
THE USE OF PUNCTUATION MARKS IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE WRITING AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Punctuation is a central resource of written communication because it helps writers organise clauses and sentences, signal grammatical relationships, indicate discourse boundaries, and guide readers towards interpretations. Yet punctuation is often taught as a collection of isolated rules, and learners may struggle to apply these rules in reading and writing. This paper presents an integrative narrative review of scholarship on punctuation, writing, reading comprehension, prosody, and English language teaching, with particular attention to Nigerian English-language education. Literature was identified through targeted searches of databases, publisher platforms, and research repositories using terms related to punctuation, comma use, apostrophe, writing, reading comprehension, prosody, English language teaching, and Nigeria. Studies were selected for direct relevance, with relevant empirical studies prioritised and foundational sources retained for conceptual background. The literature was synthesised thematically rather than statistically. The review finds that punctuation functions as a grammatical, semantic, rhetorical, and processing resource. Evidence on commas shows that grammatical structure strongly constrains placement, although readers and writers respond to prosodic cues. Research indicates that awareness of punctuation-prosody relationships is associated with reading comprehension, while writing studies show that punctuation can serve rhetorical purposes as well as mechanical correctness. Nigerian evidence indicates that writing development remains an educational concern, but punctuation-specific evidence in primary and secondary classrooms is limited. The paper therefore argues that punctuation instruction should be integrated with syntax, reading aloud, comprehension, guided writing, editing, peer review, and writing practices. It identifies the need for more context-specific empirical research on punctuation and English language pedagogy in Nigeria.

Keywords: punctuation; written communication; syntax; reading comprehension; English language teaching

INTRODUCTION

Writing enables people to communicate ideas, information, experiences, arguments, and knowledge beyond the immediate circumstances of face-to-face interaction. Because the reader is usually separated from the writer in time and space, written discourse requires visible resources that help the reader reconstruct intended relationships among words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and larger stretches of text. Punctuation is one of these resources. It is not simply a set of decorative symbols inserted into otherwise complete language; rather, it forms part of the graphic system through which writers organise information and readers interpret it. Adenuga, Osoba, and Osoba (2006), for example, describe punctuation as a resource for organising writing into clauses, phrases, and sentences so that comprehension is facilitated.

Recent research strengthens this functional view. Kempa and Treiman (2023) demonstrate that adults' judgements about comma placement are influenced by both grammatical structure and prosodic information. Their findings are important because they challenge the simplistic classroom assumption that a comma should be inserted wherever a speaker would naturally pause. Similarly, Ryken, Wade-Woolley, and Deacon (2025) report evidence that awareness of how punctuation reflects prosody helps explain the relationship between prosodic awareness and reading comprehension among English-speaking pupils. Punctuation therefore sits at an important intersection of syntax, speech, reading, and meaning.

The pedagogical issue is especially significant in contexts where English is an additional language and a major language of schooling. In Nigeria, English occupies a central position in education and formal

communication, while learners operate within complex multilingual environments. Recent Nigerian scholarship continues to document challenges in English language learning and writing, and national assessment evidence indicates substantial variation in learners' attainment in English Studies at basic-education level (Universal Basic Education Commission [UBEC] & UNICEF, 2025). These circumstances make it necessary to treat punctuation not as a minor editing issue but as one component of broader literacy development.

The present paper responds to this need by reviewing the functions of punctuation marks, examining the relationship between punctuation and meaning, critically comparing recent studies, and considering implications for English language teaching in Nigeria. The discussion gives sustained attention to commas and apostrophes because they create distinctive grammatical and orthographic problems, but it also provides balanced treatment of the other major marks. The paper does not claim to generate new statistical evidence. Its contribution is interpretive: it brings together strands of literature that are often discussed separately and uses them to develop a coherent pedagogical argument for punctuation instruction.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although punctuation is routinely included in English language curricula, learners may continue to omit, add, substitute, or misplace punctuation marks in school and university writing. Such errors matter because punctuation can signal sentence boundaries, distinguish restrictive from non-restrictive information, clarify coordination and subordination, mark possession and contraction, and influence the rhetorical force of a statement. A punctuation problem is consequently not always a superficial error. In some cases, it reflects incomplete understanding of syntax; in others, it may affect interpretation directly.

For example, compare: (a) "The students who completed the assignment received certificates" and (b) "The students, who completed the assignment, received certificates." The first sentence presents the relative clause as restrictive, identifying the relevant students; the second presents it as additional information about the students as a group. The punctuation therefore interacts with syntax and meaning rather than merely marking a pause.

