

## Punctuations used by Filipino and Thai students in their essays: A corpus-based inquiry

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**Abstract:** Writing, being one of the most vital skills to develop, is of great importance. It is imperative that one needs to master not just the structure but also the functions of punctuation marks. It is undeniable that punctuation marks seem confusing and are used interchangeably among Thai and Filipino students. Consequently, the written output of the students becomes incomprehensible due to the misuse or the absence of punctuation. This study aimed to determine the average common errors of Filipino (ESL) students and Thai (EFL) students when it comes to using punctuation marks in writing essays and to find out the significant difference. The researchers also pointed out the possible causes of why Thai and Filipino students committed such errors. To further illustrate the results of the study, the researchers opted to present the errors individually through tables and charts and interpreted the figure based on the total percentage of individual respondents, and eventually identified the committed error as a whole. There were 30 participants in the research composed of 15 Thai (EFL) students and 15 Filipino (ESL) students. The sources of data were the written essays of the 30 participants. The total percentage was used to treat the data to identify the average punctuation errors committed by the participants and the significant difference in the committed errors between the Thai EFL and Filipino ESL learners. The result showed a significant difference in the punctuation errors committed between Thai and Filipino students with a comma (,) receiving the largest number of errors.

**Keywords:** punctuation marks, errors analysis, writing

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### Introduction

Writing, as one of the productive skills, makes the learning and teaching process challenging to acquire and master, it needs extensive knowledge of some linguistic features and takes an amount of time to come up with an impressive and interesting output. In learning English, all macro skills are important in almost equal measure, but writing undoubtedly transcends the level of difficulty to compare with other skills that even teachers find it difficult to teach among students, and thus writing is not given a much more emphasis particularly the components of a good writing (Rajesh et al., 2019). Writing is a herculean task that demands a lot of effort and time to accomplish if it is done systematically, as Nunan (2003) stated, writing is a mental work of inventing ideas and expressing them to the readers into a clear and organized paragraph. Consequently, in order to produce a good writing piece, planning and modification must be considered such as: choosing the right words, the grammatical structure, and the unity and parallelism between sentences within the paragraph (Wijayatiningsih, 2013).

The complexity of writing skills in a foreign language is difficult to learn, not just the ability to structure the sentence but also the concept of different skills such as stylistics and mechanical skills (Heaton, 1979). The perspective of stylistics is how to manipulate the sentence in a language effectively, while mechanical skill is the ability to demonstrate the mastery of good spelling, punctuation and capitalization (Annisya, 2018; Zidan, 2020). Hence, the focus of this paper is to distinguish the written structure of both Filipino and Thai students respectively in regard to the use and application of punctuation. Thus, other linguistic features might be mentioned especially if it's impacting and conspicuous.

### **Problem and its Background**

Error in using proper punctuation is commonly found in essays among Thai (English as a Foreign Language) and Filipino (English as a Second Language) learners. Without adequate linguistic proficiency in the English language, writing is one of the hardest tasks for both Thai and Filipino students. Adekola and Lawal (2017) states that punctuation marks are the use of conventional signs and certain typographical devices as aids to the understanding of handwritten and printed texts. Students need to learn the details of the English punctuation system, such as when to end a sentence or the proper way to punctuate a question. According to Mccuen and Winkler (2000), punctuation errors occur with the omission or misuse of one of the punctuation marks.

### **Current Status or Issue**

Writing English essays with the use of appropriate punctuation has become a major issue among Thai and Filipino students. It is observed that even if English is a second language in the Philippines, the problem with it comes to the use and application of correct punctuation is still pervasive and dominant, whilst in Thailand, since punctuations do not exist in their written language, tend to apply it in their English essays making their output confusing because of the absence of punctuation. There are some students who use commas and periods interchangeably, and worst, not use any punctuation at all. Thus, this study considered the need to determine the most common errors in punctuation in the essays of Thai and Filipino students as well as the significant difference in terms of their occurrences.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The listed research questions served as a guide in this corpus-based inquiry. It aimed to analyze the errors used by Thai and Filipino students in the application of punctuations in writing essays. More specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: (1) What is the average error in punctuation committed by Thai and Filipino students in their essays?; (2) Is there a significant difference between the average error in punctuation committed by Thai and Filipino students in their essays?

