

Punctuation Proficiency, Error Patterns, and Contributory Factors among Grade 11 Learners: Evidence from a Philippine Senior High School

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Abstract

This study examined the punctuation proficiency of Grade 11 learners at AB Advanced Colleges (ABACI) Incorporated, Tarlac City, with emphasis on error patterns, category-specific mastery, and contributory factors affecting punctuation use. Using a quantitative descriptive design, the study involved 60 Grade 11 learners selected through stratified random sampling from six sections. Three researcher-made instruments were employed: a written output task, a punctuation proficiency test, and a Likert-scale checklist on contributory factors. Data were analyzed using frequency counts, percentage scores, and mean scores. Findings revealed an uneven proficiency profile across punctuation categories. Learners demonstrated mastery in ending marks (87.44%), quotation marks (83.33%), and pausing and connecting marks (76.67%), while possession and contraction marks were only nearly mastered (63.33%). Dash and hyphen marks obtained the lowest mean percentage score (37.50%), indicating non-mastery and representing the most critical area of difficulty. Item-level analysis further showed particularly weak performance in selected uses of exclamation points, commas, apostrophes, hyphens, and dash marks. In terms of contributory factors, educational and cognitive dimensions were rated high, suggesting that punctuation difficulties were associated with instructional support, practice opportunities, feedback, attention, recall, and self-monitoring. The findings indicate that Grade 11 learners possess a functional command of basic punctuation but remain weak in less frequent and more rule-sensitive marks. The study recommends explicit instruction, targeted practice, and intervention programs focused on advanced punctuation conventions to strengthen writing accuracy and reading comprehension.

Keywords: *punctuation proficiency, writing skills, reading comprehension, Grade 11 learners, English language learning, punctuation errors, senior high school*

Introduction

Punctuation is not a minor mechanical feature of writing; it is a meaning-making system that structures ideas, clarifies relationships among clauses, and supports coherence in written discourse. When punctuation is used inaccurately, readers may misinterpret emphasis, boundaries, possession, reported speech, and logical connections between ideas. Recent scholarship has also emphasized that punctuation matters not only in formal writing but also in digital communication, where omission or misuse can alter tone and meaning.

Research further shows that punctuation proficiency is associated with broader literacy development. Studies in secondary education found that stronger punctuation awareness and more accurate comma use are linked to stronger reading comprehension, suggesting that punctuation competence supports not only written expression but also text processing and interpretation.

In English learning contexts, punctuation difficulties remain common, especially in areas that require syntactic sensitivity and rule discrimination. Evidence from learner-writing studies has shown persistent

errors in commas, apostrophes, capital letters, and other punctuation conventions, especially when instruction is insufficiently explicit or when writing practice is limited.

This pattern is consistent with the uploaded study conducted at AB Advanced Colleges (ABACI) Incorporated in Tarlac City, which examined the punctuation proficiency of Grade 11 learners across five punctuation categories: ending marks, pausing and connecting marks, quotation marks, possession and contraction marks, and dash and hyphen marks. The study also investigated contributory factors affecting punctuation proficiency and identified intervention strategies to improve it.

Given these concerns, the present article reframes the thesis into a journal-style manuscript. It argues that punctuation proficiency among senior high school learners is uneven rather than uniformly weak: learners tend to perform well in high-frequency, foundational punctuation marks, but they experience substantial difficulty in apostrophe-related forms and dash-hyphen usage, where rule application is more nuanced. This uneven proficiency profile has direct implications for writing instruction, reading comprehension, and school-based literacy intervention.

Methodology

The study employed a **quantitative descriptive research design** to describe and measure the punctuation proficiency of Grade 11 learners without manipulating variables. It was conducted at **AB Advanced Colleges (ABACI) Incorporated, Tarlac City**, during Academic Year 2025–2026. The total Grade 11 population was 150, from which a sample of **60 learners** was drawn through **stratified random sampling** based on section membership. Each of the six sections—Ametrine, Ammolite, Bixbite, Beryl, Amber, and Amethyst—contributed 10 respondents.

