

Punctuation Today: A Qualitative Study¹

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The focal idea of the research project on which this article reports originated from my personal and professional interest in language use and acquisition. After reading Hall's 'Young children's use of graphic punctuation' (2003), I decided to use similar research methods to study how people use punctuation later on in their lives. I interviewed individuals about their writing to examine their thought processes when punctuating and to obtain their perspectives on and opinions about punctuation, in order to address the following questions:²

- 1) On the 'general use' of punctuation in multimodal communication:
 - i. How much do the participants in this study utilise or actively avoid using punctuation?
 - ii. How do the participants think that punctuation applies to various literacy practices, including 'new literacies' such as emails and text messages?
 - iii. What role or roles do the participants give to punctuation in different contexts? Do they think punctuation is useful and, if so, how?
 - iv. How much do the participants know about punctuation and which punctuation marks do they habitually use?
 - v. How do the participants apply this knowledge?
- 2) On punctuation and identity:

To what extent and in what way does punctuation relate to the participants' identity construction?
- 3) As a follow-up research topic:
 - i. Why do the participants avoid using punctuation and/or use what Hall calls 'unconventional punctuation', i.e. the 'use of conventional punctuation

¹ This article was first presented as a paper at the conference *The Evolution of Research: adapting to survive in a changing world* organised by the Post-Graduate Research Association and held at Canterbury Christ Church University on 17 June 2011.

² See data in the Appendices and findings in section 2.

marks where an experienced user of punctuation would least expect them' (Hall 2003: 73–78)?

- ii. To what extent do people continue to use, as Hall suggests is the case, what he terms 'graphic punctuation', that is, 'the use of, or belief about the use of, punctuation which is dominated by the positioning of the marks on the page according to space rather than any underlying linguistic principles' (Hall 2003: 76)?

These questions were designed to allow this enquiry to test how different literacy-related themes might apply to the specific aspect of punctuation. The intention was to identify types of social (literacy) practices (Street 2003) with which the participants are involved and how the participants position themselves, in other words how they construct their identities in collaboration with others (Lillis 2003) through punctuation within these practices, while possibly comparing the participants' punctuating principles with those of the children in Hall's study.

Additionally, the qualitative/ethnographic approach adopted for this study not only directed the prioritisation of certain aspects over others³ but also allowed further questions to emerge within the course of the study, including:

- The extent to which individuals' learning styles (auditory/visual) may be linked to their interpretation of the role of punctuation (prosodic/graphic).
- The effects of simplifying punctuation terminology in early education.
- International differences in punctuation rules, practices and teaching approaches.

The target group comprised eight participants: two GCSE students, two undergraduate students (respectively reading Modern Languages and Economics) and four professionals aged between 45–55 with higher educational backgrounds (a civil servant, a business manager, a restaurant owner and a graphic designer), all close friends or relatives of the researcher, at different stages of their lives and education, who take part in a variety of literacy practices: academic (essays, projects), professional (letters, reports), and/or casual (letters, messages).

All participants contributed by means of interviews and post-interview conversations with the researcher; two of them provided this study with a text they had written and took part in

³ See findings in section 2.

individual ‘talk around text’ sessions (Freebody 2010; Hall 2003; Jaffe 2003), while the other six participants offered their comments on the punctuation in the two texts⁴.

The data-collection took place in April–May 2010, in informal settings, i.e. the researcher’s and the participants’ own homes, as well as on the phone and via email. The sources of evidence comprised:

- Responses to interviews.
- Researcher’s journal entries.
- Texts produced by two participants.
- Participants’ punctuation work and comments.
- Notes taken during ‘talk around text’.
- Relevant literature.

Because of the personal character of this research, the informal circumstances in which it was carried out, the absence of an overseeing body and the facts that the participants neither were mutual friends/colleagues nor had a stake in this project, precautions were taken to deal essentially with the following ethical issues:

- Minimising any inconvenience caused to the participants; interviews and ‘talk around text’ were carried out at a time and place to suit them, when and where they could talk freely with the researcher.
- Anonymity: the participants’ names are not revealed.
- Privacy and consent: the participants’ permission was obtained to use their texts and messages to capture data for the sole purpose of this study.
- Minors: parental consent was obtained regarding the participation of the two GCSE students.

Taking into account concerns with fairness, relevance and accuracy, I consciously avoided leading questions and I advised all participants that the outcome of the study depended on their honest answers. However, I am aware of the influence of my own ‘subjectivity’ (Lee 2003) on the information I obtained from the participants and on my interpretations and data analysis. Further, an awareness of my relationship with the participants guided me in taking precautions such as:

⁴ For text extracts and a summary of comments from the participants, see Appendix 2.

- Being aware that a participant might more readily recognise colloquial terminology: calling parentheses ‘round brackets’ and ellipses ‘three dots’, for example.
- Providing a relaxed atmosphere.
- Approaching each question in different ways to make sure that the participants did not disguise their own views in an effort to try to please me with their answers.
- Being sensitive to the context in which their messages were expressed in order to capture the actual meaning they intended.
- Taking into account any stress or repetition of specific ideas.
- Taking note of any help required by and given to the participants.

1. Background information

1.1 The nature and purpose of punctuation

Punctuation is an essential element of writing and its use is, therefore, an element of literacy but it also needs to be acknowledged as ‘the marker of the relations of speech and writing’ (Kress 2003: 126), that is, as a semiotic resource, distinct from words, and therefore influenced differently by information technology in various practices.

Punctuation marks are individual symbols with the power to not only define textual meaning by marking pauses or signifying intonations, but also by adding rhythm, breath and life to a text. Without punctuation, a written text may be ambiguous:

My mum says my dad sometimes talks too much.

One might assume that the sentence above is a contraction of ‘My mum says *that* my dad talks too much’. However, the simple insertion of commas could change the entire meaning of this statement:

- 1) My mum, says my dad, sometimes talks too much.
- 2) My mum, says my dad sometimes, talks too much.
 - In punctuated version 1): My dad says that my mum *sometimes* talks too much.
 - In punctuated version 2): My dad *sometimes says* that my mum talks too much.

This example, which only makes use of the two most commonly used punctuation marks, the comma and the full stop, enables us to get a sense of the fundamental role of punctuation: ‘Punctuation is more important than spelling’ (King 2009: 1).

Taking into account the power of punctuation over texts, the purpose of which is to communicate meaning, punctuation use is an important issue that concerns a variety of ‘literacy practices’ (Carrington and Luke 1997; Street 2003) in a changing world. Yet, punctuation can be perceived as an obscure aspect of the English language, used inconsistently across literacy practices, even by the most literate adults.

1.2 Universal negligence?

Despite the importance of punctuation in effective communication, there seems today to be a woeful indifference to and ignorance about using even its simplest forms. (King 2009: 1).

This argument, which could constitute a rationale for further research into punctuation, appears to lack empirical support. An initial search was conducted, which revealed little research literature into literate adults’ everyday use of punctuation in the English language⁵; no evidence was found to have emanated from ethnographic studies exploring punctuation as a ‘conventional’ skill, applied to various literacy practices.

