

Vietnamese EFL Learners' Common Errors in Using Punctuation in Writing

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Article information	Abstract
Article history:	<i>English punctuation plays a crucial role in conveying meaning and clarity in written communication. Proficiency in punctuation is essential for effective language expression, especially for Vietnamese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This is particularly important for Vietnamese learners due to the significant differences in punctuation rules between Vietnamese and English. The use of correct punctuation marks ensures that ideas are organized coherently, facilitating comprehension for readers. Despite its significance, learners, particularly those at the intermediate level, may encounter challenges in mastering the intricacies of English punctuation. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine: (1) the familiarity of intermediate Vietnamese EFL learners with English punctuation, (2) the recurring punctuation mistakes in EFL written compositions, and (3) the underlying causes contributing to punctuation errors in the written work of Vietnamese learners. The study involved 41 participants, comprising intermediate EFL learners enrolled in an English Centre in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Data was collected through a punctuation proficiency assessment, essay submissions, and an interview. The findings revealed that the majority of intermediate EFL learners possess a moderately proficient grasp of English punctuation. Predominant punctuation errors encompass improper use of commas, periods, ellipses, and semicolons, as well as instances of missing semicolons, commas, and periods. The most frequently occurring errors are observed in semicolons, followed by commas and periods. Four overarching factors contributing to these punctuation errors include deficiencies in linguistic competence, limited knowledge of English punctuation rules, inattention to punctuation during the writing process, and a dearth of practice.</i>
Keywords:	
Punctuation errors	
Punctuation mistakes	
Punctuation knowledge	
Punctuation proficiency	
Writing	

INTRODUCTION

Punctuation, a fundamental aspect of language structure, plays a pivotal role in effective communication and comprehension. The nuanced and intricate rules governing punctuation,

This paper was specially selected to be published from the FPT Conference of Language and Education (FCLE) that ran from 20 to 21 January 2024 at FPT University's Can Tho campus in Vietnam.

however, present a challenge for individuals learning the English language, often leading to a plethora of errors in written expressions (Hirvel et al., 2012; Huyen, 2020; Raba, 2012). Past research has delved into this issue, employing various methodologies to investigate the difficulties learners face in correctly employing punctuation marks.

Raba (2012) focused on the participants' use of punctuation marks in their writing, revealing common errors such as the overuse of commas instead of periods and misuse of semicolons. Huyen (2020) extended this exploration to Vietnamese students, exposing punctuation errors as a common challenge among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Meanwhile, Hirvel et al. (2012) conducted a study on English as a Second Language (ESL) students and demonstrated a generally favorable disposition towards punctuation but highlighted persisting challenges, particularly in using periods, commas, and semicolons effectively.

In alignment with this broader context, the present study aims to further investigate punctuation errors among intermediate EFL learners. Employing a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods, the research endeavors to evaluate students' understanding of punctuation, identify prevalent errors in English essay writing, and scrutinize the underlying factors contributing to these errors. This examination is crucial, as punctuation not only serves as a grammatical guide but also aids in conveying the intended meaning of a sentence.

Despite possessing knowledge of punctuation rules, students often fail to integrate these rules into their writing consistently. Punctuation errors, once made, often go unnoticed by the individuals committing them, yet these seemingly inconspicuous errors can significantly impede readers' understanding of the composition's message (Benzer, 2010).

Recognizing the significance of punctuation in language acquisition and the challenges faced by EFL learners, this study emerges from a synthesis of existing literature and empirical observations. The objective is to provide a comprehensive analysis of learners' punctuation knowledge, categorize common errors in English essay writing, and unearth the root causes behind these recurrent punctuation challenges. In doing so, the research aims to contribute valuable insights to the pedagogical approaches addressing punctuation difficulties among EFL learners, ultimately fostering enhanced writing proficiency.

To investigate EFL learners' knowledge of using punctuation and their common punctuation errors in English writing, and major causes leading to their errors, the researchers attempted to find out the answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent do intermediate EFL learners understand the use of English punctuation?
2. What are the common punctuation errors found in intermediate EFL learners' essays?
3. What are the primary causes of their punctuation errors?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Punctuation

According to Samson (2014), punctuation enables us to clarify statements and communicate better with readers. Noris (2022) categorized punctuation into different terms such as period/full stop (.), comma (,), semicolon (:), hyphen (-), “n” dash/ “m” dash (--), dot (for the net) (www.helsinki.fi), decimal point (2.5), parentheses/ brackets (()), braces/ curly brackets ({}), exclamation mark (!), question mark (?), Slash, slant line, diagonal, stroke, virgule (/), backlash (\), apostrophe ('), quotation marks (” ” ; ” ”), ellipsis dots(. . .) asterisk (not comic asterix!) (*), superscript (Soon¹⁵), subscript (H_2O).

Common errors of punctuation

Comma splices involve the incorrect use of a comma to create a compound sentence by combining two or more simple sentences. Superfluous commas are often added, leading to over-punctuation and comma splices. Marcat et al. (2022) surveyed Spanish learners and identified common punctuation errors, including the omission of commas in over half of cases and significant misuse of periods and commas. In Vietnam, EFL learners frequently make two punctuation errors: missing punctuation, which leads to lengthy sentences, and misusing commas, semicolons, and periods, resulting in fragmentation and comma splices.

Common causes leading to punctuation errors

Ancker (2000) summarized three causes of punctuation errors in second language writing as follows:

Interference from the native language

Interference refers to the use of a native-language pattern or rule which leads to an error or inappropriate form in the target language. Learners may assume that the target language and their native language are similar. Then they will over-generalize the rules of their native language and the target language (Nguyen, 2017).

An incomplete knowledge of the target language

Most errors are a result of incomplete learning which is caused by the fact that the second language speaker half-learned a structure, a rule or a word or an expression or any other feature of the target language that is only partially correct (Tran, 2011).

The complexity of the target language

Language learners have difficulty with a certain aspect partly due to the complexity of rules of that aspect in English. Ancker (2000) stated that certain aspects in English are problematic for some learners, and it may be because the rules of their native language are quite different from English, whatever their native language is.

Fossilization

Fossilization is a normal and natural stage for many language learners. It occurs when learners reach a satisfactory level of competence in the target language and are not concerned about persistent errors that do not hinder communication (Ancker, 2000; Brown, 2000).