### **Significance of the Study**

The corpus-based research was conducted for some reasons: to scrutinize the common punctuation errors committed by Thai and Filipino students in writing essays; to analyze if there is a significant difference between the average error in punctuation committed by Thai and Filipino students in their essays. The study aimed to find out the average error in punctuation committed by Thai and Filipino students in writing essays and the difference between the errors committed by Thai and Filipino students. Furthermore, the results aimed to provide a basis for addressing the writing challenges of Thai and Filipino students that could lead to their improvement and their proficiency. Thus, the study could also be used as a starting point for

the creation of suitable teaching and instructional materials that will reduce the writing problems of Thai and Filipino students in the future.

### **Related Literature**

Punctuation error committed by Thai and Filipino students is a common issue that occurs in every written output. Thus, this chapter presents the related studies when it comes to omission and wrong usage of punctuations and the functions of punctuations in different areas,

### **Functions of Punctuation Mark**

Punctuation marks are essential in a sentence to deliver the message and convey what is truly meant. Awad (2022) shares three functions of punctuation to help us better understand its purposes and usage: first is the *phonetic function*, which indicates the rhythm, pauses, and tone in a written piece, and since a written document has a tone, Connelly et al. (2005) emphasized that the tone is controlled by commas, semicolons, ellipses, etc. Oftentimes, the tone is not given any importance leading to a misunderstanding between the written text and the readers, but keep in mind that punctuation is like a traffic light that tells us when to continue, to stop, or to slow down. Second is the *grammatical function* in which punctuation is used in direct style, this is where to form interrogation; mark empathic content; highlight syntactic elements; and compose simple or complex sentences, paragraphs, written documents and so on. The third is the *semantic function* which helps learners comprehend the meaning of the text by highlighting them differently than normal text by using bold text, italics, underlining, etc. By means of punctuation, not only readers will be able to understand what the writer is trying to convey with the use of significant words/phrases but also makes readers engrossed in writing (Rumki, 2005). However, it can also interrupt the flow of ideas and alter the meaning of the message if it's used incorrectly.

### **Punctuation Mark Errors in Thai Writings**

The absence of basic Thai punctuations greatly affects their writings in English. Thais do not use punctuations in writing, but they are aware of when to stop at the end of the sentence by having a space to start with a new one. The ambiguity level of a full stop in English is less than the space in Thai, a period may denote as a decimal or indicate a sentence boundary marker, however, the space in that which is the counterpart of the full stop has a more variety of usage such as the end of phrase/clause or placing before/after numerals (Charoenpornasawat & Sornlertlamvanich, 2001). Though there is a number of English punctuations currently used in writing, space is the only punctuation that is noticeable in writing to break between words, phrases, and sentences. This results in the ambiguity of the sentence to which one is being punctuated and since Thai punctuation is limited to the usage of space, this results in misinterpretation between the reader and the writer.

### **Punctuation Mark Errors in Filipino Writings**

The proper use of punctuation has been incorporated and embedded in the English curriculum as early as elementary years. However, the study by Balanga et al. (2016) showed that most students in secondary school are not aware of the use of punctuation marks, particularly the use of commas, and this is due to a lack of practice. This further identifies that one of the root causes of why students could barely use the correct punctuation marks is the lack of mastery of English teachers in the English language system (Ulla, 2019). Teachers tend to focus on other linguistic features, such as grammar and meaning, while the mechanics of writing are disregarded.

## Methods

### Quantitative

Since this methodology employs holistic steps in conducting research work as described by Leedy and Ormrod (2001); and Williams (2013), the researchers conducted the study using quantitative methods in order to quantify and analyze the variable to determine and get the result. This study also involves numerical data to answer some specific questions and explains an issue or phenomenon through the data extracted when analyzing the materials used when conducting the research (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2002).