Three researcher-made instruments were used. First, learners produced a written output that served as a basis for identifying common punctuation errors. Second, they completed a punctuation proficiency test covering ending marks, pausing and connecting marks, quotation marks, possession and contraction marks, and dash and hyphen marks. Third, they answered a Likert-scale checklist measuring possible contributory factors, specifically educational, cognitive, environmental and social, psychological, and technological influences on punctuation proficiency. The instruments were validated by three experts in the English language study.

Data analysis followed the procedures stated in the source document. The frequency of punctuation errors was used to answer the question on common errors in written outputs. Percentage scores were used to determine overall punctuation proficiency, with the following descriptors: **90–100% = Excellent, 75–89% = Proficient, 60–74% = Developing, Below 60% = Needs Improvement**. Mean scores were used to analyze contributory factors, interpreted as **Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree** across specified score ranges. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, responsible use of data, and avoidance of bias and plagiarism.

Results

The overall results show an uneven punctuation proficiency profile. Learners performed best in **ending marks** with a mean percentage score of **87.44** (“Mastered”), followed by **quotation marks** at **83.33** and **pausing and connecting marks** at **76.67**, both also interpreted as mastered in the summary table. Performance declined substantially in **possession and contraction marks** at **63.33** (“Nearly Mastered”), and was weakest in **dash and hyphen marks** at **37.50** (“Not Mastered”). These findings indicate that learners were strongest in basic terminal punctuation and weaker in punctuation categories requiring more fine-grained grammatical judgment.

Item-level findings reinforce this pattern. For **periods**, seven of ten items were rated “Highly Mastered,” with correct response rates ranging from **87% to 97%**. For **question marks**, all ten items were “Highly Mastered,” with scores ranging from **90% to 100%**, indicating very strong control of interrogative

sentence punctuation. For **exclamation points**, however, only 38% of items were marked, indicating that learners had trouble identifying contexts that warrant emphatic punctuation.

Performance for **comma** and **semicolon** use was mixed but generally stronger than that for apostrophe- and dash-related forms. Comma items ranged from **45% to 92%**, with some items rated “Not Mastered,” “Nearly Mastered,” and “Mastered,” indicating inconsistency in clause separation and list structures. Semicolon items ranged from **68% to 95%**, with most items in the mastered or highly mastered range, suggesting comparatively stronger performance in linking closely related clauses.

For **quotation marks**, learners showed partial but unstable control. Only one item reached the mastered level, while most items were “Nearly Mastered,” and one item fell to **58%** (“Not Mastered”). In **possession marks**, two items were not mastered, including one with only **47%** correct responses, pointing to difficulty in distinguishing possessive forms. In **contraction marks**, scores ranged from **62% to 83%**, suggesting basic understanding but inconsistent execution. In **hyphen marks**, four items were not mastered, with the lowest score at **40%**. The most serious weakness appeared in **dash marks**, where all ten items were not mastered and scores ranged only from **17% to 50%**.

Regarding contributory factors, the study found that **cognitive factors** had the highest mean score (**3.73**), followed by **educational** (**3.63**), **psychological** (**3.59**), and **environmental and social** (**3.46**) factors; all four were interpreted as **Agree**. **Technological factors** had the lowest mean (**3.16**) and were interpreted as **Neutral**, suggesting that technology played a mixed rather than dominant role in punctuation difficulties.

The psychological factor table also showed an important nuance. Although learners agreed that punctuation is important for good writing (**4.00**) and reported that punctuation is interesting and worth learning (**4.03**), confidence-related items were lower, and several anxiety-related statements were rated neutral. This suggests that learners value punctuation but are less certain of their own competence in using it accurately.