Several researchers have investigated the causes of punctuation errors. Benzer (2009) identified various reasons among Turkish students, including disregard for punctuation rules, insufficient foundational knowledge from elementary school, differences between the native and target languages, and exposure to inaccuracies in media. Additionally, students often lack self-criticism when reflecting on their writing and punctuation. Similarly, Tran (2011) noted comparable issues among Vietnamese students, attributing errors to interference from the native language and inadequate teaching methods. Teachers and students frequently overlook sentence structure and punctuation rules, exacerbating these problems.

These factors - lack of linguistic competence, limited knowledge of English punctuation, inattention to punctuation, and fossilization - are commonly observed in English writing classrooms

Related studies

Aydin et al. (2012) investigated the impact of native language interference on punctuation and capitalization errors among Turkish EFL students at Kafkas University. They analyzed 300 papers from 32 intermediate students and 225 papers from 29 upper-intermediate students. The results revealed that both groups committed fewer interference errors compared to general errors, with interference errors decreasing as proficiency increased (20.3% for intermediate students and 17% for upper-intermediate students). The study concluded that Turkish EFL students' punctuation and capitalization errors often originated from L1 habits. To address this, it recommended explicitly and comparatively teaching punctuation and capitalization to reduce L1 interference.

Alamin and Ahmed (2012) conducted a study on syntactical and punctuation errors in the technical writing of first-year male science students at Taif University, Saudi Arabia. Despite focusing on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), their findings revealed that punctuation errors in technical writing were similar to those found in general English. The study analyzed quizzes, homework, and exams from 100 students who had studied English for 5 - 10 years in secondary school. Common punctuation errors included improper use of commas and semicolons, omission of full stops, and infrequent use of question marks and hyphens. These errors were attributed to both interlingual interference (influences from the students' native language) and intralingual interference, which stemmed from the developmental learning process of technical English. The researchers recommended revising the ESP course to better address the needs of science students by incorporating appropriate teaching materials and syllabi tailored to technical writing.

Awad (2012) investigated common punctuation errors among English majors at An-Najah National University, administering a test to a stratified random sample of 100 students (45 males and 55 females). The study found that the most frequent errors included overusing commas instead of periods, incorrect use of capital letters, misuse of quotation marks, and improper use of semicolons. There were no significant differences in punctuation errors based on gender or department, but academic level did influence error rates. Both Awad and teaching staff emphasized the importance of all punctuation marks in written communication courses.

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Mullina (2022) analyzed punctuation errors made by students in academic writing in English to explore the underlying reasons and propose potential solutions. Data was collected from 56 English essays written by participants as their final assignment for a writing course. Errors were identified, quantified, and categorized as either intralingual or interlingual, with the reasons for these errors discussed in the context of relevant literature. The findings revealed that students frequently misused commas and tended to commit interlingual errors, although intralingual errors caused by the target language were also evident. Based on these findings, the study recommended detailed instruction on punctuation marks in the target language, emphasizing both differences and similarities between the native and target languages to improve students' understanding and usage.

Tran (2011) conducted a contrastive analysis to examine common errors in English and Vietnamese writing among Vietnamese learners, analyzing writing samples from high school students and adult learners in southern Vietnam. She identified four major error types: sentence structure, punctuation, plural-singular noun forms, and tenses, with sentence structure and punctuation errors being the most prevalent. Learners frequently overused commas, resulting in comma splices and run-on sentences, misused full stops, leading to sentence fragments, and struggled to differentiate between commas and semicolons. Additionally, some learners omitted punctuation entirely, rendering their writing confusing. Tran attributed these issues to the interference of Vietnamese language rules and inadequate teaching methods, which failed to emphasize sentence structure and punctuation. To address these challenges, she recommended revising the syllabus to dedicate more time to teaching these fundamental aspects before progressing to paragraph and essay writing.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This descriptive study employed a mixed-methods research approach, incorporating a punctuation test, an analysis of essay submissions from EFL intermediate learners, and interviews. The objective was to assess participants' familiarity with punctuation rules, identify prevalent punctuation errors in their written essays, and explore the underlying causes of these errors. A convenience sampling technique was used to select the participants.

Participants

The study involved 41 students enrolled in an EFL course at a private English center in the Mekong Delta. Of the participants, 28 were female (68%) and 13 were male (32%), aged between 16 and 25. Four participants were high school students, while the remaining were university students from a variety of majors, including Tourism, Building Engineering, Finance and Banking, General Medicine, Pharmacy, Plant Protection, Fishery, History, French Language Education, Mechanical Engineering, Food Technology, and Civil Construction.

Regarding the participants' background in punctuation knowledge, they had studied English for over eight years. However, a significant number of students (88%) reported that they had not attended any courses or lessons where English punctuation was taught intensively. Only three participants mentioned having read some articles about English punctuation marks, while two participants did not provide any information about their background knowledge of punctuation usage.

Research instruments

Three methods of data collection were employed: a punctuation test, essay submissions, and interviews. These instruments aimed to assess the participants' ability to use punctuation, identify common punctuation errors in their written essays, and explore the underlying causes of these errors.

The punctuation test

A 100-point punctuation test was administered to assess the participants' proficiency in using punctuation in English essays. The test consisted of three parts. Part 1 included 20 multiple-choice questions, where participants were asked to select the correct punctuation mark for each item. Part 2 focused on identifying and correcting errors. Part 2A was worth 40 points, with one point for identifying an error and another for correcting it. Part 3 was a matching task that involved 16 statements about the theoretical usage of punctuation in English essays, with 2.5 points awarded for each correct answer. The test was conducted in both Vietnamese and English, with a time allocation of 60 minutes. It was graded using a correct/incorrect scoring method, followed by conversion into a 100-point scale based on the 10-point grading system.

The writing test

The study aimed to explore punctuation errors in English writing by having participants write an essay on the topic 'The Effects of Computers on Human Life.' This topic was selected for its relevance to students' lives, encouraging self-reflection, and providing an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of English grammar, including the use of compound and complex sentences. Participants were given one hour to complete the task without access to dictionaries, course textbooks, grammar books, or English writing guides.