### Corpus-based

Corpora emerged back in the 1980s with the advent of computer technology, and this would help the study to systematically organize the collection of texts using electronics (Vyatkina & Boulton, 2017), and it becomes easier to determine the emerging issue that you would like to address. Using corpus linguistics, the corpus data, whether it is written or spoken, will help the process of learning language and is also considered essential as a resource in the teaching and learning process (Huang, 2011). The researchers used a written corpus for this study to help them analyze the problem of Thai and Filipino students in writing essays. As cited in Dash (2008), and Crystal (2003) the collection of the linguistic data served as the starting point of description for verifying hypotheses about the language.

### The Participants

The researchers purposely chose 30 secondary students to write an essay. The students were divided into two groups. Fifteen students were secondary Thai (EFL) students from a government school, while the other 15 students were secondary Filipino students from a government school.

### Source of Data

The collection of the pieces of information from this study relied on students' descriptive essays that contain 150-200 words. The researchers spent time with the participants in writing essays. The researchers prepared relevant topics in order to ensure that students would have ideas on what to write, and then the focus was pointed out and exhaustively undertaken.

### Data Analysis

The data collected through writing essays were selectively checked and carefully analyzed. The descriptive essays from the students were from their thoughts about the legalization of cannabis in Thailand for Thai students, and in the Philippines for Filipino students. After through examinations of the students' essays, the punctuation errors committed and the use of periods and comma were encoded. In order to obtain the average and the total percentage of punctuation errors committed by the students, the researcher calculated the result using this formula:

$$\text{Total Number of Individual Errors} \times 100 / \text{Total Errors of All Respondents} \dots\dots\dots 1)$$

## Results and Discussion

### Incorrect Use of Punctuation Marks

By looking at the Table 1, it is clear that most students have difficulties in identifying and choosing the correct punctuation to use in their essays. It also gives a clear overview of what

punctuation marks are students having a hard time, with and whether to use this type of punctuation or not to punctuate the sentence.

**Table 1.** Detailed Illustration of Punctuation errors

Respondents	Period (.)	Comma (,)	Apostrophe (')	Question Mark (?)	Others	Total Number of Errors	Total Percentage of Errors
R-8	3	5	2	2	1	13	6.40%
R-15	5	6	1	1	0	13	6.40%
R-9	3	6	2	1	0	12	5.91%
R-11	4	4	2	2	0	12	5.91%
R-14	5	3	2	1	0	11	5.42%
R-12	4	5	0	0	1	10	4.93%
R-13	3	4	1	1	0	9	4.43%
R-6	2	4	1	0	0	7	3.45%
R-7	4	3	0	0	0	7	3.45%
R-10	2	4	1	0	0	7	3.45%
R-1	2	2	1	0	1	6	2.96%
R-4	2	3	1	0	0	6	2.96%
R-16	3	2	0	1	0	6	2.96%
R-17	2	2	0	2	0	6	2.96%
R-19	3	2	0	1	0	6	2.96%
R-22	4	1	0	0	1	6	2.96%
R-29	3	3	0	0	0	6	2.96%
R-5	2	3	0	0	0	5	2.46%
R-20	2	2	0	1	0	5	2.46%
R-21	2	2	0	1	0	5	2.46%
R-25	3	2	0	0	0	5	2.46%
R-26	2	2	0	1	0	5	2.46%
R-27	3	2	0	0	0	5	2.46%
R-28	2	3	0	0	0	5	2.46%
R-30	2	3	0	0	0	5	2.46%
R-2	1	3	0	0	0	4	1.97%
R-3	1	2	0	0	1	4	1.97%
R-18	2	0	0	2	0	4	1.97%
R-23	2	2	0	0	0	4	1.97%
R-24	2	2	0	0	0	4	1.97%
Total	80	87	14	17	5	203	100%

As shown in Table 1, the data were distributed in terms of the total punctuation errors committed by the students and its equivalent percentages. Respondents 1-15 are Thai students while respondents 16-30 are Filipino students. Thus, the researchers arranged the order to identify the students who got the most errors in writing essays. The table also gives a clear picture that most Thai students got the highest number of punctuation errors. Among the five punctuation categories, comma ranks first when it comes to punctuation errors; it is observed that some students omit the use of commas (87) to separate words and clauses.

