasks by the 7th graders, most learners appear to have difficulties in using punctuation marks

correctly, especially during the construction of sentences. Based on the above background, it is worth investigating the causes of incorrect use of punctuation marks (i.e., the usage of a full stop, comma, exclamation mark, quotation, colon and semi-colon, etc.) among upper primary learners during writing in English as a second language in the Oshana region.

This paper is significant in determining factors that might hinder the correct usage of punctuation marks during writing in English. The findings of this study might be important for many reasons. Firstly, it will inform teachers about where they need to make necessary improvements and be able to choose the appropriate teaching strategies to be used in teaching punctuations lessons in English as a second language in Grade 7. Equally, this might also help learners to adopt and acquire necessary grammatical skills. This research may also contribute significantly to the body of knowledge and add to existing literature which might inform future researchers in similar subject matters.

Review of related literature on punctuation marks

Punctuation marks in English as a second language

Nordquist (2020) defines punctuation marks as a set of grammatical tools used to regulate texts and clarify their meanings mainly by separating or linking words, phrases, and clauses together. In addition, Adhikary (2020, p. 2) also affirms that punctuation marks refer to “the use of standard marks and signs in writing to separate sentences, clauses and phrases in order to clarify meaning”. Therefore, punctuation marks are the most important mechanics of writing. In general, punctuation marks form part of the language system which provides contextual clues on how a text is organized. Mawudoku (2020) believes that punctuation marks are like road traffic symbols. They cannot be neglected.

Significance of punctuation marks in a second language (L2) classroom

There has been much dispute on the use of punctuation marks among the 7th graders during the English writing tasks. This paper however only concentrates on its advantages. Abdulkhaleq (2019, p. 4) states that punctuation marks have a great importance in writing. They make reading much easier to comprehend and prevent confusion and overlap between the sentence and words. In

other words, if a good writer uses them correctly, they help readers to understand what is written. In addition, Khan (2016) indicated that punctuation marks are important because they define and show how various elements of sentences relate to each other, thereby ensuring clear and unambiguous communication. Additionally, punctuation marks help to establish the tone of a written text. Mawudoku (2020) maintains that punctuation marks are essential for the unity of sentences and for clarifying the meaning given in a piece of writing. Hence, punctuation marks are used to break up words and sentences and make written material easier to read and understand. Without punctuation marks, sentences are portrayed as a mere jungle mass of words without division to mark pauses and breaks in thoughts. In other words, it is difficult to determine the exact meaning of sentences which are not punctuated, and this may eventually hinder understanding the meaning of a written work (Mawudoku, 2020).

Typical writing errors among 7th graders

Abi (2014) defined errors as a repeated process that is likely to happen without prior recognition by learners. Shipanga (2012) acknowledged that errors are made when a learner is unfamiliar with the correct form or language use. Schunk (2009) argued that Second Language (L2) writing contains errors and it is the teachers' responsibility to ensure that learners develop strategies for self-correction and regulation. Schunk (2009, p. 432) noted that writing is “an active process and most sophisticated phenomenon of putting oral language into graphic symbols and a complex achievement of the language system”. The process of writing requires many interrelated skills and abilities including spoken language, ability to read, skills in spelling, legible handwriting, skills and knowledge of the rules of written language, cognitive strategies and planning. In other words, learners' English second language often has several errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, handwriting and grammar; hence their written products tend to be short, poorly organised and lack development of ideas. Similarly, Elyssa (2009) reiterated that writing forms an important component of literacy although less research is conducted on writing. He further states that less skilled writers make spelling, cohesion and punctuation errors because they do not spend time on planning what to write and the format

of writing it. Shipanga (2012) maintains that learners can only write well if they are given enough time to think critically, to rewrite, select, revise and organise their ideas. Therefore, it is imperative that learners, especially the 7th graders, are assisted to achieve the basic competencies in writing as it is a pre-requisite for educational achievement as well as learners' career opportunities.

Factors hindering effective teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English second language (ESL)

Various researchers, Shweba and Mujiyanto (2017) have argued that most punctuation errors are caused by lack of knowledge and inadequate curriculum. Punctuation errors among learners are equally caused by lack of practice on punctuation marks, lack of teaching punctuations within a wide context, lack of checking of punctuation errors and consecutive feedback on punctuation errors. In addition, Fareed and Ashraf (2016) state that ineffective teaching and learning of punctuation marks is a result of inadequate linguistic proficiency, writing anxiety, lack of ideas and reliance on the first language (mother-tongue). These challenges are influenced by various factors including untrained teachers, ineffective teaching methods, and lack of writing practice, overcrowded classrooms and low intrinsic motivation to teach.