The interview

To identify common causes of punctuation errors, the researchers conducted a four-question interview with the participants. Ten participants, selected for having the lowest punctuation test scores, were invited to attend face-to-face interviews conducted in Vietnamese to ensure comfort and confidence. The responses were transcribed into English for analysis. The questions ranged from general confidence in using punctuation to specific difficulties with different punctuation marks, common problems encountered, and perceived causes of these errors.

Data collection

The punctuation test was first piloted with 18 students who had similar characteristics. Based on the pilot results, the test was revised, edited, and necessary changes were made to improve its clarity, comprehension, and reliability. In the initial version of the test, Part 3 required participants to write one or two functions of the given punctuation marks. However, the sample students found this task difficult and were unable to answer the questions. The reason cited was that they did not know the exact functions of punctuation.

The researchers revised the questions in Part 3 of the test. In the new version, Part 3 was transformed into a matching task, where participants had to match the correct punctuation with its usage. The revised test was reviewed by two English teachers for clarity and comprehension. However, both teachers found Part 3 still challenging for the participants to understand. Since the pilot students lacked understanding of punctuation usage in English, they were unable to match the correct punctuation with its usage. Given that the purpose of the test was to assess participants' knowledge of punctuation, the researchers revised Part 3 again, making it bilingual with both English and Vietnamese. The final version of the test consisted of three parts with a total of 56 questions.

The software SPSS 20.0 was used to analyze the obtained data. After the test was revised, a descriptive statistics test was conducted to calculate the reliability of the punctuation test. The reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .85$) indicated high reliability.

The interviews were conducted after all 41 punctuation tests had been evaluated. Ten participants, selected for scoring the lowest on the punctuation test, were invited for individual face-to-face interviews. These interviews were conducted informally in Vietnamese. The data collected was carefully recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English for analysis.

RESULTS

Participants' knowledge of using punctuation

To examine the participants' knowledge of punctuation, the fifty-six-item test was used.

Table 1
Mean scores of the participants' punctuation test

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
The participants' knowledge of using punctuation	41	38	92	65.27	12.99

The test results presented in Table 1 show a significant range of scores among the participants, with the minimum score being 38 and the maximum score 92. The mean score (M) is 65.27, which exceeds the average score of 50. Based on the test scores, the participants' level of punctuation knowledge is categorized into six groups according to the grading scheme of the Ministry of Education and Training. This classification is shown in the table below.

Table 2
Summary of participants' scores range

Score ranges	No. of participants
Excellent (90-100)	2
Very good (80-89)	3
Good (70-79)	12
Average (60-69)	10
Below average (50-59)	11
Fail (<50)	3

Table 2 provides a summary of the total number of participants across various categories, based on their score ranges. As shown, most participants scored within the below-average to good range. Two participants achieved exceptional results on the test. However, three participants, accounting for 7% of the total, were unsuccessful, indicating a deficiency in their understanding and application of punctuation in English writing.

To gain a deeper understanding of the punctuation test results, the scores from each section were analyzed individually. A detailed explanation of each component of the test - including selecting appropriate punctuation, identifying and correcting punctuation errors, and matching punctuation with its correct usage - is provided below.

Participants' ability to identify correct punctuation

In the first phase of the examination, participants were asked to select the appropriate punctuation mark from a set of four options to complete each sentence. A descriptive statistics test was used to analyze the participants' proficiency in choosing the correct punctuation marks. The results of the descriptive statistics test are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Participants' ability to identify correct punctuation

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Participants' ability to identify correct punctuation	41	0.55	0.95	0.78	0.10

A descriptive statistics test was conducted to determine the average score of the participants' ability to correctly identify punctuation marks. The findings revealed a mean score of 0.78, exceeding the accepted score of 0.5, which represents the average score for Part 1 of the test. In this grading scale, one point is awarded for a correct answer and zero for an incorrect answer. The results indicated that the participants demonstrated a general ability to accurately identify and select the appropriate punctuation mark to complete the sentence. A frequency test was employed, and the results showed that 89% of the participants selected the correct answers.

A one-sample *t*-test was conducted to assess whether the mean score of the participants' ability to recognize appropriate punctuation differed significantly from two values: 1.0, representing high accuracy in punctuation use, and 0.5, representing the average mean of accurate use. The analysis revealed that the average score of the sample ($M = 0.78$) differed significantly from both 1.0 ($t = -14.3$, $df = 40$, $p = .00$) and 0.5 ($t = 18.76$, $df = 40$, $p = .00$). This suggests that the participants demonstrated proficiency in recognizing accurate punctuation, with most selecting correct responses and a minority making errors. The score ranges for the participants in Part 1 are presented in the following table.

Table 4
Participants' score ranges of correct punctuation identification

Score ranges	No. of participants
Excellent (90-100)	9
Very good (80-89)	14
Good (70-79)	12
Average (60-69)	5
Below average (50-59)	1
Fail (<50)	0

The score ranges for the first section of the test for all 41 participants are displayed in Table 4.3. Most participants achieved high scores, with 9 falling into the exceptional category. Additionally, 14 participants obtained very good scores, while 12 others received good marks. Only five participants had average scores, with one scoring in the range of 50 to 59%. No participants failed this section. This outcome indicates that the participants generally possessed the ability to identify and select the appropriate punctuation mark to complete the sentence.

Participants' ability to identify and correct errors

In the second part of the test, the participants were tasked with identifying and correcting punctuation problems. Their ability to recognize and rectify these issues was assessed using a descriptive statistical test. The results of this test are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Participants' ability to identify and correct errors

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Participants' ability to identify and correct errors	41	0.08	0.98	0.62	0.2

From Table 5, it can be observed that the participants' ability to identify and correct punctuation errors was moderate. The mean score for this section ($M = 0.62$) was higher than the overall mean score of the study ($M = 0.5$) on a correct/incorrect scale. However, a few participants struggled to identify and correct errors, as reflected by the minimum score of 0.08. The one-sample t-test confirmed the hypothesis that the mean score ($M = 0.62$) significantly deviated from 1.0 ($t = -11.86, df = 40, p = .00$). The test results also revealed a significant difference ($t = 3.8, df = 40, p = .00$) between the mean score ($M = 0.62$) and the test value of 0.5, which represents the average score of the test. These findings suggest that the participants demonstrated a fair level of proficiency in recognizing and correcting punctuation errors.