The use of the term ‘literate’ in this context is that adopted by Carrington and Luke, as well as Street, and is not intended to determine the overall social status of our participants but rather to denote people who use similar means of communication and share the same ‘ground rules’ (Mercer 2000) of the wider culture of their country, in this case the UK; the term ‘literate adults’ should, therefore, be understood to mean people past the age of puberty, able to read and write in English at the expected level for their age group.

This socio-cultural study explores how far its participants can exemplify and elucidate this apparent general neglect of punctuation and whether it may reflect approaches used for teaching punctuation in formal education. In his study, Hall argues that the children’s teachers emphasise the graphic rather than the linguistic function of punctuation. Nevertheless, he also recognises that children operate differently from adults (Hall 2003: 73). Indeed, educators know that children do not comprehend abstract matters the way adults do: ‘children (up to the age of about 11) are still in an intellectual stage of what Piaget called “concrete operations”’ (Brown 2007: 102), ‘codifying the outside world’ (Perraudeau 1996: 68–78) and developing their spatial awareness (Steiner, in Houssaye 1995: 96–99); children ‘have little appreciation of our adult

⁵ Please refer to the *Further Reading*, ‘On teaching punctuation’, ‘On punctuation usage in languages other than English’ and ‘On punctuation usage in information technology’, for existing research literature on punctuation teaching, punctuation in languages other English and punctuation use in information technology.

notions of “correctness” and ‘need to have all five senses stimulated’ (Brown, *ibid.*); additionally, the development of children’s ‘metalinguistic awareness also includes the discovery of such things as ambiguity’ (Lightbown and Spada 2006: 9). Therefore, a linguistic approach to punctuation with children would need to be adapted to such aspects of their learning and subjected to investigation. However, it would certainly appear that punctuating conventions are, if not often overlooked, at least rarely addressed in language teaching regardless of the learners’ age or development stage. Punctuation rules are frequently quite vague, tending to communicate controversial ideas regarding linguistic functions and occasionally suggesting that the use of individual marks might, in certain cases, even be optional. As many grammar/reference books do, the *New Hart’s Rules* describes ‘situations where a number of styles are possible’ (Ritter 2005: 63), for example, the debate around the use or non-use of the serial comma, i.e. whether or not there should be a comma before the final conjunction (‘and’, ‘or’ and, sometimes, ‘nor’) in a list of three or more items.⁶

I argue that, as is the case with literacy in its broad sense, there are two different conceptions of the function of punctuation marks. On the one hand, there is what Street defines as the ‘autonomous’ view or the ‘conforming to the rules’ function, which Hall refers to as ‘conventional’ punctuation use. On the other hand, there is a focus on punctuation as ‘ideological’ or punctuation in its social function, as it contributes to meaning-making in different ways and finds relations with status and power associated to different ‘literacy practices’ (Street 2003: 81) and different discourses (identity practice) within cultural systems. In the latter function, knowledge is not fixed but jointly constructed through language (Mercer 2000), evolving differently across practices, with time and with the use of new communication technologies.

1.3 Variation and evolution

An approach to teaching punctuation may, therefore, need to take into consideration the fact that some aspects of punctuation are ‘open to variation and vary from writer to writer, and can change over time’ (Seely 2009: 130):

Regarding punctuation inconsistency, Truss (2003: 1–34) refers to punctuation as a ‘seventh sense’. So one may also ask to what extent it is even possible to teach punctuation. Additionally,

⁶ This is also known as the ‘Harvard’ or ‘Oxford’ comma.

different punctuation rules in different languages may create confusion for users of more than one language. Although it was never within the scope of this project to address such questions directly, I expected that prioritising the exploration of people's perspectives, knowledge and use of punctuation would shed some light upon them. Literate adults often have their own relationships with particular punctuation marks: in a BBC news article, an American best-selling author and an American literary editor of *The Times* expressed their likes and dislikes and what they perceived to be the functions, style and status associated with the dash and the semi-colon (Shriver and Wagner 2009). Thus, the present study adopts a 'post-structuralist' theoretical position to examine punctuation in its subjectivity, in other words punctuation's variations from writer to writer in relation to the individual's identity construction, in the continuous process of making the self through meaning-making in contextual interactions. Exploring how punctuation is valued and how it possibly affects the participants' self-perception in different contexts and situations also involves considering the 'multimodal' aspect of modern communication (Kress 2003).

It is beyond the scope of this study to explore in detail either the history of punctuation or changes in the practice of punctuation over time.⁷ It does, however, address more contemporary variations of its use in different multimodal literacy practices in people's modern daily lives, including those involving information technologies,⁸ and examines Matchett's suggestion that 'perhaps the icons we use in emails and text messages, such as :-) [emoticons], might in the future become accepted punctuation marks' (2009: 30).

Furthermore, the development of punctuation throughout the lives and learning processes of individuals is addressed. This research on young and middle-aged adults' use of punctuation was inspired by Hall's study and his conclusive argument that 'while the principles of graphic punctuation is a temporary phenomenon for many children, it can persist for an unnecessarily long and unhelpful period of time' (Hall 2003: 77). In order to determine the extent to which this

⁷ For example, the question mark, ?, developed from a letter 'q', an abbreviation of the Latin *quaestio* (question) which was used by scribes to indicate that a phrase was to be given the intonation of a question in an age when texts were more likely to be read aloud than silently (Matchett 2009: 30). Please refer to *Further Reading 'On the history of punctuation'* for existing research literature on the history of punctuation.

⁸ Please refer to *Further Reading 'On punctuation usage in information technology'* for existing research literature on information technology and punctuation usage.

statement is true, responses were sought from the focus group, regarding the individuals' principles underlying their use of punctuation⁹.

2. Discussion of findings

The analysis of data led to findings which fall under the six headings in this section.¹⁰

2.1 Situation and Culture.

Situation encompasses three concepts: *field* — the different literacies associated with different domains of life; *tenor* — the relationship the writer has with the reader; and *mode* — the nature and form of the text itself.

All participants were consistent in that, with regard to *field*, they said that they employed English punctuation more generously and carefully in fields that were academic and work-related and that, with regard to *tenor*, this was an even greater influence on their use of punctuation. This was an especially significant issue for the student-participants, whose written work reflected asymmetrical power relationships between them and their readers: their teachers or tutors.

The affect of *tenor* on people's attitude towards punctuation is illustrated by comparing the attitudes of Ellen and Brian to their texts: despite Ellen's essay being only a draft¹¹ on which she was still intending to work, and Brian's email being a final text¹² which he had already sent to his recipient, Brian's attitude was more relaxed: 'In emails, I tend to be quick and not careful'¹³. The main reason for Brian's lack of concern about using punctuation adequately was expressed in his further comment: 'I don't feel hindered because the people I deal with would not know how to use [punctuation] either',¹⁴ an attitude that can be contrasted with that of Diana, who thought that punctuation was 'hindering if it shows a lack of education'¹⁵.

However, wider than the context of situation is the context of *culture* (Butt & al. 2000). One of my interview questions was formulated after Marie commented that the difference between French and English punctuation affected her punctuation use in both languages: she thought that the differences in punctuation habits between the two cultures were linked with the differences

⁹ See data in Appendix 2 and findings in section 2.5.

