

Teaching Punctuation

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> Aim

- To identify reasons why some pupils in Year 8 have difficulty with basic punctuation.
- To explore teachers' perceptions of pupils' difficulty with punctuation and their pedagogic strategies for supporting pupils with punctuation problems.
- To suggest strategies which are likely to help pupils use punctuation successfully.

> Dimensions of this Case Study

This study was conducted in a comprehensive school. It involved English and other subject teachers within the school, teachers from a primary feeder school and pupils from two Year 8 classes with reading ages ranging from 8.6 to 14.9. From each of these two classes, six pupils were identified by their English teachers as having significant problems with punctuation. These 12 pupils became the focus of this study.

> Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Punctuation was used with greater accuracy when the pupils were motivated and had a clear sense of purpose and reader, e.g. when they wrote letters and news reports.
- Tests showed that there was no correlation between ability to observe punctuation appropriately when reading aloud and a child's ability to punctuate, conflicting with the widely held view of the majority of teachers in this study.
- Pupils tended to omit punctuation when they became personally involved in their writing.
- Only 27 out of 52 pupils claimed that the purpose of punctuation was to make the meaning clear for the reader.
- The majority of pupils in this study could not define a sentence.
- Primary teachers recognised the importance of children understanding the purpose of punctuation.
- Many secondary teachers addressed punctuation mainly through error correction.
- There was little evidence of pre-emptive teaching of punctuation at the secondary school.
- In teaching punctuation, secondary teachers tended to associate punctuation with sound rather than with sentence structure, which may have added to pupils' problems.

Background

The revised National Curriculum (1995) states that at the end of Key Stage 2 pupils are expected to use full stops, capital letters, question marks, exclamation marks, commas, inverted commas and the apostrophe for possession. This study was prompted by the fact that a significant number of pupils in our school fail to use even basic punctuation accurately: i.e. full stops and commas.

Different aspects of punctuation are problematic in different ways. Omission or inappropriate use of punctuation can be the result of poor understanding of what a sentence is. Pupils often think that punctuation is a layout feature, simply demarcating text and not a grammatical feature, demarcating syntactical blocks.

Researchers have found that pupils recognise sentences because of the presence of full stops and capital letters, but this does not help pupils identify where these punctuation marks should be placed in their own writing; [see *Improving Writing* (1999)]. In addition, recent research: Wray and Lewis (1997) and Hall (1998) suggest that certain methods of teaching punctuation, such as telling children to insert punctuation when they pause or take a breath, are unhelpful

The project investigated pupils' understanding of punctuation and methods employed by teachers to address pupils' difficulties.

Aims

The aims of the study were to:

- investigate the nature and level of difficulty pupils faced in deploying punctuation marks appropriately;
- explore the reasons underpinning these difficulties;
- identify teachers' perceptions of pupils' difficulties and their own pedagogic practices in attempting to teach punctuation; and
- use these findings to suggest positive teaching strategies to improve pupils' punctuation.

Research Methods

Sample

Two classes of year 8 pupils, one class of pupils of average ability and one of below average were set according to their attainment in Year 6 English Key Stage 2 National Tests, their reading ages, and on the recommendation of Year 7 English teachers. Reading ages were assessed using the Schonell Test that measures reading comprehension in children aged 6 to 12.6 years. The teachers identified 12 children, six from each class, as having particular problems with punctuation and these children formed the focus of the study.

Questionnaire

I designed a questionnaire to find out what all the Year 8 pupils thought was the purpose of punctuation. Another questionnaire, to discover how teachers viewed and taught punctuation, was distributed to English and subject teachers from this school and Year 6 teachers from the feeder primary school.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the group of 12 children to provide further information about their perceptions of the purpose of punctuation and their understanding of its application.

Analysis of pupils' written work

I analysed the English exercise books of the group of 12 children to establish the nature of their difficulties with punctuation and to explore the relationship between their perceptions and their practice. The books contained a term's written work and encompassed a range of writing genres including explanation, reviews and narration.

The English exercise books of all pupils in the two Year 8 classes were also examined for comments made by English teachers about punctuation.

Classroom observation

To investigate how the pupils set about punctuating their writing, I observed the 12 focus children writing a letter and a news report.

The Findings

Fifty-two pupils in the two Year 8 classes completed questionnaires. All the English teachers, representatives from most subject departments in the school, and a small number of teachers from the feeder primary school responded to questionnaires.

Perceptions of pupils

Nearly all the pupils recognised the importance of punctuation, particularly when the purpose seemed important and when they were clearly aware of who might read their work, for example writing a job application letter to a prospective employer. Some pupils did not consider the teacher to be 'a reader' in the same sense as someone reading a newspaper or a letter.

Over half the pupils interviewed thought that the purpose of punctuation was to assist clarity, understanding or meaning. The most common reasons the remainder gave were that punctuation:

- 'helped you to breathe', and
- had something to do with what the writing looked like (graphic punctuation).

Five pupils from the group of 12 could not suggest any purpose for punctuation.

