

A PERSPECTIVE ON PUNCTUATION

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Since punctuation is an integral part of writing and according to Marland “arguably the most important technical aspect, and one that has been a least successful part of formal education” (1977: 203), the teacher of English as a second language or as a foreign language has the responsibility of endeavoring to make punctuation as pragmatic as possible in language instruction. In his argument that traditional grammar instruction “has been ineffective in improving students’ writing or speaking competence,” Andrews states that “other language conventions [among them, punctuation] have been included in school curricula in a similarly ill-begotten manner. Within the optional varieties of punctuation, for example, one choice will be selected as the *correct or preferred* choice” (1993:86-87).

What does the language teacher, therefore, do about punctuation? I support Marland’s contention that “our theory of punctuations has to be much better, so what instruction we do judge fit to give is not only accurate, but also useful because it refers to fundamentals and can thus be applied to other occasions” (p.203). Marland mentions five fallacies from which punctuation teaching has suffered:

1. “Since the teaching of grammar is out, punctuation should not be taught”;
2. “Punctuation is all a matter of personal taste, and so cannot be taught”;
3. “Concentration on mechanical aspects of language inhibits creativity, and therefore punctuation should not be taught”;
4. “For the less able it should be ‘first things first,’ and any consideration of punctuation is an excessive burden for such pupils”; and
5. “Punctuation is unnecessary in any case.” (pp. 203-205)

The fact that one may have a choice as to the correct or preferred punctuation use and also the fact that we have our beliefs that there is a “discrete and fixed code of ‘right’ pronunciations, labels for things and ideas, sentence patterns, and punctuation conventions” (Andrews p. 128), does not mean that the teaching of punctuation is irrelevant, unnecessary, or will necessarily be botched up.

K-12 ESL instructors need to consult with the English language arts departments as to punctuation priorities so that both ESL and regular English teachers (as well as teachers in other subject areas) are working from the same principles. In this way there will be uniformity of use. It is essential, of course, that the general framework be from the standpoint of fundamental principles. Many ESL/EFL textbooks on the market have useful information on punctuation that a teacher can adapt to his or her instruction. College level textbooks on writing generally follow the same punctuation conventions in terms of usage, and this information could be helpful to

ESL instructors at the adult/college level. (See, for example, *Grammar Troublespots* by Raimes, and *Refining Composition Skills* by Smalley and Hanks).

Marland (p. 205-6) suggests that a theory of punctuation should be sufficient to incorporate the “complexities of real language, but simple enough for use in all subject classes.” He recommends that punctuation be analyzed in terms of “function, not sign” and explains:

The common analysis by sign (e.g. “a capital letter is used to start sentences and for the names of persons or places”) confuses quite separate functions. The fullstop [period] ending a sentence is quite different from the one showing an abbreviation. Instead of the uses of the semi-colon, we might, for example, show seven ways of marking off a sense group, or the three ways of inserting interruptions (commas, dashes, brackets), or three ways of indicating a word or phrase has been borrowed for a special use. In this analysis the emphasis would be on the way we must group words to make sense. Ungrouped words are mere puzzles, and wrongly grouped words are nonsense.

For example, the sense groupings mentioned are indicated by: the comma, the semicolon, the bracket, the fullstop [period] with space and upper case letter, the paragraph indentation (or extra horizontal space), the space or signs for section divisions, and, the chapter ending space.

It is quite obvious that these signs are a hierarchy of meaningful “groupings from the phrase to the chapter.” Here the space is considered a sign, for it is used to indicate meaning to the reader. Paragraphs used to be marked by a sign in the margin but indentation is now employed instead. The period as “the major, sense group marker . . . is always followed either by an upper-case letter or by space to the end of the line (to show the end of the paragraph).” Marland proposes that the merger of the period and upper-case letter be taught from the first, and explained as a duo separating sense groups.

In our college ESL classes, we handle punctuation at the beginning of the semester in terms of its function in a sentence. Students are given examples of different types of sentences—simple, compound, complex, etc.—with the relevant punctuation. Students practice punctuating further examples on their own. They are then required to compose their own sentences and punctuate accordingly. It is pointed out to students that writers use a variety of sentences in their writing, and students are encouraged to do likewise in their written composition assignments. With practice and concentration, students become adept at applying sentence variety to their essays. I can see the applicability of this approach at the intermediate/advanced levels of ESL. Meanwhile, students are improving their skill at punctuating sentences.

Since much practice is required for students to achieve mastery in punctuation, throughout the semester spot reviews of punctuation are done to help students apply

what they have learned. It does not require too much time and effort on the part of the teacher and students to, for example, demonstrate how different punctuation can be applied in correcting the following compound sentence (comma splice):

(1) **She likes cats a lot, she does not like dogs.**

One can punctuate the sentence by using a semicolon; a comma with a correlative conjunction, a conjunctive adverb; and a period:

(2) **She likes cats a lot; she does not like dogs.**

(3) **She likes cats a lot, but she does not like dogs.**

(4) **She likes cats a lot; however, she does not like dogs.**

(5) **She likes cats a lot. She does not like dogs.**

Students may be asked how item (5) is different from sentences (1) to (4). It is composed of simple sentences of course; the rest are compound constructions. Complex sentences are used to demonstrate when a comma is used and when not.

Punctuation is a significant technical side of writing, and students, particularly intermediate and advanced students, need to know the reasons why it is necessary to adhere to writing conventions for any language they are learning. Proper punctuation does help eliminate those communication problems whose source is improper punctuation. The available research indicates that punctuation is used by the best students who have been taught it (Heath, 1962). To return to Andrews' concerns about "discrete and fixed codes" of rightness (p. 128), it is true that different experienced writers seem to have more liberty with punctuation use, but since they are skilled at what they do, they know when to break rules. Unskilled writers need to be equipped first, and then as they become more experienced, they too can break rules they know can be broken.

References

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