The teaching and learning of punctuation marks in upper primary schools

The study by Fareed and Ashraf (2016) sheds light on the possible remedial measures such as increased reading, conscious and incidental vocabulary teaching, writing practices, training of teachers, and reforms in the examination system as well as writing competitions. Ochako (2019) recommended workshops for teachers on the use of punctuation marks during writing, appropriate teaching approaches and integration of technology in punctuation lessons. Furthermore, learners need to be trained to take time to plan, write and edit longer pieces of writing to minimize the use of wrong punctuations. In addition, Samhon and Abdall (2016) indicated that teachers need extensive training on the teaching of grammar, accompanied by solid examples from written texts, to ensure that learners have a firm understanding of the necessary punctuation rules.

Furthermore, Ochako (2019) proposed

the use of a "Slap the Board" method as the practical method in teaching punctuation marks. The English teacher puts the full range of punctuation marks on the board and projects a sentence with a gap where a punctuation mark should be. Learners then rush and slap the picture of the punctuation mark. Whoever touches the correct punctuation mark first wins a point for their team. This method motivates learners to learn indirectly as it attracts learners' attention. In addition, Bakla (2019) claims that the best practical method to teach punctuation marks to the Grade 7 learners is by giving them fragmented sentences, where learners are given unpunctuated paragraphs for them to punctuate. Punctuation methods such as: sentence re-ordering method, teaching within context and using the dictogloss method (whereby a teacher reads a short text three times and learners take notes and punctuate) might equally help learners to advance in using punctuation marks correctly (Bakla, 2019).

Theoretical framework

This paper is based on Jim Cummins' theory of Second Language Acquisition. Cummins (2015) maintains that the first language knowledge is crucial in the second language acquisition. Therefore, the cognitive and literacy skills established through the mother tongue are transferred to the second language. However, learners sometimes transfer their first language knowledge in order to learn the second language. One could therefore say that the English proficiency of learners depends on the amount of instruction they receive. If learners are exposed to comprehensible input, there is always a high probability of acquiring more English proficiency. However, if their input is minimal, their acquisition is likely to get minimal as well. A lot might need to be done for learners to acquire more English proficiency. Cummins (2015) has acknowledged that an error is a result of insufficient and ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure or due to mother-tongue interference. The English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT), which was conducted countrywide in Namibia and given to English second language teachers, supports Cummins' Theory of Second Language Acquisition as most teachers performed satisfactorily in this test (Smit, 2011). Additionally, the researcher has interviewed English language teachers on how often they teach punctuation marks in their English class as Cummins (2015) indicates, the mastery of a

specific topic is based on the frequent coverage of that topic. If teachers are effective and efficient enough in the teaching of English punctuations, learners might perform well in ESL writing incorporating correct punctuation marks.

Research methods and procedures

This study used a descriptive qualitative research method to collect data from the research participants. Aspers and Corte (2019) defined this method as an interactive process which involves interpretive, naturalist approach to its subject matter. Qualitative research method offers a complete description and analysis of the research subject, without limiting the scope of the research and nature of participants' responses (Langkos, 2020). This paper investigated punctuation marks that were frequently used incorrectly by the 7th graders in one of the selected upper primary schools in Oshana region. The setting of this study was Shapwa Primary School in Oshana region. The school has a total number of 27 teachers and 240 learners. The Grade 7 English second language (ESL) teachers were two (2). The total number of ESL Grade 7 learners was 54 which was the population of this study. The sample of this study included Grade 7 ESL teachers (the two teachers at the school) and twenty (20) Grade 7 learners who were purposively selected. The twenty learners were selected based on the characteristics of the Grade 7 ESL population and these 20 learners, therefore made an accurate representation of the population of this study (the 54 ESL Grade 7 learners).

Data collection and analysis

In collecting data, this study used questionnaires and unstructured interviews

(for teachers only) and an essay test consisting of 11 sentences with incorrect use of punctuation marks (for learners to correct). Twenty (20) Grade 7 learners were asked to individually rewrite the essay and punctuating it correctly. These learners were purposively selected from the 54 ESL Grade 7 learners who formed part of the population of this study. According to Aspers and Corte (2019), purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that is selected based on the characteristics of a population and the objectives of the study. For data collection, the teachers' questionnaires and an essay test for learners were utilised. The questionnaire and an unstructured interview were simply designed to obtain teachers' experiences and expertise on Grade 7 learners' writing using punctuation marks. The interview consisted of only 2 open-ended questions whereas the questionnaires used a 3-point scale for each item (i.e., 1= always, 2= sometimes and 3= never). Teachers were asked to circle the suitable answers. The teachers' questionnaire responses were used to investigate whether their (teachers) perceptions on learners' incorrect use of punctuation marks matched the learners' perceptions. The collected data were quantified and analysed through tables, graphs and emerging themes.