The majority of pupils were unable to give a satisfactory definition of a sentence, giving graphic explanations, such as:

- 'a sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop;
- 'it is a line of words'; or
- 'words between breaths'.

Punctuation in practice

Analysis of the exercise books of the 12 children identified as having problems with punctuation, showed that although some of these pupils, from both ability groups, were able to write in grammatically correct, sometimes complex, sentences, none of them used punctuation accurately. These pupils either omitted punctuation or used it incorrectly, e.g. a comma was used instead of a full stop.

Classroom observation revealed that when asked to complete a personal writing task these pupils appeared to be emotionally involved in their writing and did not stop to read what they had written as they wrote.

However, the majority of the 12 pupils in both classes were able to use punctuation with greater accuracy when writing news reports and letters. When the pupils were engaged in these tasks all those from the more able class, and some from the less able, paused at the end of a sentence to read what they had written, sometimes inserting a full stop before reading and sometimes afterwards. This suggests that the pupils gave more thought to the process of writing because this type of writing was written with a particular purpose and reader in mind. It may also be that the focus of this type of writing was tighter than in a longer piece of narrative writing for the teacher to read.

Punctuation and reading ability

Both primary and secondary teachers believed that a lack of understanding of where to place punctuation and of its purpose was a major factor with pupils who experienced difficulties. These teachers also perceived a link between pupils' reading ability and accurate punctuation but this was not found to be the case, in this study. For example one pupil, with a reading age of 14.9 years, observed almost all the full stops and commas when reading aloud a passage from a book of his choice, while another pupil with a reading age of 10.9 years, observed only 5% fewer full stops and commas. Yet these pupils rarely used punctuation accurately in their own writing.

Comparison of primary and secondary teachers' attitudes and approaches

Perceptions of Punctuation

A significant proportion of secondary teachers from across the curriculum believed that poor early years' training was at the root of pupils' problems. Only secondary teachers cited pupils' laziness as a reason. The teachers felt that they were teaching punctuation using appropriate methods but some pupils were unable to learn.

Methods of Teaching

All the primary teachers used punctuation exercises as a teaching method and were unanimous in their belief of reminders and reinforcement of the rules.

One strategy that some English teachers found useful was to ask the pupils to read their work aloud. Some, but not all, secondary English teachers also used punctuation exercises as a teaching method. All used reminders.

Secondary teachers from all subject areas valued

correcting pupils' punctuation in their written work. However, unless pupils had some understanding of what a sentence was, they were likely to have difficulty in following instructions like: 'Put full stops at the end of your sentences', and 'Divide your writing into sentences'.

Conclusions

Previous studies on the perceptions of punctuation have been largely concerned with children in primary schools. This study supports the findings of Hall (1996, 1997 and 1998) and shows that pupils in Year 8 had similar perceptions and difficulties to those of primary pupils in their understanding of the nature of a sentence unit. Nearly 50% of pupils did not equate punctuation with making the meaning clear for the reader.

English and primary teachers emphasised the importance of reminding pupils to use punctuation and of providing practice. The practice did not necessarily give the pupils the motivation to communicate with a reader or give them opportunities to think about punctuation.

The teachers in this survey tended to find it difficult to articulate the ground rules for punctuation. Many secondary teachers addressed punctuation through error correction or marking rather than pre-emptive teaching. In addition, they associated sound with syntax which may have compounded pupils' problems. It may be useful to find out if teachers themselves understand the syntactical rules of punctuation.

Pupils of all abilities used punctuation with significantly greater accuracy when they wrote with a clear awareness of purpose and audience, for example when writing letters and news reports. They were more likely to omit punctuation when they became too involved with their thoughts and ideas instead of focusing on the response of the reader to their writing.

Implications for this School

In the light of these findings, the following teaching strategies have been adopted by the English department as being most likely to help pupils in this school use punctuation successfully:

- giving explicit explanations of sentences and the purpose of punctuation in written and verbal feedback;
- encouraging pupils to read a range of texts and providing opportunities to discuss the sentence structures used with the pupils;
- providing meaningful writing activities which motivate pupils to observe punctuation rules;
- providing readers, other than the teacher, for pupils' work;
- explaining that punctuation is used to separate syntactical units of meaning and focusing on the meaning rather than the sound of sentences;
- modelling examples of specific features of punctuation, such as sentence demarcation and commas to demarcate clauses, through texts being studied in class; and using this aspect as a focus in the next piece of writing;
- involving pupils explicitly in monitoring their own use of punctuation, through the use of self-assessment devices;
- encouraging teachers in all subject areas to employ these strategies.

Wider Implications

The disparity between the perception of punctuation and methods of teaching in primary and secondary phases suggests the need for creating opportunities for primary and secondary teachers to share observations and good practice. This is particularly important for Year 6 teachers and Year 7 English teachers. The differences in approach of the English teachers and their colleagues in other subjects to teaching punctuation, observed in this school may highlight the need for a whole school policy for the teaching of punctuation.

Further Reading

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