The problem becomes more complex in second-language and multilingual educational settings. Learners may have substantial grammatical knowledge but still experience difficulty transferring that knowledge into punctuation decisions in extended writing. Conversely, learners may use punctuation in rhetorically meaningful ways that a purely error-focused approach fails to recognise. The literature therefore calls for a more integrated account of punctuation that explains not only what a mark is called and where it is conventionally placed, but why it is used, how it interacts with sentence structure, and what readers are likely to infer from it.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this paper is to critically examine punctuation as a resource for written communication and to consider its implications for effective writing and English language teaching. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

- a) examine the major functions of punctuation in written communication;
- b) explain how punctuation interacts with syntax, meaning, prosody, reading, and writing;
- c) critically compare recent empirical studies of punctuation and identify their strengths and limitations;
- d) examine difficulties associated with punctuation use among learners, including evidence from Nigeria;
- e) provide balanced pedagogical attention to major punctuation marks rather than treating punctuation as a narrow comma problem; and
- f) propose evidence-informed approaches for teaching punctuation in English language classrooms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. What are the principal functions of punctuation in written communication?
- ii. How does punctuation interact with syntax, prosody, reading comprehension, and writing?
- iii. What patterns and limitations emerge from recent research on punctuation learning and use?
- iv. What does existing evidence suggest about punctuation and English-language education in Nigeria?
- v. What instructional approaches are most defensible in light of the reviewed evidence?

METHODOLOGY

This paper is an integrative narrative literature review and conceptual paper, not an empirical survey, experiment, systematic review, or meta-analysis. The distinction is important because the paper does not present newly collected participant data. Instead, it interprets and synthesises existing scholarship to develop an explanatory and pedagogical account of punctuation in written communication. An integrative narrative

approach is appropriate because the relevant evidence comes from several research traditions, including linguistics, literacy studies, reading research, writing development, English language teaching, and Nigerian language education.

Literature was identified through targeted searches of scholarly search services, publisher platforms, research repositories, and educational sources. Search combinations included terms such as “punctuation and writing”, “comma use”, “punctuation and prosody”, “punctuation and reading comprehension”, “punctuation instruction”, “punctuation in academic writing”, “punctuation Nigeria”, and “English language writing Nigeria”. Where a promising article was located, its publisher or repository record was checked to confirm bibliographic details, authorship, publication year, journal, volume, pages, and DOI where available.

Sources were selected when they met at least one of four criteria: (a) they directly investigated punctuation knowledge or use; (b) they examined punctuation in relation to reading, prosody, syntax, or writing; (c) they evaluated an instructional intervention relevant to punctuation or academic writing; or (d) they provided credible Nigerian evidence needed to contextualise English-language education. Recent empirical studies, especially those published from 2022 onwards, were prioritised. Older sources were retained only where they provided foundational definitions or directly relevant background. Non-scholarly web material was not used as substantive evidence.

The selected literature was read comparatively and organised under five analytic themes: punctuation as a meaning-making resource; punctuation and syntax/prosody; punctuation and reading comprehension; punctuation and writing development; and implications for English language teaching, with a cross-cutting Nigerian context. The synthesis focused on convergence, divergence, methodological limitations, educational implications, and unanswered questions. Studies were therefore not summarised one after another without interpretation. Instead, their findings were compared to determine what can reasonably be inferred and where the evidence remains incomplete.

Because this is an integrative narrative review, it does not claim exhaustive retrieval of every publication on punctuation. Nor does it calculate pooled effect sizes. The conclusions should consequently be understood as an evidence-informed conceptual synthesis. A further limitation is the relative scarcity of recent Nigerian studies that isolate punctuation from broader writing competence. This limitation is itself part of the research gap identified by the paper and supports the call for classroom-based Nigerian research.

RESEARCH GAP AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE PAPER

Three related gaps emerge from the reviewed literature. First, punctuation research is often fragmented by function or discipline. Studies of comma placement may focus on grammar and prosody; reading studies may examine punctuation as a mediator of prosodic awareness; writing studies may treat punctuation as one scoring category; and language-teaching studies may address punctuation through digital or corrective instruction. These strands are valuable, but they are not always brought together into a single account of how punctuation operates across syntax, reading, writing, and meaning.