Findings

Teachers' feedback on the questionnaire

The two upper primary ESL teachers were asked to rate learners' usage of punctuation marks during writing. Figure 1 shows the responses from the first teacher (labelled as teacher **A**), while Figure 2 indicates the responses from the second teacher (labelled as teacher **B**).

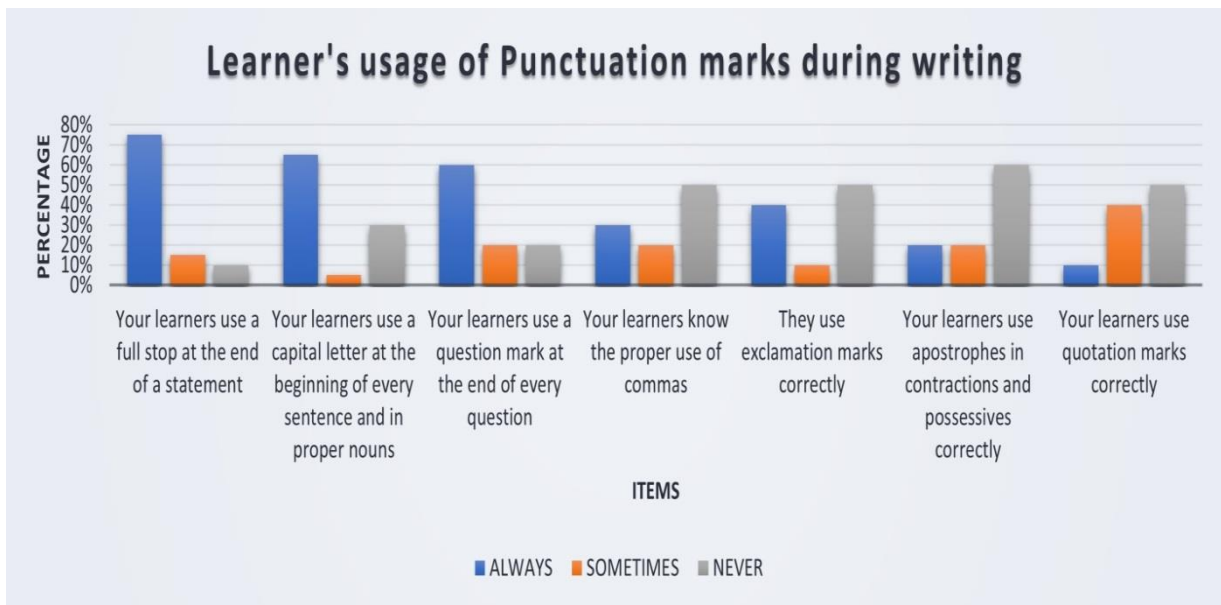


Figure 1: Teacher A’s feedback on learner’s usage of punctuation marks during writing