¹⁰ See extracts and summaries in Appendices.

¹¹ See Appendix 2, Data Extract 1.

¹² See Appendix 2, Data Extract 2.

¹³ Talk around text entry in research journal.

¹⁴ See Appendix 1, Question 8.

¹⁵ See Appendix 1, Question 8.

between the French and the English educational approaches.¹⁶ Formerly educated in the French system, she experienced the English system through the education of her three children in the UK. Her observations were that, whereas the French approach operated from reliable rules to texts, the English approach used texts to identify language aspects in context. She also noticed that the grammatical terminology taught in English schools was more basic than the French and simplified to indicate functional aspects, for example, the practice of calling adjectives and adverbs ‘describing words’ or commas and full-stops ‘pauses’. Pat, who writes regularly in French, Spanish and English, expressed the view that more punctuation is needed in French and Spanish writing, where formality calls for longer, more elaborate, complex sentences, than in English writing, where it is preferable to keep all sentences short and straightforward.¹⁷ Therefore, although all Latin-scripted languages share the same punctuation marks, the different cultures, habits, ideologies, rules, intonations, etc. associated with these languages affect punctuation use.

2.2 Identity and social practice

The above comments are also good illustrations of *identity* being constructed in relation to others (Ivanič 1998) and of the ‘social perspective’ of language supported by Mercer, who draws on the Vygotskian theory about ‘the relationship between language and thought and between individual and society’ (Mercer 2000: 9) to introduce the notion of ‘communities of practice’ that are ‘typified by roles and ground rules that govern members’ behaviour’ (*Ibid*: 116–17). They demonstrate that a writer’s motivation to punctuate depends more on the writer’s conception of the reader’s requirements than on textual modality. Although all four professionals said that they ‘only ever [wrote] emails’, this ‘new communication order’ (Snyder 2003) had more implications for Brian’s literacy practice. For him, it was ‘just an email’ and his reader would understand his message, regardless of punctuation. His perception of an email corresponded to Mercer’s description of this asynchronous form of computer mediated communication, which serves to perform rapid problem solving, and represents a ‘clumsy medium, one in which people try to do talk-like things but without the auxiliary systems of gesture and tone of voice for conveying emotions and subtle meaning’ (Mercer 2000: 125–28). In contrast, the three other professionals agreed that a work email is still a formal letter, requiring ‘proper punctuation’. While

¹⁶ Informal discussion, recorded in research journal.

¹⁷ Informal discussion, recorded in research journal.

exemplifying different *literate mentalities* (Olson 2003), these different perspectives also illustrate the individuals' *choice*, influenced by their aspirations, in the construction of their 'constantly negotiated' identities, within different *communities of practice* (Bucholtz 2003).

The participants' confidence in using certain marks was not exclusively related to the depth of their knowledge of punctuation conventions. The relationship between their knowledge of punctuation terms and functions, and their use of punctuation is illustrated as follows:

Use > Knowledge of functions > Knowledge of terminology.

This signifies that the amount of punctuation use is greater than the knowledge of functions, which in turn is greater than the knowledge of terminology.

My closeness to the participants allowed me to notice that the individual's balance of their expressed feelings of empowerment and concern associated with punctuation was in line with what I perceived to be their *identity*, i.e. their temporary positioning in the world: participants in asymmetrical relationships, i.e. younger participants and/or those with less assertive personalities, experienced hindrance.

The idea that punctuation is a 'formal', 'standard', 'official' tool that loses its status in modern speech-like instant communication was unanimous, despite its role in relating speech and writing. Because of its literary and semiotic nature, punctuation is subjected to evolutionary language changes on different levels:

The multiple and often contradictory logics of multimodal text can be explained plausibly and satisfactorily only by bringing them into an integral relation with the logics of other social cultural systems. (Kress 2003: 123)

Although the two texts selected, a GCSE student's school essay and a professional's work email, provided a good comparison of the same type of misuse of punctuation marks (comma, dash, colon, full stop), they were governed by various socio-cultural aspects and needed to be identified differently in terms of:

- Literacy practices (Street 2003).
- Functions/social purposes (Halliday 1994; his genre theory).
- Degrees of formality: in his business email, Brian's informal mode of address, simply the use of his recipient's first name, suggests a certain familiarity with the reader, allowing a lesser degree of formality and an increased autonomy of style.

- Positions in power relationships: in Ellen's essay, punctuation is one of the evaluation and marking criteria.
- Modalities (the perceived ground rules in any communication channel), with emails representing 'a new communication order' (Snyder 2003).
- Channels (the nature of the passage of communication: essay/email).
- Mediums (the form of the passage of communication: paper/screen).

Brian benefited from a certain 'design' freedom (Kress et al. 1998), whereas Ellen responded to academic requirements limited to competence and critique.

2.3 Conventions

Many of the corrections in the texts identified by the participants acting as correctors are supported by some kind of authority;¹⁸ this suggests that internalised rules constitute a large part of 'instinctive punctuation'. However, not only were some necessary corrections not spotted but some participants suggested a 'correction' where none was required, in other words, suggesting a punctuating use that would be 'unconventional'. The following factors might explain these phenomena.

- All the participants claimed that they did not consciously know or rely on precise punctuation rules and that this was, they believed, the case for most people.
- Most participants felt that punctuation rules offered a certain margin of freedom and creativity.
- Confusion could arise because different punctuation rules can be obtained from different reference books.¹⁹
- There are actual differences between British punctuation usage and US usage.²⁰
- Some usages are not prescriptive rules, as such, but flexible conventions which can be applied at the writer's discretion, so long as the writer does so consistently:²¹

¹⁸ See Appendix 2.

¹⁹ For example, some suggest that a semi-colon should only be used to separate clauses that could stand alone as sentences in their own right (Seely 2009: 140; Swan 1998: 459; Ritter 2005: 72), while others suggest that the semi-colon may also separate grammatically dependent clauses (King 2009: p.60; Truss 2003: 114).

²⁰ For example, the practice of the serial comma referred to earlier is standard in US English but is less common in British English.

²¹ For example, there is no rule of punctuation which dictates that quotations running on with the main text must be enclosed within single inverted commas; double inverted commas may also be used for this purpose: Appendix 2, correction 9.

- Some rules cannot be stated simply, because the correct use of the punctuation mark in question depends on a number of factors.²²
- In some cases, different ways of punctuating could all be equally correct.²³
- Whether or not a particular rule applies can depend on the context, which will not necessarily be known to the reader.²⁴
- The use of punctuation sometimes depends on the relationship between the writer and the ‘voice’ of the text (Maybin 2003, pp.160–161, Kamberelis 1992: 359–403); i.e. whether or not the text ‘voices’ the author’s or someone else’s words.²⁵
- The use of punctuation can be influenced by an awareness of the prosody of the text: the writer/reader is conscious of the natural rhythms, cadences and pauses of the text and common sense prevails over a strict application of punctuation rules.²⁶
- Different punctuation rules apply in different languages, which can be confusing for writers of more than one language.²⁷

2.4 Creativity

Elements of *choice* represent the ‘critical aspect of language’ (Wallace 2003), and the individual’s ability to use humanistic interpretation, an idea communicated by Street (2003) from an anthropological perspective. Choice was expressed by various participants, in terms of:

- *Preference*: I don’t use the semi-colon; I just don’t need it — the full stop’s easier.
- *Taste*: I just don’t like them.
- *Risk*: I’m not sure how we’re supposed to use them, but I use them anyway — I live life on the edge! (laughs).