Second, the literature is uneven in its treatment of punctuation marks. The comma receives substantial empirical attention because of its frequency and complexity, whereas apostrophes, semicolons, colons, dashes, quotation marks, parentheses, hyphens, and ellipses are less frequently examined through the same integrated lens. A paper that foregrounds commas without explaining the status of other marks risks reproducing an unnecessarily narrow view of punctuation.

Third, there is a contextual gap in Nigerian research. Isah and Musa (2024) provide useful direct evidence from 400-level English students in two Nigerian universities, but evidence at primary and secondary levels, across regions, and in authentic classroom writing remains limited. Broader Nigerian writing research demonstrates that students continue to face challenges in written English, but punctuation is frequently embedded within a larger category of writing performance rather than investigated as a distinct meaning-making resource (Chigbu et al., 2023).

The original contribution of this paper is therefore a context-sensitive synthesis that connects punctuation knowledge across five domains: punctuation marks and their conventions; syntactic structure; prosodic interpretation; reading comprehension; and writing development. It extends existing knowledge by translating this synthesis into a Nigerian English-language teaching agenda. The paper consequently reframes punctuation from an isolated editing skill into a cross-linguistic and literacy resource that teachers can develop through integrated reading, grammar, writing, and revision activities.

CONCEPTUALISING PUNCTUATION AS A MEANING-MAKING RESOURCE

Punctuation may be defined as a conventional system of graphic signs used to organise written language and guide interpretation. Its functions include marking sentence boundaries, separating or linking grammatical units, signalling quotation, indicating possession or contraction, setting off additional information, organising lists, indicating omission, and controlling rhetorical emphasis. The central principle is that punctuation has a relationship with linguistic structure. A punctuation mark is meaningful because it operates within a particular syntactic, semantic, discourse, or typographic environment.

This does not mean that every punctuation choice has a single absolute interpretation. Style, genre, register, and publisher conventions may influence particular choices. The serial comma, for example, is accepted in many contexts but not required by every style system. Dashes can perform several rhetorical functions, while quotation-mark conventions vary between British and American publishing practices. Effective instruction should therefore distinguish between stable grammatical conventions and style-sensitive choices.

MAJOR PUNCTUATION MARKS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

The Full Stop

The full stop normally marks the end of a declarative sentence and provides a strong boundary between propositions. Its pedagogical importance lies in helping learners recognise when a complete sentence has ended and another should begin. Persistent omission of full stops may contribute to run-on writing, while excessive or inappropriate use can fragment ideas.

The Question Mark

The question mark normally marks a direct interrogative sentence. Learners should distinguish direct questions from indirect questions, where a question mark is not ordinarily required: “Where are the students?” but “The lecturer asked where the students were.”

The Exclamation Mark

The exclamation mark signals exclamatory force, surprise, strong emotion, or emphasis. In academic writing it should be used selectively because repeated exclamation marks can create an informal or overly emotional register.

The Comma

The comma receives particular attention because it is frequent, structurally complex, and prone to misuse. It can separate items in a series, follow introductory elements, set off non-restrictive information, separate coordinate clauses where appropriate, and distinguish certain grammatical units. However, a comma should not be treated as a universal representation of a spoken pause. Kempa and Treiman (2023) found that prosodic pauses influence adults' judgements, but grammatical structure remains decisive. This is a critical distinction for teaching.

Examples:

He was staying with his sister, a piano teacher, in Paris.

If I miss the train, I will be late for the meeting.

The examination was difficult, but the students completed it successfully.

Incorrect: The examination was difficult, the students completed it successfully.

Correct: The examination was difficult; the students completed it successfully.

The Apostrophe

The apostrophe mainly marks omitted letters in contractions and possession. Examples include “don’t” (do not), “it’s” (it is/it has), “the student’s book”, and “the students’ books”. Possessive pronouns such as its, hers, yours, and theirs do not take apostrophes. Apostrophes should also not normally be used to form ordinary plurals: “three essays”, not “three essay’s”. The apostrophe deserves explicit treatment because errors often reflect confusion between grammatical categories rather than simple carelessness.

The Colon and Semicolon

A colon can introduce a list, explanation, elaboration, or example when the preceding structure licenses it. A semicolon can join closely related independent clauses or separate complex list items. These marks are particularly useful for teaching relationships among clauses and ideas because their appropriate use requires more than identifying sentence endings.

The Quotation Marks

Quotation marks identify direct speech or direct quotations and may have additional functions depending on the adopted style. Teachers should make students aware that quotation marks are part of source-use conventions as well as punctuation.