A comparison between the participants' ability to identify errors and their ability to correct errors was carried out, as shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6
Comparative analysis of error identification ability and error correction ability

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Participants' ability of error identification	41	0.10	1.00	0.75	0.20
Participants' ability of error correction	41	0.00	0.95	0.49	0.24

The average score of the participants' proficiency in identifying punctuation problems ($M = 0.75$) is significantly greater than the average score of participants' proficiency in rectifying punctuation errors ($M = 0.49$). This suggests that the participants were able to identify and discover the mistakes, but they lacked knowledge on how to rectify them. There was a participant who was unable to rectify any of the punctuation issues that he had observed. Consequently, he received a score of zero in this section, and the lowest average score in this section was $M = 0.00$. Table 7 provides a comprehensive comparison of the score ranges for error identification and error correction, highlighting the differences between the two portions.

Table 7
Comparing participants' score ranges of the participants' ability to identify and correct errors

Score ranges	No. of participants	41
	Error identification	Error correction
Excellent (90-100)	5	2
Very good (80-89)	16	3
Good (70-79)	10	6
Average (60-69)	3	3
Below average (50-59)	4	7
Fail (<50)	3	20

The disparity in the number of participants across the score ranges for the two sections - error identification and error correction - indicates a significant difference in the participants' ability to recognize versus correct punctuation errors. While most participants were successful in identifying the errors, with only three failing to do so, a large number struggled with error correction. Specifically, 20 participants were unable to correct the errors they identified.

Participants' knowledge of punctuation

The final section of the test aimed to assess the participants' theoretical knowledge of punctuation. Participants received 2.5 marks for each correct answer and 0 for incorrect ones. A descriptive statistical test was used to calculate the mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation (SD). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 8.

Table 8
Participants' knowledge of punctuation theory

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Participants' knowledge of punctuation theory	41	0.94	2.19	1.54	0.31

The results of the descriptive statistical test indicated that the participants had a reasonably high level of understanding of punctuation theory, with a mean score of 1.54. To determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the mean of this component and two values - 1.25 (the mid-score) and 2.5 (the highest score) - a one-sample t-test was conducted. The test revealed a significant difference between the mean score of this component and the mid-point of 1.25 ($t = 5.84, df = 40, p = .00$), as well as between the mean and the maximum score of 2.5 ($t = -14.33, df = 40, p = .00$). Therefore, it can be inferred that the participants were generally satisfied with achieving a moderate score, as they correctly associated punctuation marks with their appropriate usage, suggesting that the test was suitably calibrated to their skill level. The score ranges, shown in Table 9, confirm this conclusion.

Table 9
Participants' score ranges of knowledge of punctuation

Score ranges	No. of participants
Excellent (90-100)	0
Very good (80-89)	5
Good (70-79)	4
Average (60-69)	17
Below average (50-59)	10
Fail (<50)	5

Table 9 shows that, apart from five participants who did not perform well in punctuation theory, the remaining participants received satisfactory ratings. Most participants fell into the below-average category, with 10 individuals, while 17 participants scored at an average level. Four participants achieved a good score, and the remaining five participants earned very good scores. Overall, the results indicate that the participants had a reasonably solid understanding of punctuation theory.

Participants' common errors in using punctuation

The overview of the participants' punctuation errors

The objective of this study is to investigate common punctuation errors made by students when writing essays. To achieve this, each of the 41 compositions written by the 41 participants was carefully examined, sentence by sentence, to ensure adherence to the punctuation rules of Standard English. All errors were thoroughly identified and categorized, with the errors being listed and classified according to their punctuation types.

In the 41 essays submitted by the participants, a total of 1,997 punctuation marks were identified, which were categorized into 11 different types. Of these, punctuation marks were used correctly 1,789 times, while they were misused 208 times. Additionally, several punctuation marks were omitted by the participants in their compositions. To provide more details on the frequency of punctuation issues in the participants' essays, Table 10 shows the occurrences of punctuation marks, the types of punctuation errors, and the error rates observed in the 41 writing samples.

The data presented in Table 10 shows that the participants primarily used commas, periods, semicolons, and apostrophes in their essays, with frequencies of 857, 743, 107, and 170, respectively. Ellipses appeared 44 times in total. This study also reveals that participants seldom used question marks and colons in their essays. Additionally, markers such as quotation marks, exclamation points, parentheses, and hyphens were rarely employed.

Table 10
Participants' performance on punctuation practice resulting from 41 compositions

Punctuation	Used	Correct	Misused	Omitted
Periods	743	702	41	16
Commas	857	766	91	31
Semicolons	107	86	21	38
Apostrophes	170	160	10	-
Ellipses	44	23	21	-
Question marks	29	21	8	-
Colons	27	17	10	1
Quotation marks	7	6	1	-
Exclamation marks	5	4	1	1
Hyphens	5	4	1	-
Parentheses	3	3	-	-

Regarding the frequency of punctuation errors, Table 10 shows that the most common errors were related to commas. Specifically, there were 91 instances of commas being misused and 31 instances of commas being omitted. Periods also presented frequent issues, with 41 instances of misuse and 16 instances of omission. Semicolons were the third most common error, with 59 instances of mistakes. Less frequent errors included misuses of ellipses (21 instances), apostrophes (10 instances), colons (10 instances misused and 1 omitted), and question marks (8 instances misused). Errors involving exclamation marks, quotation marks, parentheses, and hyphens occurred only rarely.

In addition to the misuse of punctuation, omission was another significant issue. The most common omissions were observed in the use of semicolons (38 instances) and commas for clause demarcation (31 instances). The absence of periods, leading to run-on sentences, was also a notable error, occurring 16 times.

An in-depth analysis was conducted to compare the ratio of errors to occurrences for the most frequently used punctuation marks: commas, periods, semicolons, and apostrophes. The distribution of errors across these four punctuation categories in the 41 compositions is presented in Table 11.