²² For example, the rule that a list should be preceded by a colon does not apply if the list has its own function within the syntax of the sentence: Appendix 2, correction 5.

²³ For example, either a full stop or a semi-colon can be used to separate main clauses; a comment or aside can be enclosed either in commas, parentheses or dashes: Appendix 2, corrections 10, 18.

²⁴ For example, it may not be possible to decide simply from the context whether a relative clause is ‘restrictive’, (i.e. identifies the antecedent substantive that it qualifies) or ‘non-restrictive’ (i.e. merely adds further information about the antecedent substantive that it qualifies); only the second type of clause is separated off from the main clause by a comma: Appendix 2, correction 4.

²⁵ See, for example, Appendix 2, correction 13, where the punctuation that should be used depends on whether ‘something royal’ is the writer’s own voice or that of Wordsworth.

²⁶ For example, on a number of occasions, the correctors gave as their reason for inserting a comma that it was ‘to mark a pause’, but in each case, the punctuation suggested was inappropriate: Appendix 2, corrections 4, 11, 16.

²⁷ For example, in French, a comma may be used before a co-ordinating conjunction to stress semantic opposition and the sentence’s forceful tone, e.g.: *Non seulement il n’aide pas, mais, en plus, il se plaint* [Not only is he unhelpful but he also complains]; as can be seen from the English version, this flexibility is not available in English.

- *Aesthetic*: When it looks right.
- *Design* – in informal writing only: The three dots (ellipses) allow leaving something out that is interpretable, something nondescript that can mean different things from person to person.²⁸

The notion of *design*, frequently used in research into multimodal texts, adds another dimension to the writer's flexibility, as it represents the liberty taken by the writer to rely on the creativity of the reader. It suggests that a punctuation mark is a meaning-making image, placed in specific ways in relation to the text; for example, the multimodal texts of the Kashinawá people of Brazil use meaning-making images, as described by De Souza (2003): in Western writing, such a practice only features in informal texts, as is elaborated in the discussion of emoticons and punctuation used alone in 2.6.

2.5 Graphicness and prosody

The roles of formal punctuation were associated with two main attributes:

- 1- The *prosodic* aspect (linked with the aural sense, the tone, rhythm and pauses in a text), having a semantic (meaning-making) effect: ‘audible pauses’, ‘to make sense’, ‘to help understanding’.²⁹
- 2- The *graphic* aspect (linked with the visual sense, the appearance of texts and sentences), having a syntactic (structuring) effect: ‘to separate sentences’, ‘to make it easier to read’.³⁰

Amongst the focus group, not only did the phenomenon of prosodic punctuation override the graphic phenomenon but it also proved to be more helpful in semantic/linguistic terms.

I question for what reason other than for grouping all ‘graphic’ symbols together, the hyphen and apostrophe (which are not punctuation marks) often figure under the punctuation section of grammar books — most participants showed uncertainty regarding the roles of these two symbols.

²⁸ Researcher's journal entries. Please note that when the context does not necessitate the use of pseudonyms, some participants' comments are quoted anonymously (see participants' accounts in Appendix 1).

²⁹ Researcher's journal entries.

³⁰ Researcher's journal entries.

Furthermore, although the *appearance* of certain marks seemed to create terminological confusion for some participants, this phenomenon is not the ‘graphic phenomenon’ described by Hall, which relates to the appearance of *text*.

2.6 Emoticons

Controversial points of views were expressed on the question of whether or not emoticons could ever be considered punctuation devices. In his explanation of why they could not, Rick recognised a contradiction,³¹ through which he expressed *resistance* (Bucholtz 2003):

- Rick: I hate emoticons; they’re annoying; they are separate from text; they stand alone; they add another meaning. Punctuation is not separate from text; it reinforces text.
- Researcher: Did you say they add meaning to text?
- Rick: Yes.
- Researcher: Do they clarify the text then?
- Rick: Yes (pause), I’m contradicting myself — that’s what I said about the role of punctuation, isn’t it? I just don’t like emoticons.

(Interview extract: Researcher = interviewer, Rick = interviewee)

Although all symbols play a role in meaning-making, traditional punctuation constitute the message, whereas emoticons, as well as punctuation used alone, belong to the context. For example, ellipses are used formally to indicate a part of text left out of a quotation, and informally to rely on the reader’s interpretation. But as Liz³² pointed out, emoticons do not provide this same *design* opportunity, which a punctuation mark used alone can. The question mark used alone can mean ‘what?’, ‘what are you talking about?’, or ‘I don’t understand’; used in conjunction with an exclamation mark, sometimes repeated (!?!?), it can express simultaneous surprise and lack of understanding, possibly meaning: ‘I can’t believe it!’ or ‘that’s not like you!’

Emoticons were attributed, as their name indicates, the role of expressing the emotion of the writer. Both punctuation marks used alone and emoticons were identified as unconventional/informal, separate from the text structure, and linked to context; but the general agreement was that their use in some communication modes does not affect the use and function

³¹ Professional participant; see summary in Appendix 1, Question 7.

³² GCSE student participant; see summary in Appendix 1, Question 7.

of punctuation in formal writing, even when such writing is technologically mediated. Macro- and micro-culture, field and tenor were agreed to affect punctuation types more than the channel.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Implications

My discussion of the findings shows that punctuation is a skill that is dynamic rather than abstract and one which cannot be acquired independently of the socio-cultural experience in which it is used; these facts support the preference for the ‘ideological’ over the ‘autonomous’ literacy model. Punctuation use is ‘subjective’ (Bahktin, in Burcholtz 2003; Kress et al. 1998; Maybin 2003); it varies across contexts, through each individual’s involvement with others and is affected by power relations (Carrington and Luke 1997); it is subject to the individual’s ‘critical interpretation’ (Wallace 2003) and ‘design’ (Kress et al. 1998), and thus has a role in shaping identities.

As is typical when studying aspects of people’s everyday lives, this report reveals many conflicts and contradictions, associated with the complex nature of punctuation. On the one hand, it is a writing device, related to grammar in meaning-making, governed by rules and conventions, and yet striking in its complexity (compared, for example, with spelling systems) and in its flexibility (punctuation rules and styles vary, along with the writers’ indulgence and the readers’ lenience). On the other hand, it is also a semiotic device (Kress et al. 1998: 107) relating speech and writing (but paradoxically finding less use in the most instant, speech-like texts), trivial in certain contexts (of formality levels or channels), or communicating mysterious meanings (design dependence).

By revealing the effects of multi-literacies, multimodality and individual styles over punctuation, this project has educational implications. It confirms the need to acknowledge such effects on language in general and to question the wider applicability and suitability of our socio-culturally grounded educational expectations. Indeed, ‘school literacy’ is only one constituent of an individual’s capital resources (Carrington and Luke 1997); academic literacy and work or everyday literacy are associated with particular aspects of cultural life; therefore ‘teaching [...] has to be able to take account of the variation in literacy practices amongst students’ (Street 2003: 85).