Parentheses and Brackets

Parentheses normally enclose supplementary information. Brackets may be used within quotations or for editorial insertions and clarifications. Their use therefore involves both syntax and discourse management.

The Dash

The dash can indicate interruption, emphasis, elaboration, or a change in thought. Because its functions vary by genre and style, it should be taught through authentic examples rather than a single inflexible rule.

The Hyphen

The hyphen connects parts of words, especially in some compound expressions, and can affect lexical interpretation. Examples include “well-known author” and “twenty-year-old student”.

Ellipsis

An ellipsis can indicate omission, hesitation, or an unfinished thought, depending on context. Students should learn that its meaning is contextual and that excessive use is usually inappropriate in formal academic prose.

CRITICAL SYNTHESIS OF THE LITERATURE

Punctuation, Syntax and Prosody

Kempa and Treiman (2023) provide especially useful evidence for moving beyond the traditional opposition between “grammar” and “pause”. Across two experiments involving university students, participants sometimes judged ungrammatical commas more acceptable when they occurred at natural prosodic pause points, yet they still rated grammatical comma placement more highly. Participants with stronger written-language skills were better at distinguishing grammatical from ungrammatical placement. The pedagogical lesson is not that prosody is irrelevant. Rather, prosody can provide a useful entry point, but learners must ultimately be guided by syntax and written convention.

This finding exposes a weakness in approaches that teach punctuation through oral pausing alone. A learner may hear a pause between a subject and its verb, but that pause does not license a comma. In this respect, punctuation instruction should be linked to clause analysis, phrase structure, coordination, subordination, and modification. The relationship is therefore complementary rather than identical: prosody may inform interpretation, while syntax constrains many conventional punctuation choices.

Punctuation and Reading Comprehension

Ryken et al. (2025) provide a further bridge between punctuation and reading. In a study of 151 English-speaking pupils in Grades 3–5, awareness of how punctuation reflects prosody was associated with reading comprehension even after several relevant variables were controlled. The authors interpret punctuation awareness as a potential mechanism through which prosodic awareness contributes to comprehension. This is important because it moves punctuation from the writing-only domain into reading pedagogy.

The evidence should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. Ryken et al. studied English-speaking children in a particular age range and educational context; their findings cannot automatically be generalised to Nigerian multilingual learners. What the study does establish is a plausible mechanism that deserves testing in other linguistic and educational settings. Nigerian research should therefore examine whether explicit attention to punctuation-prosody relationships improves oral reading, phrasing, and comprehension among learners who use English alongside Nigerian languages.

Punctuation and Writing Development

Burrell and Beard (2022) complicate a purely corrective view of punctuation by showing that primary-school children use playful punctuation to achieve persuasive purposes. Their study of advertisement writing demonstrates that punctuation can contribute to rhetoric, not merely correctness. Their subsequent work on narrative writing similarly shows that children may use punctuation playfully to create effects related to genre and communicative purpose (Burrell & Beard, 2023).

These studies are valuable because they shift the question from “Did the child obey the rule?” to “What is the writer trying to achieve, and is the punctuation effective in this context?” However, their focus on English primary-school writing also limits direct transfer to Nigerian classrooms. The implication is not to abandon conventions but to teach conventions alongside rhetorical choice. Students need to know when a

punctuation choice is required, when it is optional, and when deliberate deviation may create a communicative effect.

Punctuation Difficulties and Academic Writing

Munfadhila (2022) analysed explanatory writing by university nursing students and reported 207 punctuation errors across 45 students. The study provides a useful reminder that punctuation difficulties can persist beyond basic education. Its qualitative descriptive design, however, does not establish why the errors occurred or whether they were caused by weak grammatical knowledge, transfer, limited revision, task demands, or other factors. The study therefore supports the need for continued instruction but cannot by itself justify a single causal explanation.

Ivanova, Arupova, and Mekeko (2022) offer stronger instructional evidence in a different context. Their empirical study compared a control group receiving face-to-face and textbook-based instruction with an experimental group receiving additional digital support. The authors reported a positive effect of digital support on punctuation knowledge and skills. The study is relevant to contemporary teaching, although its small participant groups and specific academic-English context mean that the findings should be treated as promising rather than universally generalisable. Taken together, these studies suggest that punctuation problems are not solved simply by presenting more rules. Learners need repeated opportunities to apply punctuation in authentic or realistic writing, receive feedback, compare alternatives, and revise their choices. Digital tools can support this process, but they should complement rather than replace teacher explanation and grammatical reasoning.