Table 11
The percentage of punctuation errors

Punctuation	Punctuation occurrences	Error occurrences	Percentage of errors (%)
Periods	743	57	7.7
Commas	857	121	14.2
Semicolons	107	59	55.1
Apostrophes	170	10	5.9

Table 11 displays the percentage of errors for the four punctuation marks. Semicolon errors accounted for the largest proportion, representing 55.1% of the instances. The error occurrences for commas and periods were 14.2% and 7.7%, respectively. Apostrophe errors made up 5.9% of all apostrophe usage. Due to the extensive use of commas in the participants' essays, comma errors were also notably frequent.

Table 12
Analysis of comma errors

Type of comma errors	To separate the list	Parenthetical	To demarcate clauses
Total number of occurrences	31	10	50
Percentage of errors (%)	36	11	55

As shown in Table 12, many participants (55%) made errors in properly using commas to separate clauses. This is due to the nature of writing, where sentences often contain multiple clauses that require commas to separate them or to mark discourse. However, the need for commas to separate items in a list or clauses in series, or to denote parenthesis, is less frequent. Commas were often used incorrectly to separate clauses that lacked coordinating conjunctions, such as for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so (commonly referred to as FANBOYS). Additionally, there were many errors in the use of commas to separate lists, totaling 31 instances (36%). In contrast, errors in the use of parenthetical commas were less common, accounting for only 11% of the errors.

Types of punctuation errors in the participants' writing performance

The participants primarily used periods and commas in their written compositions. This study classified punctuation problems into two main categories: misuse of punctuation and omission

of punctuation. The most common errors were found in the use of semicolons. Other frequent errors included the misuse of commas, periods, and ellipses. These types of errors seem to be common among Vietnamese learners when writing in English. While learners make various punctuation errors, the focus is on the most prevalent issues: improper use and omission of punctuation.

Punctuation missing

Omission of punctuation marks (e.g., missing commas, semicolons, and periods) is a frequent error among students in English writing. This mistake often results in run-on sentences that are excessively long and complicated.

Semicolon missing

Furthermore, the participants often neglected to use a semicolon or a comma to separate distinct clauses when they were joined by conjunctive adverbs such as *otherwise*, *besides*, *hence*, *moreover*, *consequently*, *for example*, and *however*. Several instances of this issue can be found in the students' essays:

The participants' omission of semicolons:

*Using computers bring us many disadvantages for example, it is harmful to our health.
Using computers bring us many advantages besides it causes some inevitable problems.*

Correct sentences and punctuation marks:

*Using computers bring us many disadvantages; for example, it is harmful to our health.
Using computers bring us many advantages; besides, it causes some inevitable problems.*

The participants omitted necessary punctuation marks when combining two independent clauses, leading to run-on sentences that were difficult to comprehend. The following samples illustrate these errors in their compositions.

The participants' omission of semicolons:

*The invention of computer is great most people in the modern world use computers to work or to study.
Binh asks his father for a new computer then his father agrees to buy it for him.*

Correct sentences and punctuation marks:

*The invention of the computer is great; most people in the modern world use computers to work or to study.
Binh asks his father for a new computer; then his father agrees to buy it for him.*

Comma missing

In addition to missing semicolons, the omission of commas is a significant issue in the participants' essays. Commas should be used to separate phrases connected by conjunctions such as *for, and, nor, but, or, still*, and so. However, many participants failed to place a comma before these conjunctions. For example:

My brother has had a computer and he uses it all day.

Ngoc spends all day playing computer games so he cannot focus on his studies.

Other instances where participants neglected to use commas include non-restrictive clauses, where commas are used to separate clauses, and appositive phrases, where commas set off parenthetical expressions. Commas are often used to separate words that provide additional, non-essential information to the main idea. In such cases, a pair of commas should be used. However, participants frequently used only one comma or omitted one entirely. This error was found repeatedly in students' essays. For example:

Minh, my sister's son is a game addict.

Binh's house which is next to my door to mine has a game room.

Using computers for a long time, of course causes brain troubles.

Correct sentences and punctuation marks:

Minh, my sister's son, is a game addict.

Binh's house, which is next to my door, to mine has a game room.

Using computers for a long time, of course, cause brain troubles.

Period missing

Occasionally, the participants forgot to add periods, resulting in overly long and verbose sentences. This may have occurred because they were focused on the ongoing ideas and unintentionally neglected to include the necessary punctuation mark. Several sentences below lack proper punctuation to signal the conclusion of each statement.

The story of my younger brother shows that most young people still think of computers mainly as a source of games. Every day he spends many hours playing games on computers he neglects his studies, refuses to meet friends and he even forgets his meals.

Generally, the absence of punctuation leads to considerable confusion. The previous examples show a relatively low number of punctuation omissions; however, they still highlight the participants' lack of proficiency in punctuation usage.

Punctuation misusing

In fact, there are instances where this error overlaps with the omission of punctuation. Run-on sentences occur for two reasons: first, participants fail to use a period to end a complete sentence; second, they incorrectly substitute a comma for a period. In the latter case, participants make the mistake of misusing commas and periods.

Misuse of periods

Improper use of periods often results in incomplete or fragmented phrases. This error typically occurs when participants place a period before completing a thought. Two common instances of period misuse can be identified. First, participants use a period to end a statement that lacks either a subject or a predicate. As a result, many sentence fragments are produced, as illustrated in the following examples:

Computers, the greatest invention of human in 20th century.

Many advantages of using computers.

Furthermore, the participants' essays demonstrated a common misuse of periods, especially when they were mistakenly placed after dependent clauses in complex sentences. Sentence fragments often result when an independent clause is preceded by a subordinating conjunction, such as *after, although, because, before, if, since, though, that, unless, when, where, or while*. In many cases, dependent or subordinate clauses are incorrectly detached from the sentence to which they belong. Numerous examples of this error were found in the participants' essays.

Because they (computers) are very necessary.

After using computers for a long time.

While children play computers more and more.

Although buying a computer is not costly.

Misuse of commas

The incorrect use of commas can be categorized into three groups, as outlined in the literature. These include the misapplication of commas in parenthetical phrases, the misapplication of commas in separating lists, and the misapplication of commas in demarcating clauses. A common mistake made by many participants in parenthetical statements is the use of a single comma instead of two. This misuse of commas is equivalent to the error of omitting commas altogether. Consider the following sentence, which contains errors:

Minh, my sister's son is a game addict.