Table 1. Consolidated Summary of Punctuation Proficiency, Item-Level Mastery, Contributory Factors, and Proposed Interventions

Major Area	Specific Indicator	Summary of Key Findings	Overall Score / Result	Interpretation	Implication
Overall Punctuation Proficiency	Ending Marks	Learners performed best in ending marks, indicating strong control of periods, question marks, and exclamation points.	87.44%	Mastered	Learners have a strong foundation in basic sentence-ending punctuation.
	Pausing and Connecting Marks	Learners showed generally good performance in commas and semicolons, although some comma items showed difficulty.	76.67%	Mastered	Learners can apply basic pausing and connecting marks but need reinforcement in complex sentence structures.
	Quotation Marks	Learners showed basic understanding of quotation marks but had inconsistent mastery in some items.	83.33%	Mastered	Learners need more practice in direct speech and punctuation placement within quotations.

Major Area	Specific Indicator	Summary of Key Findings	Overall Score / Interpretation	Implication
Item-Level Mastery	Possession and Contraction Marks	Learners showed partial mastery of apostrophe use, especially in possession and contractions.	63.33% Nearly Mastered	Learners need guided practice in singular/plural possession and contraction formation.
	Dash and Hyphen Marks	This was the weakest punctuation category, with learners showing very low mastery.	37.50% Not Mastered	Dash and hyphen usage should be prioritized in intervention activities.
	Period	Most items were highly mastered, with scores ranging from 87% to 97%.	Highest: 97% Lowest: 87% Mastered Highly Mastered	Learners can to generally use periods correctly in sentence construction.
	Question Mark	All items were highly mastered, with scores ranging from 90% to 100%.	Highest: 100% Lowest: 90% Highly Mastered	Learners have excellent command of question marks.
	Exclamation Point	Most items were mastered, but two items were not mastered at 38%.	Highest: 90% Lowest: 38% Mixed Mastery	Learners need reinforcement in recognizing appropriate contexts for emphasis or strong emotion.
	Comma	Learners showed varied performance, with some items mastered and others not mastered.	Highest: 92% Lowest: 45% Mixed Mastery	Comma use in clauses, series, and complex sentences needs further instruction.
	Semicolon	Learners generally performed well, with most items mastered or highly mastered.	Highest: 95% Lowest: 68% Mastered	Learners show good basic control of semicolon usage but still need refinement.
	Quotation Mark	Most items were nearly mastered, with one not mastered item.	Highest: 75% Lowest: 58% Nearly Mastered	Learners need more consistent practice in quotation mark rules.
	Possession Mark	Learners showed difficulty in apostrophe placement, especially in possession.	Highest: 75% Lowest: 47% Nearly Mastered	Instruction should focus on singular and plural possessive forms.

Major Area	Specific Indicator	Summary of Key Findings	Overall Score / Interpretation	Implication
Contributory Factors	Contraction Mark	Learners showed adequate but inconsistent understanding of contractions.	Highest: 83%; Lowest: 62% Nearly Mastered	More practice is needed to improve accuracy in forming contractions.
	Hyphen Mark	Learners showed weak and inconsistent performance in hyphen use.	Highest: 80%; Lowest: 40% Nearly Mastered	Hyphen rules should be explicitly taught using contextual examples.
	Dash Mark	All items were not mastered, showing the most serious punctuation weakness.	Highest: 50%; Lowest: 17% Not Mastered	Dash usage requires intensive remediation and direct instruction.
	Educational Factor	Learners agreed that teachers explain punctuation, provide materials, give feedback, and support learning.	Mean = 3.63 = Agree / High	Instructional support is present but should be strengthened through more targeted punctuation activities.
	Cognitive Factor	This obtained the highest mean among the factors, showing that focus, memory, self-monitoring, and interest affect punctuation learning.	Mean = 3.73 = Agree / High	Learners recognize the importance of attention, recall, and self-checking in punctuation proficiency.
	Environmental and Social Factor	Learners generally agreed that classroom, peer, and family support influence punctuation learning, although home support was weaker.	Mean = 3.46 = Agree / High	Collaborative learning and parental support may help improve punctuation proficiency.
	Psychological Factor	Learners valued punctuation and showed interest in learning it, but confidence and anxiety-related responses were only moderate.	Mean = 3.59 = Agree / High	Learners need confidence-building activities and supportive writing practice.
	Technological Factor	Learners gave neutral responses on	Mean = 3.16 = Neutral Moderate	/ Technology has a moderate or