CONTEXTUALISING PUNCTUATION FROM THE NIGERIAN ANGLE

The Nigerian context requires particular attention because English functions as a major language of formal education, assessment, professional communication, and academic publication within a highly multilingual society. Research on Nigerian language education continues to identify challenges surrounding English-language learning and the implementation of language policy (Ejiofor, 2023). Such a context makes written accuracy important, but it also means that learners may be negotiating several linguistic systems and communicative norms.

Direct punctuation-specific Nigerian evidence is emerging. Isah and Musa (2024) investigated 400-level English students at Ahmadu Bello University and Federal University Gusau using punctuation tasks and an essay. Their results showed substantial variation across punctuation marks: for example, ellipsis and dash attracted 100% correct responses among the ABU group, whereas semicolon performance was much weaker; in the Federal University Gusau group, full-stop knowledge was relatively strong while colon knowledge was comparatively weak. The study's strength is its direct attention to punctuation across multiple marks. Its limitation is its restricted sample: 100 scripts from two institutions cannot represent Nigerian learners generally.

Broader Nigerian writing research reinforces the need for integrated intervention. Chigbu et al. (2023), working with secondary-school learners, found that a digital graphic-organiser intervention significantly improved expository writing performance. The study was not a punctuation study, but it is relevant because it demonstrates that writing instruction can benefit from explicit, structured support in Nigerian English classrooms. This supports the present paper's argument for integrating punctuation with wider composing processes rather than isolating it in decontextualised exercises.

At national level, the NALABE 2022 assessment, reported by UBEC and UNICEF (2025), sampled 23,564 JS2 learners across 788 schools in all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, alongside large samples at Primary 3 and Primary 5. The assessment covers English Studies among other subjects and is not a punctuation-specific study. Nevertheless, its scale highlights the importance of evidence-based English-language instruction in Nigerian basic education. Punctuation research should build on this broader literacy agenda by investigating how learners' control of sentence boundaries, clause relationships, and orthographic conventions develops across educational levels.

The Nigerian context also cautions against interpreting punctuation problems simply as evidence of learner carelessness. Multilingualism, differences in exposure to written English, classroom practices, digital writing habits, and opportunities for extended writing may all shape learners' performance. A useful research agenda should therefore examine punctuation errors alongside syntactic knowledge, reading practices, writing frequency, language background, and instructional history.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Integrate Punctuation with Syntax

Teachers should teach punctuation through the grammatical structures that license it. Learners can identify subjects, verbs, clauses, phrases, modifiers, coordination, and subordination before deciding where punctuation is appropriate. This is particularly important for comma instruction, where a pause-based rule is insufficient.

Connect Punctuation with Reading Aloud and Prosody

Reading aloud can help learners notice phrasing and the relationship between punctuation and prosodic structure. However, teachers should explicitly explain that punctuation and speech pauses are related but not identical. This approach reflects the evidence from Kempa and Treiman (2023) and Ryken et al. (2025).

Use Punctuation in Meaning-Based Reading Tasks

Learners can compare pairs of sentences in which punctuation changes the interpretation of a relative clause, appositive, quotation, or list. Such tasks make punctuation visible as a meaning-making resource and connect it directly to comprehension.

Teach Punctuation through Writing and Revision

Students should encounter punctuation during planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Teachers can require learners to explain selected punctuation choices rather than merely circle errors. This encourages metalinguistic awareness and reduces dependence on memorised rules.

Use Peer Review and Collaborative Editing

Peer review can turn punctuation into a communicative activity. Learners can identify a punctuation choice, explain its effect, and suggest alternatives. The teacher then addresses disagreements and reinforces the relevant grammatical principle.

Incorporate Digital Writing Responsibly

Digital writing environments can provide useful opportunities for editing and immediate feedback. Ivanova et al. (2022) found evidence of the pedagogical value of digital support for punctuation. In Nigeria, however, digital tools should be used critically: automatic suggestions are not always grammatically appropriate, and learners still need to understand why a correction is justified.

Develop Progressive Punctuation Instruction

Punctuation should be revisited across educational levels. Early instruction may focus on sentence boundaries and basic commas; later instruction can address restrictive and non-restrictive structures, semicolons, colons, quotation conventions, rhetorical punctuation, academic citation, and genre-specific choices. Persistent difficulties at tertiary level suggest that punctuation should not disappear from instruction once learners leave primary or secondary school.