Manny applications on computers which are interesting to children, make children addicted.

Some people, actually use computers more than ten hours a day.

It should be noticed that these sentences are awkward. The only way to fix these errors is to offset the entire phrase with commas.

Minh, my sister's son, is a game addict.

Manny applications on computers, which are interesting to children, make children addicted."

Some people, actually, use computers more than ten hours a day.

Regarding the misuse of commas in separating lists, many participants tended to use a comma before the last item in the series, without a conjunction, as shown in the following examples:

Many students spend their time playing computer games, watching movies on computers.

People use computers to relax, to study, to work.

Indeed, it is necessary to include a conjunction before the final item in a series to complete the sentence, and a comma before the conjunction is optional. However, the participants used a comma in the absence of a conjunction, leading to the misuse of commas in separating lists.

The most concerning punctuation errors among EFL learners are the misuses of commas in demarcating clauses. A significant number of students incorrectly used commas to connect two independent clauses instead of semicolons. This type of error, known as a 'comma splice', occurs in compound sentences. A semicolon can be used to connect independent clauses in a compound sentence when no conjunction, such as *and* or *but*, is present. Below are several instances of comma misuse exhibited by the students:

The participants' misuse of comma:

Many students use computers to search information, many teachers use computers to prepare the lesson plan, many people use computers to entertain.

Minh likes playing games on computers, he plays games all day sometimes he quits his class to play games.

Correct sentences and punctuation marks:

Many students use computers to search information; many teachers use computers to prepare the lesson plan, and many people use computers to entertain.

Minh likes playing games on computers; he plays games all day. Sometimes, he quits his class to play games.

Misuse of semicolons

Many EFL learners mistakenly conflate conjunctive adverbs, such as *otherwise*, *besides*, *hence*, *moreover*, *therefore*, and *for example*, with subordinating conjunctions like *because*, *though*, *until*, *when*, *since*, and *while*. As a result, students may incorrectly use semicolons to separate

sentences joined by conjunctive adverbs and commas to separate a subordinate clause from the main clause. Additionally, a small number of students mistakenly employ both a semicolon and a coordinating conjunction, such as *and, but, or, yet, or so*, to separate two independent clauses in a compound sentence. Multiple instances of semicolon misuse were found in students' essays. These sentences require revision, with commas being replaced by semicolons. For example:

Computers are very useful; so each person should have one.
Computers help human save much labor; so many people are unemployed.
Since computers were invented; they help human do a lot of wonderful things.
When people are overworked; they can play computer games to relax.

Misuse of apostrophes

Apostrophes are essential for clarity in writing, but they can also lead to punctuation errors. In the participants' writing exercises, apostrophes were used to indicate possessive forms and contractions. Several common contractions replace the *o* in *not* with an apostrophe, such as *didn't, doesn't, shouldn't, hasn't, aren't, wouldn't, haven't, and isn't*. Some individuals incorrectly use an apostrophe to replace the letter *i* in the word *is*, resulting in contractions like *it's, there's, he's, and she's*. Additionally, the letter *a* in the word *are* is replaced with an apostrophe in contractions such as *we're* and *they're*. The participants demonstrated proficient use of apostrophes in many contractions. However, a small number of participants struggled with using apostrophes for possession. For example:

Some children do not care about their parents's advice.
Playing computers games affects study's Binh.
Some people use computers to study English and improve their's job.

Indeed, the participants were supposed to know how to use an apostrophe in possessive forms to avoid this technical error.

Misuse of ellipses, colons and question marks

Ellipses were erroneously used after a list of nouns and phrases to indicate the omission of other comparable items. Many participants frequently misuse ellipses ('...') as a substitute for *so on* or *etc.* at the end of a list. As a result, ellipsis misuse occurs. The following examples, extracted from the participants' written work, clearly illustrate this punctuation mistake.

Nowadays, a lot of new technological innovations such as cellphones, computers, digitals... play an important role in human life.
People can use computers for many purposes such as: working, studying, entertaining...

The misuse of colons stems from learners' misunderstanding of their proper usage in English writing. A significant number of participants frequently used the phrases *such as* and *for example* to introduce lists in their written work, consistently placing a colon after these phrases. In addition to this, the colon was often used incorrectly in other contexts as well. For example:

People can use computers for many purposes such as: working, studying, entertaining... In business, business people benefit a lot from using computers. For example: they work faster, communicate faster, and solve problems faster. Many people: from children to adult can use computers.

Regarding the misuse of question marks, several participants mistakenly used a question mark in indirect questions. This error likely arises from their inability to distinguish between direct and indirect questions. The following examples illustrate this common mistake in the students' work:

*Everyone knows how are important computers?
Children don't know how harmful computer?*

Causes leading to the participants' punctuation errors

After collecting data from punctuation and writing tests, the researchers interviewed ten participants with the lowest punctuation scores to investigate the causes of their errors. Using a semi-structured interview format, the researchers asked about the importance of punctuation and their confidence in using 12 different punctuation marks. Seven participants expressed a lack of confidence, while three felt confident. Most participants found periods and commas easy to use but struggled with semicolons. The participants identified several issues, including not recognizing punctuation errors, using punctuation incorrectly, and placing periods in incomplete sentences, which resulted in sentence fragments. Three participants admitted to neglecting punctuation, often omitting periods and question marks. Additionally, some participants had difficulty distinguishing between direct questions and indirect speech, leading to improper use of question marks. The interviews uncovered several underlying causes for their punctuation difficulties.

Lack of linguistic competence, particularly in syntax and discourse knowledge, is the primary cause of the participants' punctuation errors. All ten students acknowledged that they did not fully understand sentence structures or the grammatical aspects of punctuation. Participants A and C explained that:

I write many fragment sentences because I think I do not have good knowledge about sentence structures, especially how to write compound sentences and complex sentences. I need to learn sentence structures again.

I must review complex sentences which is the main source of my punctuation errors.

Secondly, the participants demonstrated a lack of attention to punctuation marks while writing. They seemed to underestimate the importance of punctuation and its role in places where it is necessary. Six participants viewed punctuation marks as minor details, considering them less important than other aspects of writing, such as content and organization. As a result, the participants appeared to disregard punctuation. Two participants, A and H, explained:

The time allowance for one writing task is limited, so I have no time to care about punctuation. It is better to use commas and periods, and then focus more on the content of the writing.

