

## Misjudgment of English Comma Sense and Types of Errors among EFL Students at Different Educational Levels

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### Abstract

A comma is one of the most vulnerable types of punctuation marks because a slight misplacement or omission in its position can lead to misunderstanding or ambiguity in the sentences. This study aims to investigate the types of errors (i.e., error of omission, error of addition, and error of mis-ordering) that occur in the punctuation of commas among students. Students from three different educational levels were taken as a population (school, college, and university level). Each student was given 14 different unpunctuated sentences, 7 from the English language and 7 from the Urdu language, with an attempt to analyze any possible influence of the first language on the second language as well. Based on the findings, the errors were categorized into their respective categories, and errors of omission were seen most frequently among all the types of errors, with a similar pattern that clearly shows an influence of the grammatical rules of the first language (Urdu) on the second language (English). This study suggests possible methods that can be implemented to control or minimize the errors in the punctuation of commas.

**Keywords:** Comma, Punctuation errors, Different educational levels, Types of errors, Influence of LI rules on L2

### I: Introduction

Being able to critically write and convey your meaning in a clear way is one of the most necessary aspects a student needs to have a grip on. "Writing is a way to produce language and express ideas, feelings and opinions." Harmer (2004:31). Writing is one of the most complex skills. "writing is elaborate, difficult, and the most complex language ability." Allen and Corder (1974, p. 177). For making a piece of writing effective and being able to convey properly what is intended, it is extremely important to know the proper usage of punctuation while writing. Punctuation marks are just like gestures or expressions, as they serve the function of showing an intended and clear meaning in a piece of writing. One of the most basic and important forms of punctuation is the comma. A comma, according to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, is defined as "the mark (,) used to separate the items in a list or to show where there is a slight break in a sentence." The Macmillan Dictionary defines a comma as "the symbol ',' used in writing and printing between parts of a sentence or between things in a list."

### I.I: Motivation for the Study

There are limited in depth or qualitative studies that are based on analyzing the errors in the usage of commas made by the students in their writing. The comma, being the most basic and most important form of punctuation, plays a vital role in shaping the meaning of the statements, as even a slight change in the placement, omission of a necessary comma, or addition of more commas than required can deteriorate the meaning intended. The usage of the comma also varies across languages, as it is a sign that is used for indicating pauses, separating lists, and clarifying sentence structure. It is extremely important for one to be familiar with the usage of the comma to convey proper sense and meaning. The lack of qualitative studies on the errors in the usage of commas is the main driving force for this study. This study tends to examine the errors in the usage of commas by the students at different academic levels.

## 2: Literature Review

When people speak, they make use of some ways to deliver their point, like voice intonations, hand gestures, and eye movement. But when they write, there are no such possibilities; punctuation marks are a key factor in clarifying what kind of thought the writer wants to deliver. Learning punctuation marks is very important to making clear writing. According to Meyer's (1985) research, teachers believe that precise punctuation marks the distinction between "good" and "bad" writing. He also mentioned that to help the reader understand each sentence's intended meaning, students writing in an easy-to-read manner must correctly use a variety of punctuation marks. Writing is tricky for many students as it is multifaceted and has various dimensions, complexities, and elements. Grammar is an essential part of meaningful communication for forming sentences properly, like sentence arrangement, structure, and other basics. Punctuation marks are also an important tool for proper communication through writing. Every writing assignment requires a thorough understanding of punctuation since it eliminates ambiguities and makes prose understandable. Another statement was made: "A writer uses punctuation to help his readers understand the meaning of his words." (Rehman, 2005)

According to many researchers, the most common and significant mistake is the usage of commas in various contexts. A comma splice, for instance, is a comma that unites two independent phrases, according to Alley (1987). Comma splices ought to be swapped out for semicolons or periods. Furthermore, he stated that one of the most common punctuation mistakes is the possessive singular of nouns added with an apostrophe, regardless of the last letter. According to Alley, the amount of space allotted to each punctuation mark indicates how difficult it is for most people to use. According to Russell's (1984), for instance, question marks are discussed far less frequently than apostrophes and bracketing commas because very few people find them difficult to use.

According to Corder (1981:23), error analysis is the study of mistakes made by second-language learners to forecast mistakes or challenges in learning a foreign language. Based on the definition, the author deduces that an error occurs when a learner's comprehension of the target language is insufficient. So, he makes more errors in writing as he is not familiar with where to write commas, take pauses, or other ways of perceiving an idea.

Syntax (structure) and semantics (coherence) in every piece of writing are affected by punctuation marks (Gamaroff, 2000; Shaughnessy, 1977). According to Carroll and Wilson (1993), learners face problems with punctuation marks because there are no universal rules for punctuation. In the same way, Byrne (1988) said that punctuation is extremely difficult because it has never been standard. Shokouhi and Dabbagh (2009) said that learners face difficulties dealing with periods and commas. Mahmood et al. (2014) say that errors in the writing of learners are more frequent in punctuation marks. He says that learners make more mistakes with punctuation marks, particularly errors in the use of full stops, commas, and apostrophes. Learners use mostly "of" to show possession of animate nouns. This shows that punctuation marks are not taught to them at the basic level, and they make bulky mistakes in punctuation. Sajid and Siddiqui (2015) say that students of social sciences and medical sciences also make punctuation errors in their writing; these are dominant errors in their writing. Punctuation errors are 27 percent, which is above other types of grammatical errors. The use of commas is frequently wrong in the writings of social sciences and medical sciences students. They say that proper use of commas requires a deep understanding of English grammar, as the comma is used in 16 different places in complex or compound sentence types.