*e.g. \*Cannabis is goodforhealth but it should moderate use.*

*Suggestion: Cannabis is good for our health, but the use should be moderated.*

*e.g \*The benefits of cannabis is prevent cancer fight diabetes and lost weight*

*Suggestion: The benefits of cannabis are: to prevent cancer, to fight diabetes, and help to lose weight.*

Another noticeable error from the students is to omit period (80) at the end of the sentence.

*e.g. \*The cannabis can damaged the life of minor the government suggest to stop it,*

*Suggestion: Cannabis can damage the lives of minors. The government suggested stopping it.*

Other errors that were observed during the analysis were the omission of apostrophes (14) *e.g. "Its important"* instead of *"It's important."* or *"\*The students future will damage if abuse it."* instead of *"The students' future will be damaged if they abuse it."* and question mark (17) *e.g. "Do we need to use it."* instead of *"Do we need to use it?"* or *"\*Is cannabis important..."* instead of *"Is cannabis important?"* Other punctuation issues (5) that were found in their essays are the misuse and non-use of ellipses, parenthesis, colon, semicolons, etc.

It is undeniable that most of the students' errors committed focused on the use or non-use of commas, as Guinda (2002) and (Awad, 2022) supported the results wherein students had a similar problem in this category (Balanga et al., 2016).

**Table 2.** Classification of Punctuation Errors

Common Punctuation Errors	Total Punctuation Errors of Thai Students	Total Punctuation Errors of Filipino Students	Total Number of Errors	Total Percentage of Errors	Total Average of Errors
Comma (,)	57	30	87	43%	2.9
Period (.)	43	37	80	39%	2.67
Question Mark (?)	8	9	17	8%	0.57
Apostrophe (')	14	0	14	7%	0.47
Others	4	1	5	3%	0.17
<b>Total</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>100%</b>	

**Classification of Punctuation Errors**

The summary of the data, as shown in Table 2, presents that Thai (English as a Foreign Language) students committed the most and highest number of punctuation errors in comma (,) with a total number of 57, when compared to Filipino (English as a Second Language) students with a total number of 30, followed by period (.) committed by Thai (EFL) students with a total number of 43, whereas Filipino (ESL) students with a total number of 37. This is not the case with the punctuation errors in a question mark (?) where Filipino (ESL) students committed more errors with a total number of 9, while Thai (EFL) students with a total number of 8. It is also shown in the table above that Filipino (ESL) students have not committed any punctuation errors in an apostrophe ('), whereas Thai (EFL) students with a total number of 14. Other punctuation errors are classified as (others), committed by Thai (ESL) students with a total number of 4, while Filipino (ESL) with a total number of 1. It is evident that Thai (EFL) students committed more punctuation errors with a total number of 126 as stated earlier that writing skills in a foreign language are difficult to learn and punctuation do not exist in their written language when compared to Filipino (ESL) students with a total number of 77 as the students need more practice in writing and using the correct punctuation marks. Moreover, Tuaycharoen (2003), sees that Thai students commit errors and mistakes because of their limited linguistic knowledge.