Although the study of eight cases does not provide the opportunity to draw generalisations about adults' punctuation use, it participates in research advancement within the field by revealing contextualised, relevant aspects of punctuation in people's lives, by providing empirical data and generating ideas regarding:

- Punctuation use, function, and terminology.
- The prosodic/graphic roles of punctuation as semantic/syntactic resources.
- The subjectivity of punctuation, due to factors of context, power relations, identity, ideologies, contradictions, creativity, design and evolution.

3.2 Suggestions for further research

The limitations of such a small-scale enquiry are that, although the findings expose major themes, they can only be subjective and exploratory at this stage, and that the conclusions drawn from the findings can, therefore, only be tentative. In particular, Hall's claim that the graphic phenomenon 'can persist for an unnecessarily long and unhelpful period of time' (Hall, 2003: 77) is not supported by my findings and would require further evidence.

In terms of expansion, another study could be undertaken involving children before puberty, with the aim of observing the extent to which the phenomenon of graphic punctuation 'can persist', and to explore if and at what stage a switch might happen from that graphic phenomenon to the prosodic/graphic roles given to punctuation in the present study. I would also like to investigate whether these prosodic/graphic interpretations correspond to the individuals' auditory/visual learning styles and preferences.

Additionally, I suggest that the long-term benefits of simplifying grammatical and punctuation terminology as a way to aid acquisition should be further explored. It would be relevant to question if linguistic and conceptual 'simplifications' in a teacher's *discourse* (Hicks 2003) are strategically adapted to the learners' abilities and realities, effectively taking advantage of the 'third space', a rich zone of collaboration and learning, similar to Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (Gutiérrez et al. 2003), drawing on resources of 'common knowledge', providing scaffolding for learning (Mercer 2000: 139; after Vygotsky) and/or encouraging young learners to engage critically (Wallace: 2003).

Finally, an enquiry into the differences in punctuation rules, practices and teaching approaches between diverse Latin scripted languages would be helpful. In addition to the

comments made in this study on this subject, I have noted the confusion that can be experienced by writers of German, who tend to apply the German rule of punctuation that requires a comma to separate all grammatical units inappropriately to all other languages. I speculate whether literate Anglophones, probably equally affected by their English punctuating systems when writing in other languages, would benefit from a teaching approach that would both emphasise standard grammatical punctuation ‘conventions’ and recognise variations of styles across practices and cultures.

Appendix 1: Table of participants' accounts, summary of data obtained from interviews and further conversations³³

key words in bold; parentheses contain researcher's notes;

participants' ID codes: S=Student, GCSE=General Certificate of Education, UG=Undergraduate, Prof=Professional.

Participants & ID codes	<u>Questions</u>
	1. How much use of punctuation do you make in your everyday writing; and in what situation or in which type of writing do you use punctuation the most?
Liz (S/GCSE)	Some; mostly in schoolwork .
Ellen (S/GCSE)	A lot; in essays .
Lewis (S/UG)	Some; more in academic writing , less in emails and text where I'm more lazy.
Pat (S/UG)	A lot; in essays , and emails, but less in text – it depends who I write to.
Brian (Prof)	Some; formal letters .
Marie (Prof)	A lot; in my work emails – formal and informal – and in attached reports, but less in English than in French.
Diana (Prof)	A lot; in work letters and emails – these require use of punctuation, formal and informal. I find it hard not to use punctuation – my daughters laugh at me for using it in mobile text messages.
Rick (Prof)	A lot; I always use it but I'm more assiduous in formal writing . I use a limited variety in mobile text messages and informal writing.
	2. How important is punctuation for writing and reading; what is its role?
Liz (S/GCSE)	Not very important; it changes the sound , makes things read more easily (prosodic)
Ellen (S/GCSE)	Very important; it changes meaning and structures sentences (meaning, grammar/functional)
Lewis (S/UG)	Very; it is the foundation of language, translates speech into writing, and has a universal standard, helps both with tone and sentence organisation, but overall, more with tone (prosodic, functional)
Pat (S/UG)	Very important; it changes meaning, helps understand written language, with intonation (meaning, prosodic)
Brian (Prof)	Very; it allows you to be precise about you mean, and to be read with the right tone (meaning, prosodic)

³³ The author expresses her thanks to the participants, without whose co-operation this study would not have been possible.

Marie (Prof)	Very; it helps meaning and text structure, makes text visually clear to help meaning. “I’m a very visual person” (meaning, functional, visual/graphic)
Diana (Prof)	Very; punctuation and grammar make a text correct. It helps meaning, sense making, and visual order (functional, meaning, visual/graphic)
Rick (Prof)	Very; it clarifies meaning, register emotions (!), intonation and feelings (meaning, prosodic)
	3. How did you learn to use punctuation; is it different in other languages?
Liz (S/GCSE)	At school, we had to punctuate unpunctuated texts or correct punctuation in other texts. I have not learnt since and I still don't know how to use some marks; just the Spanish question mark is different – a different way of doing the same thing.
Ellen (S/GCSE)	Since Year 4 and I'm still learning it ; I use the same punctuation in French and English. I have noticed that some emoticons are different in French (: and ^^).
Lewis (S/UG)	First at school and now, when I read. But when I write, it's more intuitive , what seems right, not so much by rules; no, French accents are not punctuation, and the Spanish question mark is just a different way of doing the same thing.
Pat (S/UG)	At school, and then it developed as common sense ; French and Spanish make more use of punctuation and therefore in these languages, it is more common to see long written sentences, which in English would be qualified as run-on sentences and frowned upon. In English, short sentences are more formal; in French and Spanish, long sentences are more skilful, more formal. My knowledge of punctuation in these other languages makes me understand punctuation in English better.
Brian (Prof)	At school, but I can't remember because I wasn't very interested ; I don't know about other languages.
Marie (Prof)	I learnt French punctuation at school and English non-punctuation in higher education. English punctuation is different to French as there's a lot less of it, especially less commas and semi-colons. English people don't appear to know how to use punctuation; for them grammar rules are less important. English language is more about use, so people can be creative. The teaching approach is different. French rules don't apply to English punctuation.
Diana (Prof)	At school, I learnt some rules but I then developed it as an instinct , with practice of reading and writing letters. You would not go far with just rules, you have to know whether a punctuation mark is right in given sentence, and you can't explain that.
Rick (Prof)	I learnt the basics at school, and then refined my knowledge professionally (TEFL course).
	4. Which punctuation marks do you not use (in parentheses); and which ones are you absolutely confident with (underlined)?
Liz (S/GCSE)	<u>Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, ellipses, comma, semicolon, colon, double quotation marks, single quotation marks, round brackets, slash, dash, hyphen, apostrophe.</u>