Thirdly, another cause contributing to the participants' misuse of punctuation is their limited knowledge of punctuation marks. Six out of the ten interviewees mentioned that they did not fully understand the meanings and functions of all punctuation marks.

There are more than 10 punctuation marks with a lot of functions. I cannot remember them, so I use periods and commas only. To me, writing short sentences and popular punctuation may help me avoid a lot of errors.

I know some functions of punctuation basing on what I know in Vietnamese. Sometimes, I use a punctuation thanks to my feeling, and I am not sure whether it is correct or not.

Unlike the six participants mentioned previously, the remaining four interviewees stated that they had read extensively about punctuation and found punctuation theory not particularly complicated. However, they noted that certain punctuation marks, such as hyphens, colons, and quotation marks, were not used regularly in their writing. As a result, they often found themselves confused when needing to apply these punctuation marks.

The final cause of punctuation problems, as mentioned by participants G and J, is the carelessness of writers. Carelessness frequently leads to punctuation omissions, which are considered mistakes rather than errors. Therefore, carelessness as a cause of punctuation issues is not considered a valid factor in the current study.

In summary, four common causes of punctuation errors were identified: lack of linguistic competence, limited knowledge of English punctuation, insufficient attention to punctuation during writing, and lack of practice. Based on these findings, the participants expressed the need to study punctuation and sentence structures early in a writing course.

DISCUSSION

Participants' knowledge of using punctuation

The results of the punctuation test suggest that most students have moderately good knowledge of English punctuation. In other words, the punctuation test results indicate that students are generally accurate in using punctuation (the average score is 65.27) and know how to use punctuation correctly. The punctuation test was at the participants' level, and there were several items that challenged students.

The punctuation test results show that most students at the intermediate level have moderately good knowledge of English punctuation. The results of the punctuation test on learners' knowledge of English punctuation are somewhat inconsistent with findings in previous studies by Alamin and Ahmed (2012), Awad (2012), Hirvela et al. (2012), and Tran (2012). While these

researchers concluded that lacking punctuation knowledge is the main source of punctuation errors among English learners, the results of the punctuation test suggest that English learners have moderately good knowledge of punctuation.

The inconsistency of the findings may be due to the different measures and instruments used to evaluate learners' knowledge of punctuation. Whereas Alamin and Ahmed (2012), Awad (2012), and Tran (2012) used learners' writing tests to identify common punctuation errors and their causes, the current study employs a punctuation test, which is a recognition test, to assess learners' punctuation knowledge.

Based on the analysis of each part of the punctuation test, the participants found the multiple-choice task to be the easiest compared to the matching task and the error identification and error correction tasks. This finding can be explained by the prevalent testing methods in the local context. EFL learners are familiar with multiple-choice tests, which are commonly used in their schools, enabling them to develop techniques to choose the correct answers from the four options.

In addition, the participants' ability to identify punctuation errors was better than their ability to correct those errors. This may be because the participants in the current study were at an intermediate proficiency level in English. At this level, their abilities are primarily suited to recognition tasks, while production tasks, such as correcting errors, remain challenging for intermediate EFL learners.

The findings align with those of Benzer's (2010) study. Benzer (2010) concluded that although most EFL learners know the rules regarding punctuation, they do not habitually use various punctuation marks. Consequently, learners often make punctuation errors in their compositions.

Participants' common errors in using punctuation

Punctuation errors appear to be common among Vietnamese learners in English writing. Evidently, learners make a wide range of punctuation errors. In accordance with the findings of Alamin and Ahmed (2012), the common punctuation errors identified in this study include the improper use of commas and semicolons, omission of full stops, and infrequent use of question marks and hyphens. Despite the differences in English proficiency levels—pre-intermediate versus intermediate—of the students in the two studies, the specific punctuation errors were repeated.

It may be concluded that EFL learners experience difficulties in using punctuation marks in writing regardless of their English proficiency. These common punctuation errors also lead to run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and comma splice errors, which align with the findings of Tran (2011).

In addition, high-frequency punctuation error categories included the misuse and omission of semicolons, commas, and periods. Generally, semicolons, commas, and periods are sources of difficulty, which is somewhat similar to the findings of Aydin (2002), Awad (2012), and Tran

(2012). However, punctuation errors identified in the current study occurred most frequently with semicolons. While commas were found to be the most problematic punctuation mark in several previous studies on punctuation error analysis (Awad, 2012; Tran, 2011), semicolons appeared to pose a greater challenge for the Vietnamese students in this study. Therefore, this result was somewhat inconsistent with the findings of previous studies.

The misuse and omission of semicolons can be attributed to students' incomplete knowledge and the complexity of punctuation rules in the target language. Most participants misunderstood the usage of commas and semicolons, which require significant effort to master. Commas and semicolons are among the most challenging punctuation marks, often demanding special attention from EFL learners (Tran, 2011). Many comma errors seem to result from the fact that commas have numerous uses, making it difficult for EFL learners to memorize and apply them correctly. Consequently, the students tended to rely on habitual usage, frequently misusing or omitting commas.

Errors in using periods often lead to run-on sentences and sentence fragments. These issues may stem from EFL learners' incomplete understanding of sentence structures. In general, punctuation is undeniably challenging for learners to remember and apply in their writing. Semicolons, commas, and periods pose the greatest difficulties, as errors in their use are significant. Students' mistakes in using semicolons, commas, and periods often result in run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and comma splices.

Improper punctuation can disrupt the flow of ideas and alter meaning, while proper punctuation not only ensures clarity but also engages readers in one's writing (Raba, 2012). Therefore, EFL learners should intentionally focus on improving their understanding of English punctuation to use it correctly in their writing.

Common causes leading to participants' punctuation errors

Four major causes leading to students' punctuation errors found in this study relatively support the finding on causes of error in second language writing of Ancker (2000).

Firstly, the correct use of punctuation depends on both linguistic skills and knowledge of punctuation conventions. A lack of linguistic competence is a significant cause of punctuation errors, as most EFL learners lack fundamental knowledge in this area and tend to use punctuation instinctively in English writing. For instance, correctly using hyphens in compound words requires an understanding of word categories and the knowledge that a hyphen connects the components of a compound noun. Similarly, the proper use of quotation marks necessitates an understanding of direct and indirect quotations, awareness of when the quotation concludes, and the ability to monitor and correct errors in output.