Major Area	Specific Indicator	Summary of Key Findings	Overall Score / Interpretation Result	Implication
Proposed Interventions		dependence on autocorrect, grammar tools, and digital writing habits.		conditional influence on punctuation learning.
	Punctuation Enrichment Program	A remedial or enrichment program may be conducted weekly to review — punctuation, grammar, reading, and writing skills.	Recommended	This can directly address the least mastered punctuation categories.
	Integration into Reading and Writing Subjects	Short punctuation exercises may be embedded in Reading and Writing — Practical Research subjects.	Recommended	Punctuation practice should be connected to authentic academic writing tasks.
	Department-Led Initiatives	The English Department may conduct activities such as Punctuation Awareness Month, writing contests, and school-wide punctuation clinics.	Recommended	These initiatives can reinforce punctuation learning beyond regular classroom instruction.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the punctuation proficiency of Grade 11 learners is uneven rather than generally poor. Learners showed stronger mastery of basic and frequently used punctuation marks, particularly ending marks, quotation marks, and pausing and connecting marks. This suggests that learners are more proficient with punctuation conventions commonly encountered in reading materials and repeatedly practiced in classroom writing tasks. This finding supports Sun and Wang's (2019) view that high-frequency punctuation marks are more easily recognized and internalized because learners encounter them more often in written texts. Similarly, the learners' strong performance in periods and question marks indicates that they have developed functional control of punctuation marks used to signal sentence boundaries and basic communicative intent. The uploaded results show that learners performed highest in ending marks at 87.44%, followed by quotation marks at 83.33% and pausing and connecting marks at 76.67%.

However, lower performance on possession and contraction marks, as well as dash and hyphen marks, indicates that learners have difficulty with punctuation categories that require more advanced grammatical judgment. Apostrophes require learners to distinguish between possession, contraction, number, and ownership, while hyphens and dashes require knowledge of word formation, emphasis, interruption, and syntactic relationship. The weakest result was recorded in dash and hyphen marks at 37.50%, interpreted as "Not Mastered," while possession and contraction marks obtained only 63.33%, interpreted as "Nearly Mastered." This pattern confirms that learners' difficulty with punctuation is not merely mechanical but also cognitive and rule-based. This agrees with Raheem and Ghafar (2024), who found that punctuation errors among EFL learners often emerge from limited grammatical control and uncertainty in applying punctuation rules in academic writing.

The learners' inconsistent performance in using commas and quotation marks also suggests partial mastery. While learners may understand basic uses of these punctuation marks, they appear less confident when punctuation requires attention to clauses, sentence structure, direct speech, and placement rules. This finding is consistent with Marcet et al. (2022), who reported that comma use is among the more difficult punctuation skills for secondary learners and that punctuation awareness is related to reading comprehension. In this study, the difficulty in comma use may indicate that learners need stronger instruction in sentence structure, clause separation, and idea organization. Since punctuation helps readers interpret pauses, relationships, and meaning, weaknesses in these areas may affect both writing clarity and reading comprehension (Dolean & Prodan, 2024).

The results further show that punctuation proficiency is influenced by cognitive and educational factors. Cognitive factors had the highest mean score of 3.73, followed by educational factors at 3.63. This means that learners themselves recognize that their punctuation difficulties are related to their understanding of grammar, attention, recall, rule application, instructional support, practice, and feedback. These findings support Wang and Han (2022), who emphasized that writing development is affected by both cognitive and psychological dimensions of feedback and instruction. Likewise, Agbayani and Sy (2022) found that corrective feedback can improve learners' writing skills when it is clear, systematic, and properly understood by students. Therefore, punctuation difficulties should not be interpreted only as learner weakness; they also reflect the need for more explicit teaching, guided practice, and meaningful teacher feedback.