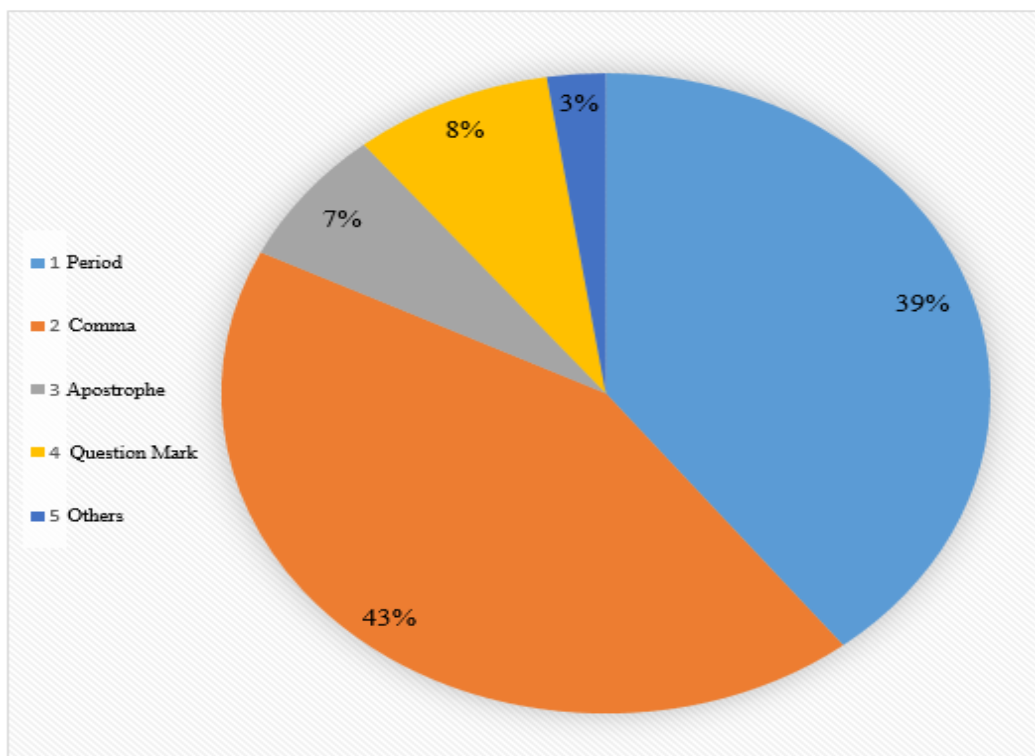


Figure 1. Total Percentages of Punctuation Errors of Thai and Filipino Students

### Total Percentages of Punctuation Errors of Thai and Filipino Students

Figure 1 shows the total percentage of punctuation errors committed by 30 respondents: 15 Thai English as Secondary Language (ESL) students and 15 Filipino English as Second Language (ESL) students. The figure shows that the most committed punctuation error is the comma at 43%, followed by periods at 39%, followed by the question mark at 8%, then apostrophes at 7%, and lastly, the other punctuation mark with 3% committed errors.

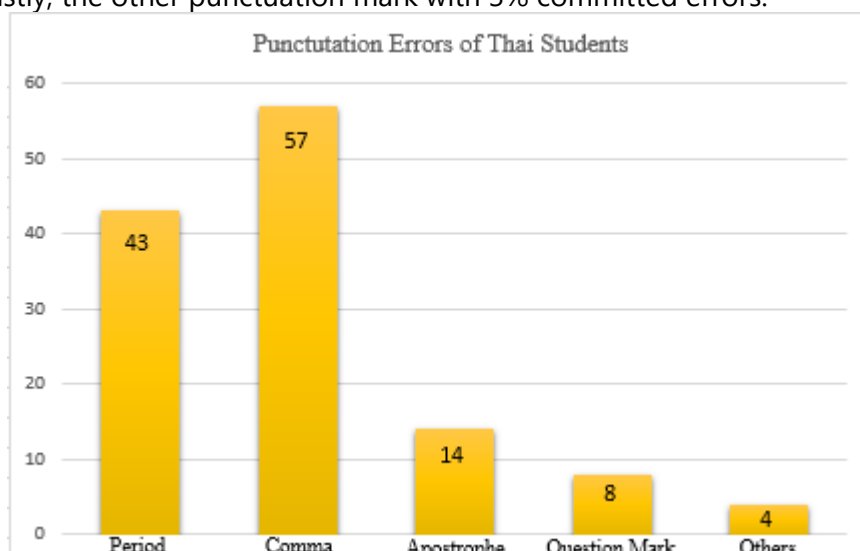


Figure 2. Punctuation Errors of Thai Students

### Punctuation Errors of Thai Students

Figure 2 shows that the most punctuation errors committed by Thai (EFL) students are comma (,) with a total number of 57, followed by a period (.) with a total number of 43. There is a big difference with the punctuation errors in an apostrophe (') with a total number of 14,

followed by question marks with a total number of 8, and classified as others with a total number of 4. It shows that periods and commas are the most common punctuation errors used by Thai students. This happens when there is a misuse of period or they use period and comma interchangeably. This is related to "The Significance of Learners' Errors" by Corder (1967), in which he stated that errors are not only inevitable but an important factor in learning a language.