In the teaching context where this study was conducted, punctuation is not emphasized in English writing instruction. Sentence structures are typically introduced only at the beginning of the syllabus, and Vietnamese teachers tend not to focus on teaching punctuation or correcting students' punctuation errors. This may be due to several factors. One possibility is

that Vietnamese teachers tolerate punctuation errors because they are accustomed to seeing them frequently or may find them challenging themselves. Another reason could be the current emphasis on communication and meaning over form and accuracy, leading teachers to consider punctuation errors less problematic since they rarely cause significant communication breakdowns. As a result, most students have limited knowledge of punctuation and do not fully understand the meaning or functions of all punctuation marks.

Secondly, the participants appear to disregard punctuation when writing. Students tend to focus solely on the ideas and organization of their writing and primarily use commas and periods. While these punctuation marks are indeed the most commonly used, other punctuation marks, such as semicolons, colons, and ellipses, can significantly enhance the quality of written pieces.

The tendency of Vietnamese students to avoid using a variety of punctuation marks may be attributed to several factors. One possible explanation is the use of an error-avoidance strategy - a communication strategy employed by EFL learners when they encounter difficulties in managing communication or effectively conveying information (Jabar & Ahmed, 2023). When EFL learners find it challenging to use a specific sentence structure alongside appropriate punctuation, they may resort to simpler words or structures instead.

Another potential reason for this tendency is time constraints. Due to limited time, participants often prioritized content and neglected punctuation accuracy in their writing.

Finally, some English learners rely on English punctuation out of habit or assume that English punctuation rules are similar to those in Vietnamese. In some cases, students tend to transfer Vietnamese punctuation rules to English, basing their punctuation strategies on prior experience rather than learned rules. Vietnamese and English share similar punctuation systems (Pham & Usaha, 2016). The usage of commas and semicolons is a typical example of this. Both punctuation marks are used to link two independent clauses in a compound sentence. However, a comma is only used when it is followed by a coordinating conjunction such as *and*, *but*, or *or*. When adverbs such as *however*, *nevertheless*, or *moreover* are used, they must be preceded by a semicolon, not a comma. Using a comma in this situation constitutes a punctuation error. English learners may apply their knowledge of correct Vietnamese punctuation usage to improve their use of English punctuation.

CONCLUSION

Regarding students' knowledge of punctuation, most students demonstrated moderately good understanding and were able to use punctuation correctly. The punctuation test was appropriate for their level, although several items still posed challenges. Additionally, the researchers found that students were better at identifying punctuation errors than correcting them. The participants primarily used periods, commas, semicolons, and apostrophes in their writing. The study identified two main types of punctuation errors: punctuation misuse and punctuation omission. Common errors included misuse of commas, periods, ellipses, and semicolons, as well as the

omission of punctuation marks in student compositions. Specific omissions that occurred repeatedly included the omission of terminal periods, semicolons to separate clauses, and commas after introductory words and in a series. Among the most frequently used punctuation marks, errors occurred most often with semicolons. Other high-frequency error categories included commas, periods, and apostrophes. And several participants found ellipses to be particularly problematic.

The results of the interviews revealed five major causes of students' punctuation errors. The first cause is a lack of linguistic competence, as students did not have a solid understanding of sentence structures or the grammatical aspects of punctuation. Secondly, the participants seemed to pay little attention to punctuation when writing. EFL learners tended to focus more on ideas and organization in their writing. Additionally, many students had limited knowledge of punctuation and were unaware of the meanings and functions of all punctuation marks. As a result, the error avoidance strategy may be employed by these English learners when writing compositions. This means several participants only used punctuation marks they were familiar with or relied on those they felt more confident using. Another cause of punctuation errors is the lack of practice with rarely used punctuation marks, such as quotation marks, parentheses, colons, question marks, and exclamation marks. This lack of practice likely led to confusion when using these punctuation marks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study on punctuation problems in writing has limitations, specifically its narrow focus on quantifying the overall number of errors and their frequency. The study's limited sample size restricts the generalizability of conclusions regarding Vietnamese EFL difficulties in punctuation, thereby demanding further research including Vietnamese EFL students. Moreover, the study's emphasis on punctuation problems in writing implies that future investigations should investigate the correlations between punctuation and writing proficiency in alternative settings and with diverse EFL learners to get more precise findings.

IMPLICATIONS

This study unveils that learners frequently misapply punctuation marks, signifying a deficiency in their precise usage of punctuation marks. English educators should prioritize the significance of punctuation in written communication and enhance students' understanding of its proper application. Exercises focusing on punctuation usage and sentence patterns are crucial in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons. These exercises serve to review technical aspects such as spelling and punctuation before students embark on writing assignments. Teachers can employ class activities to eradicate errors and augment writing precision, such as engaging students in group exercises where they spot and rectify punctuation errors in given paragraphs. Furthermore, it is advisable to include sentence patterns and punctuation in the English curriculum, as several writing coursebooks do not have specific sections dedicated to these subjects. This guarantees that pupils acquire the fundamental abilities to compose accurate sentences prior to advancing to the task of composing paragraphs and essays.

LIMITATIONS

The first limitation of this study is the small sample size, as it involved only 41 non-major English students at a local English language center. This relatively small sample may not adequately represent the diverse population of Vietnamese EFL learners, reducing the generalizability of the findings to learners in different language learning settings. Additionally, all participants were enrolled in a single English Centre located in the Mekong Delta, which further limits the applicability of the conclusions to learners from other regions or educational institutions that may face different challenges or have access to different resources. Another limitation is that the analysis exclusively focused on identifying and quantifying typical punctuation errors at the sentence level, without examining the relationship between these errors and the overall quality of writing. As a result, the impact of punctuation on the quality of writing was not emphasized. To overcome these limitations, future research should aim to replicate the study with a larger, more diverse sample and include learners from various regions and institutional contexts. Moreover, conducting cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal studies, and correlation analyses would provide a deeper understanding of the influence of punctuation errors on the quality of writing.

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