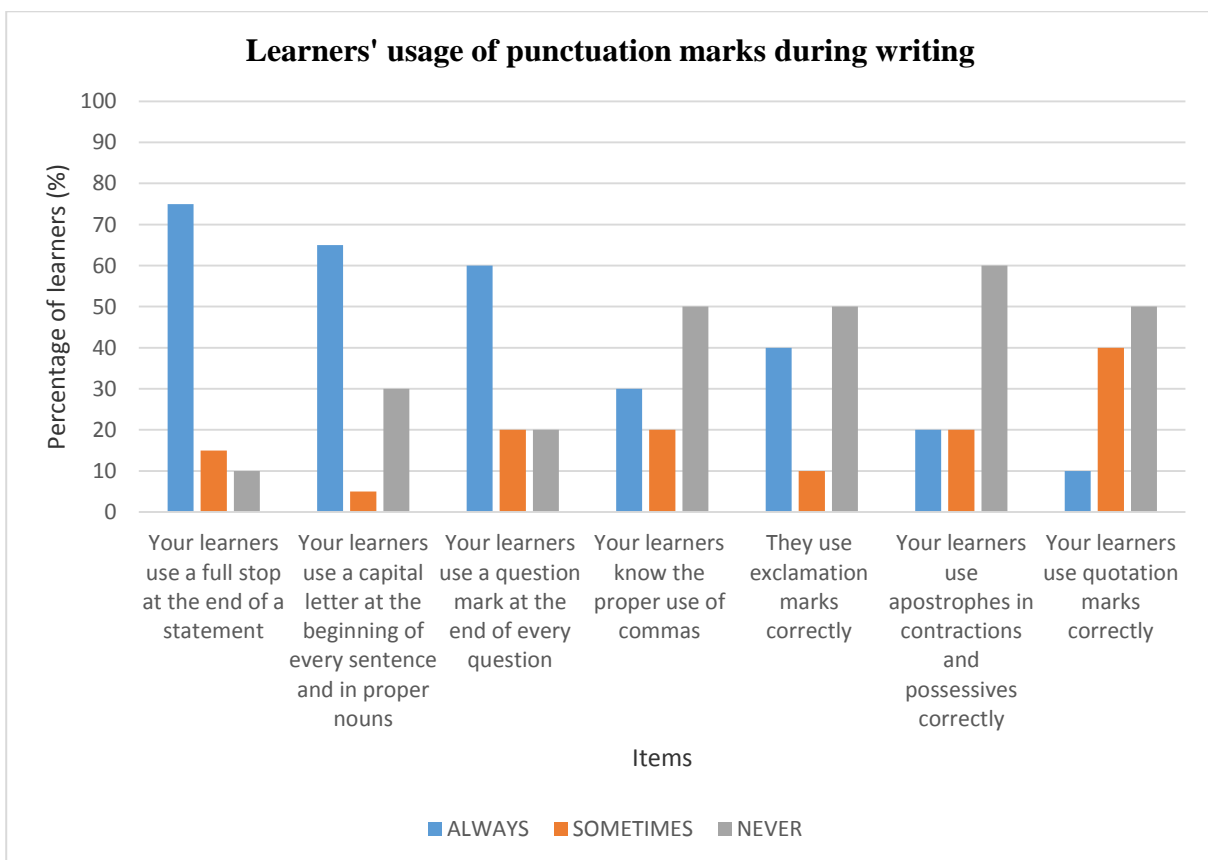


Figure 2: Teacher B’s feedback on learner’s usage of punctuation marks during writing

Teachers’ feedback on unstructured interview questions

After an interview on factors that hinder effective teaching and learning of punctuation marks during writing in ESL, the following were the responses from Teacher A and Teacher B respectively:

Response by Teacher A

Teacher A believed that learners’ inadequate knowledge on the use of punctuation marks was attributed to poor methods of teaching punctuations.

Teacher A said: *"Poor punctuation during writing is mostly caused by poor teaching methods or strategies employed by teachers when teaching punctuation marks. Teachers fail to adopt and use the best approaches to*

reinforce this topic among learners. Teachers equally fail to use the most "effective and appropriate teaching aids" whenever they present this topic, which, in turn, is likely to affect the teaching and learning of punctuation marks in ESL."

Response by Teacher B

Teacher B said: "Some learners are lazy and ignorant when it comes to using punctuation marks. Additionally, the study materials such as English textbooks for teachers and learners that are provided by the ministry do not have many challenging activities on this topic. They are outdated."

Suggestions to improve the teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English as a second language

Response by Teacher A

Teacher A believed that "all English language teachers, in the same cluster centre or region, should at least come together and work as a team to discuss and find the best methods/ approaches towards teaching and learning of punctuation marks. Secondly, teachers should also try to come up with many "effective teaching aids" to teach this topic as this will definitely attract learners' attention". She concluded that: "teachers should also provide as many activities as possible to reinforce the

mastery of punctuation marks into learners."

Response by Teacher B

Teacher B explained that "remedial teaching measures should be put in place to deal with lazy and ignorant learners that do not take punctuation marks seriously during writing." This is in conformity with Cummins' (2015) theory of Second Language Acquisition that mastery and acquisition of the second language depends on the exposure and amount of information that learners receive from their subject teacher. The teacher further claimed that: the "Ministry of Education should provide "updated books" and other teaching and learning materials to enable a proper and effective teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English as a second language."

Results of the essay test

Twenty (20) Grade 7 learners each wrote the test in forty minutes. Ten learners were from Grade 7A (5 boys and 5 girls). The other 10 learners (5 boys and five girls) were from Grade 7B. By looking at the overall performance of the test, eight of the ten selected girls passed the test (scored above 50%) and only two failed (below 50%). However, only four (4) of the ten (10) boys managed to score above 50%.