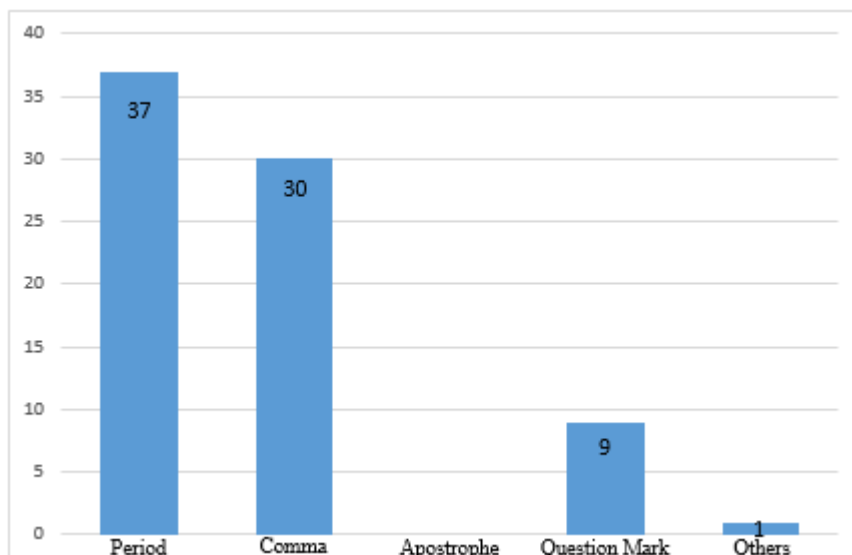


Figure 2. Punctuation Errors of Filipino Students

### Punctuation Errors of Filipino Students

Figure 3 shows the punctuation errors committed by 15 Filipino English as Second Language students. It can be seen that the most commonly committed punctuation error is the period (.) with a total number of 37 committed errors. This is followed by the comma (,) with a total number of 30 committed errors. Among the least committed errors in the use of punctuation is the question mark (?) which shows a total number of 9 committed errors, followed by another punctuation mark which shows a total number of 1 committed error.

Based on Figure 3 the most committed punctuation errors by Filipino ESL students are period and comma which show a large number of committed errors, while the least committed punctuation errors are Question Mark and others. This could possibly be the result of the limited knowledge of Filipino students in the structure and context of sentence construction in the English Language (Nasrudin, 2015).

### Conclusion

Writing is undeniably one of the most challenging skills to acquire. It needs not only the skills in words and structure but also the knowledge in mechanical skills which includes punctuation marks. The researchers conducted the study to find out the most common punctuation errors of secondary students in writing essays, and it was found that errors revolved around commas and periods. It is either the misuse of punctuation or not using it.

Based on the data gathered, it can also be concluded that there is a significant difference between the punctuation errors committed by Thai EFL and Filipino ESL learners. The most common punctuation error is a comma (,) with Thai EFL students committing 57 errors, while Filipino ESL students committed 30 errors. Next is the period (.) with the Thai EFL committing 43 errors and Filipino ESL committing 37 errors. It was followed by an apostrophe where the Thai EFL committed 14 errors compared to zero errors of the Filipino ESL. The least two



committed errors are the question mark (?) with 8 errors committed by Thai EFL and 9 errors committed by Filipino ESL, and others with 4 errors committed by Thai EFL students and one error committed by Filipino ESL students.

Committing punctuation errors is apparently unavoidable since the respondents have limited linguistic knowledge. In addition, Thai EFL learners committed more punctuation errors than Filipino ESL learners. Although the respondents are EFL learners from Thailand and ESL learners from the Philippines, punctuation should be taught correctly with some sort of practice to master its use regardless whether English is a second language or a foreign language.

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