The psychological findings are also important. Although learners recognized punctuation as important and worth learning, their lower-confidence responses suggest they may not feel fully capable of applying punctuation rules independently. This gap between awareness and confidence implies that learners value punctuation but lack sufficient mastery and automaticity. Brandmo and Gamlem (2025) emphasized that students' perceptions of feedback and learning support influence academic outcomes, particularly when learners are expected to revise, monitor, and improve their own work. Thus, punctuation instruction should not only focus on rule memorization but also on confidence-building activities such as guided editing, peer review, sentence-combining exercises, and repeated writing practice.

The relatively neutral result for technological factors suggests that technology is not the dominant cause of punctuation difficulty. While digital writing tools may influence punctuation habits, the findings indicate that learners' main challenges are more strongly connected to cognitive processing and educational support. Nevertheless, punctuation remains important even in digital communication, as misuse or omission can alter meaning, tone, and clarity. Ogechukwu and Onebunne (2025) noted that punctuation continues to shape interpretation in digital writing, especially where tone and intention may be misunderstood. This implies that punctuation instruction remains relevant not only for academic writing but also for everyday communication.

Overall, the study indicates that Grade 11 learners possess basic punctuation competence but need targeted intervention in more complex punctuation marks. Their strengths in ending marks show that foundational punctuation skills are present, but their weaknesses in apostrophes, hyphens, and dashes reveal a need for explicit, rule-based, and contextualized instruction. The findings affirm that punctuation proficiency should be treated as a core literacy skill because it supports writing accuracy, reading comprehension, and effective communication. Therefore, a school-based punctuation enrichment program should prioritize the least mastered categories, provide structured practice, and integrate punctuation instruction into authentic writing tasks across English and academic subjects.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that Grade 11 learners at AB Advanced Colleges (ABACI) Incorporated do not exhibit a uniformly low level of punctuation proficiency. Instead, they show **strong mastery of basic terminal punctuation**, moderate proficiency in some pausing and quotation conventions, and **substantial weaknesses in possession, contraction, hyphen, and especially dash usage**.

The most serious weaknesses cluster in punctuation categories that require rule discrimination and grammatical precision, not merely sentence-ending awareness. This indicates that punctuation instruction at the senior high school level should move beyond general writing exposure and toward explicit, targeted teaching of difficult punctuation rules.

The findings also show that **cognitive, educational, psychological, and environmental-social factors** all contribute meaningfully to punctuation difficulties, while the role of technology is more conditional than dominant. Learners still value punctuation and express willingness to improve, which means the conditions for intervention are favorable.

Overall, the evidence supports the conclusion that punctuation proficiency should be treated as a core literacy concern in senior high school, with implications for writing quality, reading comprehension, and academic preparedness.

Recommendations

First, the school should implement a **Punctuation Enrichment Program** as an intensive, school-based intervention that revisits punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure through targeted lessons, guided exercises, and collaborative writing activities. The source study specifically identifies this intervention as a central response to observed weaknesses.

Second, punctuation instruction should be **integrated into the Reading and Writing and Practical Research subjects through short but regular punctuation exercises, especially on apostrophes, quotation marks, the use of commas in complex sentences, hyphenation, and the use of dashes**. This would allow reinforcement of punctuation within authentic academic writing tasks rather than as an isolated drill.

Third, the English Department should organize **department-led literacy initiatives**, such as a **Punctuation Awareness Month**, writing contests, editing activities, and school-wide punctuation clinics. These activities can normalize punctuation practice and reinforce its importance across grade levels.

Fourth, teachers should strengthen **feedback systems** by providing more explicit correction, exemplars, and guided revision opportunities. Research indicates that well-structured teacher feedback contributes to better writing performance and stronger learner understanding, especially when feedback is specific and instructionally aligned.

Finally, future school-based studies may extend this work by examining the relationship between punctuation proficiency and measured writing quality or reading comprehension, and by testing the effectiveness of the proposed interventions over time. Such follow-up research would help move from descriptive diagnosis to evidence-based program evaluation.

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