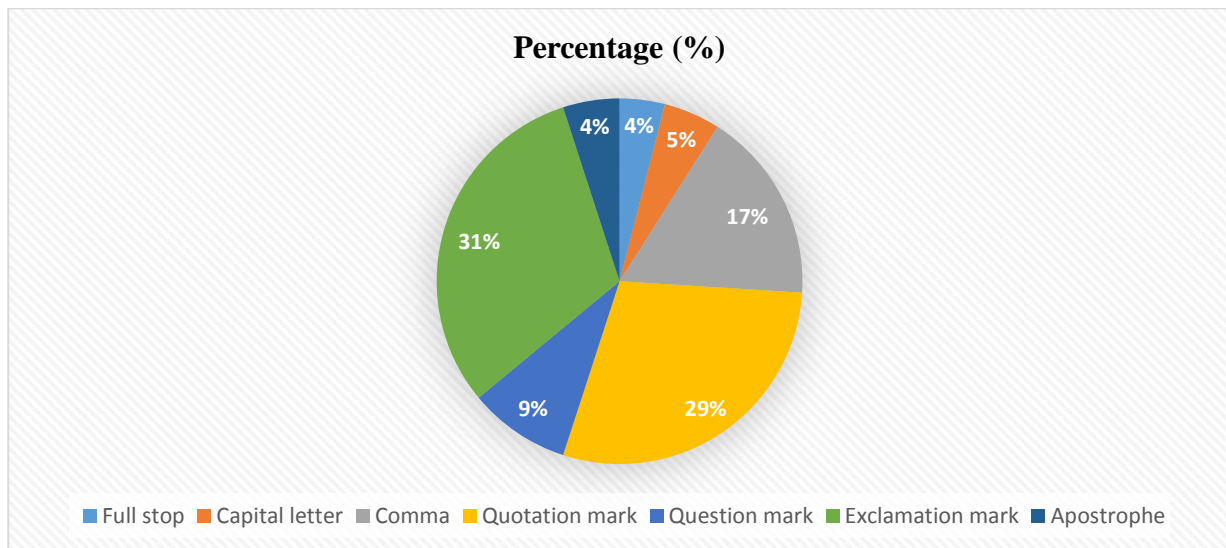


Figure 3: Percentages of punctuation errors during the essay test

From Figure 3, the most incorrectly used punctuation mark was an exclamation mark, with 31% and the least incorrectly used punctuation marks were the full stop and apostrophe with 4% each.

Summary of the findings

The study findings revealed that most learners did not know how to use quotation marks, exclamation marks, commas and question marks correctly during writing. Poor teaching methods, lack of appropriate teaching aids,

lack of updated resources, laziness and ignorance among learners were identified as the main contributors to poor teaching and learning of punctuation marks in ESL. One teacher, during the interview session, proposed that all the upper primary English teachers should come together to discuss and find the best methods and approaches towards the teaching and learning of punctuation marks. The study also revealed that there were no updated teaching and learning resources of ESL at Shapwa Primary School.

Discussions

Teacher's questionnaires

Responses given by teachers indicated that most learners seemed to have difficulties in using quotation marks, apostrophes, commas and exclamation marks. The two teachers explained that most Grade 7 learners found it difficult to use punctuation marks adequately when writing. However, some learners have mastered the proper use of a full stop (period) and question marks correctly during writing. This is in full conformity with Cummins' (2015) theory of Second Language Acquisition supported by Kolas (2019) who argued that the most commonly mistaken and incorrectly used punctuation marks among upper primary learners were "a comma and exclamation marks". In most instances, learners would use a comma instead of a full stop.

Unstructured interview questions

Factors hindering effective teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English as a second language

As teacher A indicated, most punctuation marks in ESL were used incorrectly as a result of poor teaching methods of punctuations. This was in agreement with Ali (2020) who argued that punctuation errors among learners are caused by lack of practice on punctuation marks, lack of teaching punctuations within context, lack of checking of punctuation errors and lack of error corrective feedback on punctuation errors. In addition, one of the interviewed teachers indicated that teachers failed to use the most effective and appropriate teaching aids whenever they presented this topic. This affects the learning process on punctuation marks. Fareed and Ashraf (2016) have affirmed that ineffective teaching and learning of punctuation marks is attributable to various factors including untrained teachers, ineffective teaching aids and methods, examination systems, lack of writing practice,

overcrowded classrooms and low motivation among learners.