Ellen (S/GCSE)	<u>Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, ellipses, comma, semicolon, colon, double quotation marks, single quotation marks, round brackets, slash, (dash), (hyphen), apostrophe.</u> Ellipses used only in CMC and text messages to make sentence sound like spoken language.
Lewis (S/UG)	<u>Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, ellipses, comma, semicolon, colon, double quotation marks, single quotation marks, round brackets, slash, (dash), hyphen, apostrophe.</u>
Pat (S/UG)	<u>Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, ellipses, comma, semicolon, colon, double quotation marks, single quotation mark, round brackets, slash, dash, hyphen, apostrophe.</u>
Brian (Prof)	<u>Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, (ellipses), comma, (semicolon), (colon), (double quotation marks), (single quotation marks), round brackets, (slash), (dash), (hyphen), apostrophe.</u>
Marie (Prof)	<u>Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, ellipses in less formal emails, comma, (semicolon), colon, double quotation marks, single quotation marks, round brackets, slash, dash, hyphen, apostrophe.</u>
Diana (Prof)	<u>Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, ellipses, comma, semicolon, colon, double quotation marks, (single quotation marks), round brackets, slash, dash (only in the sort-codes on the computer at work), (hyphen), apostrophe.</u>
Rick (Prof)	<u>Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, ellipses (not in formal), comma, semicolon, colon, double quotation marks, single quotation marks, round brackets, slash, dash, hyphen, apostrophe.</u>
	5. Do you not use some punctuation because you are not sure how?
Liz (S/GCSE)	The opposite , I use punctuation even though I'm not sure I'm using it right.
Ellen (S/GCSE)	Some yes, I would not know how to use ellipses in essays, or the dash.
Lewis (S/UG)	Yes, the dash.
Pat (S/UG)	No , I use them anyway, I live life on the edge.
Brian (Prof)	Yes, many I don't use, I don't need to .
Marie (Prof)	No .
Diana (Prof)	Yes, because I don't need them . I also use some I'm unsure of: I use the computer's writing help.
Rick (Prof)	No . I assume I make mistakes.
	6. Do you consider the hyphen and the apostrophe to be punctuation devices?
Liz (S/GCSE)	The apostrophe, yes. Not the Hyphen – it serves to link words.
Ellen (S/GCSE)	Yes, they have the same role as punctuation, they change meaning.
Lewis (S/UG)	Yes they part of words but they are just as important.
Pat (S/UG)	Yes, they both change meaning too.

Brian (Prof)	Yes, they help understand meaning.
Marie (Prof)	No , they are part of word construction, not sentence construction.
Diana (Prof)	The apostrophe, yes, because it changes words meanings indicating possession or an abbreviation; but not the hyphen , it's word spelling.
Rick (Prof)	I'm not sure about the apostrophe, but the hyphen is a spelling device – not punctuation.
	7. Are/could emoticons become punctuation devices; and why?
Liz (S/GCSE)	They are not proper English but they could become punctuation because they make things sound different.
Ellen (S/GCSE)	Yes, they change meaning, show feelings and how things are meant.
Lewis (S/UG)	No, they are too modern. They don't convey tone but feeling/mood. They brake the flow of the reading, they are distracting. They distract the reader's interpretation (anti-design) They banalise text.
Pat (S/UG)	No, they are not official; they are just aesthetic ; restricted to informal writing, short speech-like forms, incomplete sentences; they replace writing.
Brian (Prof)	No, they are a modern piece of pop art , expressing mood, they are not punctuation.
Marie (Prof)	No, although they are made of punctuation symbols , they are not punctuation because they stand on their own, they don't need words. Their purpose is to imitate oral speech.
Diana (Prof)	No, they are informal, unofficial and not part of the English language.
Rick (Prof)	No; they are annoying, I don't like them, they are just graphic symbols, not part of the text. Symbols are not punctuation when used separately from text. Whereas punctuation reinforces text, emoticons add another line to your text. They have a meaning on their own.
	8. Do you feel hindered or empowered by the use of punctuation?
Liz (S/GCSE)	Both . It helps express myself better but I always get corrected with the semicolon for example.
Ellen (S/GCSE)	Only empowered in social writing but both hindered and empowered in school work.
Lewis (S/UG)	Empowered because they are necessary and because of the diversity of punctuation marks available which helps people express themselves better.
Pat (S/UG)	Generally empowered because it helps express myself better.

Brian (Prof)	Neither, it's just useful . I don't feel hindered because the people I deal with (his readers) would not know how to use it either.
Marie (Prof)	Only empowered ; it enables me to formulate a message, to say what I want to say. I use punctuation because I need it, for the effect it has on what you say.
Diana (Prof)	'Empowered' might be too strong, punctuation is a good tool but it's hindering if it shows a lack of education. Because using punctuation is so instinctive, there is always a little doubt .
Rick (Prof)	Only empowered .

Appendix 2: Extracts of two participants' texts and summary of comments

In the two texts that follow, the analyses and bold type indicates corrections which, if made, would be instances of 'unconventional punctuation' as defined by Hall.⁴⁹

Data Extract 1: Ellen's Essay

Both poets (**1**) William Wordsworth and William Blake (**2**) decided to portray the city of London in their poems (**3**) 'Westminster Bridge' and 'London'. The poems show many similarities (**4**) through (**5**) the figurative language, imagery, rhythm, and structure the poets both use. [Nevertheless],⁵⁰ they do manipulate these in their own way (**6**) in order to convey their passionate feelings about London. [...]

Wordsworth and Blake are both romantic poets, which is important to take into account when analyzing both poems. It is clear to see (**7**) that they both express their feelings about London passionately through their poems. [...]

He refers to London as (**8**) 'a sight so touching in its majesty' (**9**) (**10**) This suggests that Wordsworth is so impressed by its beauty (**11**) that he refers to it as majestic, (**12**) (**13**) something royal. [...]

'Bights' and 'plagues' are both words with hard consonant sounds (**14**) which help express the anger he is trying to convey. [...]

⁴⁹ That is, the use of conventional punctuation marks where an experienced user of punctuation would least expect them (Hall 2003: 73–78).

⁵⁰ The text received from Ellen originally said '[t]hough, they do manipulate [...]' . The text was amended, after Ellen explained that she had intended to write 'nevertheless, they do manipulate [...]' but overlooked making the alteration. The correctors only saw the amended version.

No.	Add	Remove	Correctors	Ellen's comments
1	Comma		5	should there be a comma or colon here or something, don't know
2	Comma		1	yes, with like a closing comma here
3	Colon or comma		4	nope, nothing here
4	Comma		2	
5	Colon		1	
6.	Comma		4	definitely a comma here — because there's a change of ideas
7		Comma	5	should not be a comma here — don't know why, not needed
8	Colon		1	maybe something here? Don't know what should be used before a quote
9	Double inverted commas	Single inverted commas	2	
10	Full stop (or semi-colon)		6	full stop here, I just forgot
11	Comma		1	
12	Add single inverted commas		0	
13	'and'	Comma	1	I put a comma here to separate and make sense
14	Comma		3	comma missing here, to make sense when reading it

TABLE 1: ANALYSIS OF CORRECTIONS —DATA EXTRACT 1

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Liz	S/GCSE	x		x	x		x	x	x		x				
Lewis	S/UG	x		x			x	x			x				x
Pat	S/UG	x		x				x		x	x			x	
Marie	Prof	x	x				x	x			x				
Diana	Prof	x			x			x		x	x				x
Rick	Prof			x		x	x			x	x				x