DISCUSSION OF LITERATURE FINDINGS

The research questions can now be answered directly. First, punctuation performs structural, semantic, discourse, orthographic, and rhetorical functions. It marks boundaries, clarifies relationships, signals quotation and possession, and helps readers reconstruct intended meaning. Second, punctuation interacts with syntax and prosody but cannot be reduced to either one. The comma evidence is especially clear: natural pauses influence judgements, yet grammatical structure remains a major constraint (Kempa & Treiman, 2023).

Third, recent research indicates that punctuation difficulties persist across educational levels and contexts, while punctuation can also be used creatively. The coexistence of these findings is important. If punctuation is taught only as error avoidance, students may learn to suppress experimentation without developing a deeper understanding of rhetorical choice. Conversely, if conventions are treated as optional, learners may fail to produce the clarity expected in academic and professional writing. Effective instruction must therefore balance convention and communicative agency.

Fourth, Nigerian evidence supports concern about punctuation competence but remains too limited to justify broad claims about all Nigerian learners. Isah and Musa (2024) provide direct evidence from two universities, while broader Nigerian writing research and national assessment evidence demonstrate the continuing importance of English-language literacy. The research gap is therefore not simply “Nigerian students make punctuation errors”. A more defensible gap is that Nigeria lacks a sufficiently broad, longitudinal, classroom-based evidence base explaining how punctuation competence develops, which

punctuation marks are most problematic at different educational levels, how multilingualism influences punctuation choices, and which instructional approaches produce durable improvement.

Finally, the evidence supports an integrated instructional model. Punctuation should be taught where reading, syntax, writing, prosody, editing, and digital literacy meet. This recommendation follows directly from the literature: syntax explains structural constraints; prosody supports phrasing and reading; writing research highlights rhetorical choice; intervention research shows the value of structured and digital support; and Nigerian evidence demonstrates the continuing need for writing development. The contribution of the present paper lies in bringing these strands together and making their implications explicit for Nigerian English-language teaching.

CONCLUSION

Punctuation is a fundamental component of effective written communication because it helps writers organise language and enables readers to interpret relationships among ideas. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that punctuation is simultaneously grammatical, semantic, prosodic, orthographic, and rhetorical. It cannot adequately be understood as a list of marks and rules.

The critical synthesis also shows that punctuation should be taught in relation to syntax, reading, prosody, and writing. Research on comma use demonstrates that grammatical structure and prosodic cues interact; reading research indicates that awareness of punctuation-prosody relationships can contribute to comprehension; and writing research shows that punctuation can serve rhetorical and playful purposes. At the same time, studies of university and EFL learners demonstrate that punctuation difficulties can persist despite years of formal education.

For Nigeria, the evidence points to both a practical need and a research opportunity. English remains central to formal education, while learners develop literacy within multilingual and increasingly digital environments. Existing Nigerian research provides useful evidence but is not yet sufficiently extensive to explain punctuation development across educational levels. The paper therefore recommends sustained, context-sensitive punctuation instruction and more Nigerian research involving authentic learner writing, classroom observation, longitudinal designs, and intervention studies.

The principal contribution of this paper is its integrated account of punctuation as a bridge among syntax, prosody, reading comprehension, writing development, and English language pedagogy. It consequently argues for a shift from punctuation as an isolated proofreading topic to punctuation as part of meaning-making and literacy development. Such a shift can help teachers produce learners who do not merely place punctuation marks correctly, but understand why those marks matter and how they guide readers towards intended meanings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- English language curricula should treat punctuation as an integral component of reading, grammar, writing, and revision rather than as an isolated topic.
- Teacher education programmes should explicitly address the relationship between punctuation, syntax, prosody, and reading comprehension.
- Teachers should use sentence-comparison, reading-aloud, editing, peer-review, and guided-writing activities to develop punctuation awareness.
- Digital writing and editing tools should be incorporated critically, with teachers ensuring that learners understand the grammatical basis of suggested corrections.
- Nigerian researchers should conduct punctuation-specific studies across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels and across different linguistic regions.
- Future studies should examine punctuation in authentic learner writing and should investigate the influence of multilingualism, digital communication, reading practices, and writing frequency.
- Assessment of writing should distinguish mechanical punctuation accuracy from purposeful rhetorical punctuation so that creative but appropriate choices are not automatically treated as errors.

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