Overall, the two teachers have explained that some learners were lazy and ignorant when it came to using punctuation marks. Most learners hardly concentrated in class when the punctuation topic was presented. Learners always think punctuation marks are easy. At the back of their minds, they think that learning punctuation marks is tedious and boring. Teacher B indicated that the study materials provided by the Ministry of Basic Education, such as English textbooks for teachers and learners, did not have many challenging activities on the topic of punctuation marks. They were out-dated. However, teachers should not wait for the government to always provide books. Sometimes the provision of books takes long. Teachers must come up with their own effective teaching and learning resources i.e., using internet and reading different books on punctuation marks for effective implementation of punctuation marks teaching.

Suggestions on how to improve the teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English as a second language

As suggested by Ochako (2019), it is imperative to organise workshops for Grade 7 English teachers to train them on various teaching methods, not only on punctuation marks, but other related English aspects. Secondly, teachers should try to come up with plenty of effective teaching materials to teach punctuation marks as this might attract learners' attention. As suggested by one of the interviewed teachers, teachers should equally make an effort to provide extra English materials for teaching and learning of punctuation marks and not merely rely on the government for the provision of these materials.

Cummins, in his theory of Second Language Acquisition, has argued that an error is attested to insufficient or ineffective teaching and learning at any school. He further maintained that for teaching and learning to take place effectively and efficiently at any school, teachers need to frequently utilise varied teaching strategies and techniques. This study conforms well to Cummins' (2015) theory of Second Language Acquisition. Therefore, teaching methods and strategies like remedial teaching and "Slap the Board" by Ochako (2019) should take centre stage among teachers and learners, not only at Shapwa

Primary School, but at various schools in Oshana region and elsewhere in Namibia. This is crucial for the mastery of punctuating sentences, paragraphs and essays by ESL learners (especially the 7th graders at Shapwa Primary School). The Ministry of Education should also provide updated books and other teaching and learning materials to enable effective teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English as a second language as suggested by one of the teachers.

Results of learners' administered essay test

By looking at the essay test results, there is a mismatch between teachers' responses and the learners' incorrect use of punctuation marks. The test results revealed that most learners struggled to use exclamation marks, question marks, quotation marks and commas correctly during writing. The highest percentage of the incorrectly used punctuation is the exclamation mark with 31% and the least is the apostrophe and full stop with 4% each. However, teachers' results indicated that about 60% of the learners never used apostrophes correctly. The test also showed that learners knew the proper use of apostrophe as only 4% of the apostrophe errors were detected. Additionally, it was also found that few learners did not know how to write punctuation symbols correctly. For example, writing the quotation marks facing the opposite direction and writing a comma in a shape of an apostrophe. The test was out of 20 and nobody scored 100%. The highest mark obtained was 13 out of 20, and the lowest was 6 out of 20.

Conclusion

This study investigated the factors hindering effective teaching and learning of punctuation marks among upper primary teachers and learners and the best strategies that ESL teachers can use to improve the teaching and learning of punctuation marks in English as a second language in the Oshana region. The researcher concluded that most learners found it difficult to use exclamation marks, quotation marks, commas and question marks correctly during writing. This could be attributed to lack of teaching and learning resources, poor teaching methodologies on punctuation marks, lack of teachers' training and ignorance among learners.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made

based on the study findings:

- English teachers should provide remedial teaching to address the problems faced by learners in the usage of punctuation marks until the stage of mastery.
- The Ministry of Education should organise ESL experts and advisors to compile advanced teaching aids and resources to be distributed to schools countrywide in Namibia and particularly in Oshana region.
- ESL teachers should be offered in-service training and workshops at the beginning of each academic trimester in order to gain mastery of teaching punctuation marks.
- ESL teachers should be encouraged to use their cognitive and creative skills to design and implement effective teaching of punctuation marks rather than waiting for rescue from the Ministry of Education and other educational stakeholders.
- English L2 teachers, especially in the Oshana Region, should organise teams and peer observations at least twice per trimester to orient one another on the teaching of ESL inclusive of punctuation marks. Rotational facilitation of the teaching of punctuation marks within the region of Oshana should be encouraged.
- Due to limited time, and the worldwide pandemic (COVID-19), the researcher did not conduct the study in various schools and involved more participants from different schools and other regions. Therefore, future research in this study need to be populated and extended countrywide, not only in the Oshana region.

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