TABLE 2: ANALYSIS OF CORRECTORS — DATA EXTRACT 1

Notes:

- (1) & (2) One corrector suggested the addition of a comma both before and after the noun phrase ‘William Wordsworth and William Blake’, which is in apposition to the preceding noun phrase ‘[b]oth poets’; four correctors suggested a comma before, but not after the phrase. An appositional phrase is enclosed in commas if it *adds extra information* about the first one (a non-restrictive appositional phrase) but not if it *identifies* the first one (a restrictive appositional phrase (Eastwood 1994: 14). In the context, the appositional phrase *identifies* the preceding noun phrase, so *no* commas are necessary, either before or after it. It is possible that the punctuation of the four correctors who inserted a comma *before* the phrase but not *after* was suggested by prosody, a pause being ‘audible’ before ‘William Wordsworth’ but less so after ‘Blake’.
- (3) Four correctors suggested that the titles of the poems should be preceded by either a colon or by comma (the titles being in this case treated as non-restrictive appositional phrases). However, neither a colon nor a comma would be usual in academic writing: titles of complete works are usually put in italics, without single inverted commas, and parts of works, such as poem titles and short stories in collections in roman and enclosed in inverted commas (see, for example, MHRA 2008: 41–46; 54).
- (4) Two correctors suggested that a comma was required before ‘through’ to mark a pause, but this would be incorrect: the phrase ‘through the figurative [...] both use’ is an adverbial phrase of means qualifying the verb phrase. Such phrases are *not* separated by a comma, unless they precede the verb phrase (Eastwood 1994: 327–322).
- (5) One corrector suggested that there should be a colon after ‘through’ as what follows is a list. This phrases ‘figurative language’, ‘imagery’, ‘rhythm’ and ‘structure’ do not in this case comprise a ‘list’, as such: they function as complements of the preposition ‘through’ to show the means whereby the ‘poems show many similarities’.
- (6) Four correctors suggested a comma here, because what follows is a ‘non-restrictive clause’ and Ellen thought that one was needed ‘because of a change of ideas’. Neither suggestion is correct: the phrase ‘in order to convey their passionate feelings about London’ functions as an infinitive clause of purpose and, as such, does *not* require a comma (Eastwood 1994: 147).
- (7) Five correctors suggested that this comma should be removed because ‘the clause introduced by that is restrictive’. The comma after ‘to see’ is indeed incorrect but not for this reason: the phrase ‘that they both [...] through their poems’ is a noun clause, complement of ‘[i]t is clear to see’. Such clauses are not separated off by commas (Eastwood 1994: 71).
- (8) One corrector suggested that the quotation should be preceded by a colon; this is usually only done if the quotation is ‘free standing’, i.e., is broken off by increased space from the preceding and following typescript of the main text (MHRA 2008: 44); a short quotation that runs on with the main text, as is the case here is simply in quotation marks (MHRA 2008: 42, which advocates the use of single quotation marks, but see the next point).
- (9) Two correctors suggested that the quotation should be enclosed in double, rather than single, inverted commas on the grounds of personal preference. As indicated in the preceding note, the modern practice, at least in some academic writing, is to enclose all short quotations that run on with the main text in single quotation marks; only a

quotation within a quotation is enclosed in double quotation marks (MHRA 2008: 42). However, there is no hard and fast rule and different conventions will obtain in other genres of writing.

- (10) As all six correctors noted, the sentence clearly lacks punctuation to separate it from the next one. This could be a full stop as they suggested, but a semi-colon would also have been appropriate, having regard to the link between the two sentences (Eastwood 1994: 70).
- (11) One corrector suggested a comma, ‘to mark a pause’, but no comma is required here because the clause ‘that he refers [...] something royal’ is a noun clause which functions as complement of ‘is so impressed [...]’ (Eastwood 1994: 71).
- (12) No corrector commented on the fact that the phrase ‘he refers to [London’s beauty] as [...]’ appears to suggest that what follows will be another quotation from ‘Upon Westminster Bridge’. What follows is not a quote as such but an allusion to the word ‘majesty’ in Wordsworth’s words ‘so touching in its majesty’ which have just been quoted; enclosing at least ‘majestic’ in quotation marks would indicate this allusion.
- (13) One corrector suggested replacing the comma after ‘majestic’ with ‘and’. This would be possible, provided either both ‘majestic’ and ‘something royal’ can be treated as quotations from ‘Upon Westminster Bridge’ or neither can. In fact, ‘something royal’ is not a quotation but the writer’s own comment on ‘majestic’. In informal writing, a single parenthetical dash could replace the comma, but academic writing does not encourage this practice (MHRA 2008: 26).
- (14) Three correctors believed there should be a comma before ‘which’ but this is a case where it is not possible to determine what punctuation would be correct without knowing the intention of the writer. The fact that the finite verb in the subordinate clause is third person plural suggests that the relative pronoun refers to ‘sounds’. If the author intends the fact that the sounds help to express anger to be a further *defining* attribute, the clause is a restrictive relative clause, so no comma is required (Eastwood 1994: 71). However, if the sounds are already defined by the fact that they are hard and consonantal and the fact that they also help to express anger is additional information, the clause is a non-restrictive relative clause, so a comma is required (*Ibid.*). However, Ellen’s comment suggests that she *may* have intended the clause to function as qualifying the main clause itself by way of being a comment on it, though if this were the case, she is more likely to have written ‘which helps to convey’. In this case, it would be treated as a non-restrictive relative clause, so a comma would be required. In the circumstances, the suggestion is neither right nor wrong.

Data Extract 2: Brian's email.

Nick (15)

Could we make a start on arranging finance for the improvements that we have already done (16) as well as the further planned improvements. (17) We have spent around 10k so far this year on medium term repairs and equipment, (18) by medium term (19) I mean expenditure that will last at least 5 years. This has consisted of (20)

(21) new computers,
new hifi (not yet installed), (31)
roof repairs,
new web site,
ice machine,
redecorations (22) and concrete (22) and drainage work to the rear of the building. (23)

We have planned to close on the 4th and 5th Jan to do the following works. (24)

Estimated cost of 12k (25)

- (26) totally redo the bar area in the main dining area, (27) this will not only greatly improve the appearance of the restaurant (28) but also improve efficiency (29) and at the same time create an extra table for 2/3 people. (30)

-install a new hifi system which will further improve ambiance. (31)

-purchase a new espresso machine (32)

- replace the kitchen floor.

No.	Add	Remove	Correctors	Brian's comments
15	Comma		6	it's okay, it's a just a title
16	Comma		4	comma? To break the sentence maybe?
17	Question mark		5	full stop, end of sentence
18	(a dash)		2	comma, break in the sentence, easier to read
19	Comma		2	no, that's good
20	Colon		6	colon, semi-colon?
21	Dash and capital letter		3	don't know
22	Comma		2	yes, I think that's all okay
23	See note		1	just makes sense, so that's alright
24	Colon	Full stop	5	here, I don't know
25	Parentheses		4	
26	Capital letter		1	the dash? Like a bullet point, to show a list — did not get round to it in the list above — In emails, I tend to be quick and not careful
27	Full stop (or dash)		5	should be a comma here — change of meaning and direction in the sentence
28	Comma		2	
29	Comma		4	not sure
30	Dash	Solidus	2	comma? I suppose
31	See note		2	
32	Full stop		5	full stop missing here, yes

TABLE 3: ANALYSIS OF CORRECTIONS — DATA EXTRACT 2

		15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
Liz	S/GCSE	X		X			X	X	X					X		X			X
Lewis	S/UG	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X			X	X	X
Pat	S/UG	X	X	X		X	X				X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Marie	Prof	X	X	X	X		X	X			X	X		X		X			X
Diana	Prof	X	X	X			X				X	X		X	X	X			X
Rick	Prof	X	X				X		X		X	X	X						

TABLE 4: ANALYSIS OF CORRECTORS — DATA EXTRACT 2

Notes:

- (15) All six correctors pointed out the lack of a comma after a salutation in a letter.
- (16) Four correctors suggested a comma here ‘to mark a pause and because commas are sometimes used before “as well as”’. A comma would be incorrect here because the prepositional phrase ‘as well as the further planned improvements’ functions as second complement of ‘finance for’ (Eastwood 1994: 324).
- (17) An interrogative sentence, as this is, should close with a question mark, not a full stop, though only five correctors noted this.
- (18) Two correctors suggested that the comma here should be removed, but a comma is required here: the phrase ‘by medium term [...] 5 years’ with which this sentence ends is a comment on or explanation of ‘medium term’. Alternatively, either this comment/explanation could instead have been preceded by a single parenthetical dash or the writer could have started a new sentence with ‘by medium term [...]’, using either a full stop or a semi-colon to close the previous sentence (Eastwood 1994: 70)
- (19) Two correctors suggested a comma here because “‘by medium term’ is an introductory clause”. A comma is required because the prepositional phrase ‘by medium term’, which functions as complement of the verb ‘mean’, comes before rather than after the finite verb (Eastwood 1994: 71).
- (20) All six correctors pointed out that the list which follows should be preceded by a colon (Eastwood 1994: 72).
- (21) The three correctors who suggested that dashes and capital letters should be used to introduce each element in the list are neither right nor wrong, as this is not strictly a matter of punctuation but rather one of style. However, it would be better for both this vertical list and the later one to be formatted and punctuated in the same way (the later list introduces each item with a hyphen, whereas this one does not and this list uses a comma after each item except the last, whereas the later one uses full stops, apart from the second item, which has nothing).
- (22) Two correctors suggested a comma after ‘redecorations’ and ‘concrete’ on the basis that a comma is required before the co-ordinating conjunction, where three or more items are joined in a series. The use of the serial comma is not obligatory in British English (Eastwood 1994: 72), so they are neither right nor wrong. However, the use of the serial comma assumes that ‘redecorations’ is part of a list of work to be done ‘to the rear of the building’ which includes ‘concrete and drainage work’. If ‘redecorations’ is one item and ‘concrete and drainage work to the rear of the building’ another, it would be better for ‘redecorations’ to be followed by a comma (for consistency with the punctuation of the previous four items in the vertical list) and a line break (see the next point).

- (23) One corrector suggested that ‘concrete and drainage work to the rear of the building’ constitutes the last element of the list and should figure on the next line, after a dash, starting with a capital letter, and without the first ‘and’, like this:
- Concrete and drainage work to the rear of the building.
- This is not strictly a punctuation point but is nonetheless a valid one; the formatting should replicate that of the previous items, though this time the phrase will be punctuated by a full stop.
- (24) This phrase should end with a colon, not a full stop, as it introduces the list that follows (Eastwood 1994: 72), although only five correctors made this point.
- (25) As four correctors pointed out, the phrase ‘Estimated cost of 12k’ is effectively a parenthetical comment on the ‘following works’, so would be better moved to the end of the phrase ‘[w]e have planned [...] following works’ and either enclosed within parentheses or preceded by either a comma or a dash; the upper case ‘E’ would, of course, be changed to a lower case ‘e’.
- (26) One corrector suggested that capital letters should be used to introduce each element in the list, but, as observed under note 21, there are no rules which prescribe how a vertical list should be formatted and punctuated beyond the general rule that formatting and punctuation should be consistent not only as regards the items in the particular vertical list but also as regards any other vertical lists in the same piece of writing.
- (27) Five correctors suggested a full stop after ‘main dining area’. Certainly punctuation of some sort is needed but the phrase beginning ‘this will not only greatly improve [...]’ comments on and explains the need for the proposed refurbishment of the bar area; a full stop would be too extreme. In view of its parenthetical nature, it would be better to introduce the phrase by a dash and, in order to make the punctuation of this list consistent with that of the first, close it with a comma; the remaining items in the list except the last should similarly end with a comma.
- (28) Two correctors suggested a comma on the basis that there is sometimes a comma before ‘and also’. The construction ‘not only [...] but also’ illustrates the use of correlative co-ordinating conjunctions, i.e. conjunctions which link two phrases that are in a complementary or reciprocal relationship, in this case the verb phrases ‘this will [...] improve greatly’ and ‘[this] will [...] improve efficiency’. Whether or not a comma is required between the two clauses depends on whether or not the second verb immediately follows the conjunction: if it does, as is the case here, no comma is required (Eastwood 1994: 70). If the subject of the second verb were expressed, a comma would be necessary: ‘this will not only improve [...], but this will also improve [...]’.
- (29) Four correctors suggested a comma here because ‘a comma is required before a co-ordinating conjunction’. British English tends not to insert a comma, where the second main verb immediately follows a co-ordinating conjunction, (Eastwood 1994: 70) or would do, were it not for the interpolation of an adverbial phrase, as is the case here. The addition of a comma would, therefore, be an instance of ‘unconventional punctuation’. The adverbial phrase ‘at the same time’ should itself be enclosed within commas (Eastwood 1994: 71).
- (30) Two people suggested that the slash (or solidus) ‘/’ should be replaced by a dash ‘–’, as the latter is used to express a range, whereas the former indicates a relationship between two or more objects. However, the slash can also be used as a substitute for ‘or’ and the

phrase ‘a table for 2/3 people’ can be understood as meaning ‘a table for two or three people’, so its use here is not incorrect.

- (31) Although this is not strictly a punctuation point, two correctors pointed out that ‘hi-fi’ requires a hyphen (here and also in the first list).
- (32) Five correctors pointed out that the full stop, which has otherwise been used consistently at the end of each clause in this list, is missing here. This is a valid point, although, in order to be consistent with the punctuation used in the *first* list, each item in this list should end with a comma, except the last which should end with a full stop (see note 27).

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Further reading

On teaching punctuation:

Mann, N., ‘Teaching Punctuation as Information Management’, in *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2003), pp. 359–93

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On punctuation usage in information technology:

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- Zhou, L., ‘Application of TPB to punctuation usage in instant messaging’, *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 26, 5 (2007), 399–407

⁵¹ There is clearly a typographical error in the on-line version of this article: it should be ‘Punctuation-pronunciation’ (Eds.).

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