Younus and Albalavi (2015) reported that students are severely confused about using punctuation marks properly in their text. They analyzed the absence of capital letters at the beginning of a sentence, rare proper noun capitalization, errors in the use of a colon, the omission of the semicolon, misuse of exclamation marks, poor or no review of writing, errors in word spacing, a lack of question marks, and the omission of a comma after beginning words as the most common errors in student writing. They reported that learners must be properly taught different aspects of the English punctuation system, such as how to punctuate a sentence and when to end a sentence.

Rumki (2005) says that the use of appropriate punctuation not only helps readers understand your meaning but also draws them into your work. Poor punctuation can disrupt the flow of thoughts and shift meaning. Further, Rubinson (2002) states that the use of proper punctuation gives clean thoughts. Linguistic proficiency is important in the English language because it has multiple genres. This language has a variety of accents and dialects of speaking. In writing, there are also different ways to describe any idea, like essay writing, poems, novels, books, and others. In every case, it demands its own language; usage of words, arrangement of words, and punctuation marks are different for every way of using that language. Students of any other language background, like Urdu, Punjabi, Saraiki, Arabic, or Hindi, make more errors in their usage of punctuation and word usage.

Sajid (2016) studied the role of expression and diction through error analysis in the English language of L2 freshmen's academic texts in interdisciplinary texts in Business & Management Sciences and IT & Computer Sciences. He has evaluated a corpus of forty published articles and introductions that were downloaded from different journals. He downloaded 20 articles on IT and computer sciences and 20 articles on business and management sciences. These articles were written by L2 novel writers. He found that writers made frequent errors in placing punctuation marks.

Abbasi (2017) says that undergraduate students from Pakistan make more errors in placing punctuation marks. Analysis of writing shows that 111 mistakes made by a learner contain 41 punctuation mistakes, which is too many, and writing shows a very negative impact. The frequency of punctuation errors among females was 42 percent, while among males it was 32 percent, which shows that females make more mistakes as compared to male students. The punctuation error ratio was 61:50.

Students of every level make errors using punctuation marks in their writing. A lack of knowledge about written English rules becomes responsible for making frequent errors in students writing (Hussain et al., 2013).

Most errors in Pakistani students are the result of mother tongue interference in written English (Sarfraz, 2011). Moy (1996) described a new intelligent tutoring system (ITS) that sets mechanical rules for teaching English capitalization and punctuation. According to him, learners make errors due to a lack of teaching materials provided by English teachers and a lack of teaching methods besides motivation. English teachers can use multiple methods, like the total physical response method, communicative language teaching, grammar paraphrasing, audiolingual, and many more, to teach the English language. Therefore, motivation for proper punctuation mark usage and activities to learn punctuation mark usage may help learners perform well in this regard.

Angelillo (2002) said that teachers mostly deplore students who do not remember punctuation marks when they write. He says that teachers must change their way of teaching punctuation marks by conveying meaning or inquiring about meaning. For example, they can teach them punctuation mark usage, not punctuation rules. They might teach the value of punctuation marks, as words and letters are important to convey meaning.

Allen (2002) explained how to write sentences step by step, starting with punctuation basics like commas and periods. He also discussed more advanced topics like quoting speech and using colons and semicolons. He showed how to avoid common punctuation mistakes, like using too many commas or using commas instead of periods.

### 2.1: Objectives

This study aims for the following objectives:

- To classify errors made in the usage of commas by students at different academic levels.
- To analyze if there is any influence of the first language (LI) rules on the second language.
- To evaluate the comma related errors made by the students in the punctuation of the given text.

### 2.2: Research Questions

- What type of errors are made by the students in the punctuation of the comma?
- What is the most frequent type of error found in the punctuation of the comma?
- Is there any possible influence of the grammatical rules of the first language on the second language?

## 3: Research Methodology

### 3.1: Design of the Study

In this study, a qualitative and quantitative approach, along with an error analysis approach, is employed for the purpose of the analysis of the data. A questionnaire was used for the collection of the data. A total of 100 responses by the participants were analyzed as the sample of the study, and the errors in the usage of commas were identified and classified into their respective categories. The students were given a questionnaire consisting of 14 different sentences, 7 from the English language and 7 from the Urdu language, with the aim of identifying if there is any influence of the native language (Urdu) on the second language (English).

### 3.2: Data Collection

Each student was given a questionnaire consisting of 14 unpunctuated sentences (Urdu and English) that were taken from the standard books and sources that are part of the curriculum and syllabus of the students. Students were supposed to punctuate the sentences with commas at the required spaces. Consent was obtained from the administration and the respondents. 40 students were chosen from the University of Sahiwal, Sahiwal, who are currently enrolled in the bachelor's program in English language and literature. 30 students were chosen from Punjab College, Sahiwal. And 30 students were chosen from Mukkabir Schools, Sahiwal.

#### **Punctuate the sentences with commas (,) where necessary.**

**He lost his money reputation and his friends.**

**Rich and poor high and low men and women all gathered to greet him.**

**The weather was nice we decided to go for a picnic.**

**Milton the great English poet was blind.**

**She was born on September 11 2007.**

**For dinner I made pasta salad and garlic bread.**

**He said "Let's play cricket".**

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### 3.2.I: Questionnaire

Responses were obtained from the students, and a self-analysis was performed on the data. The errors in the punctuation of commas were identified and classified into their respective categories (error of omission, addition, and mis-ordering). The data analysis method employed was Corder's (1974) five-stage error analysis procedure. The stages listed below can be used to summarize this method:

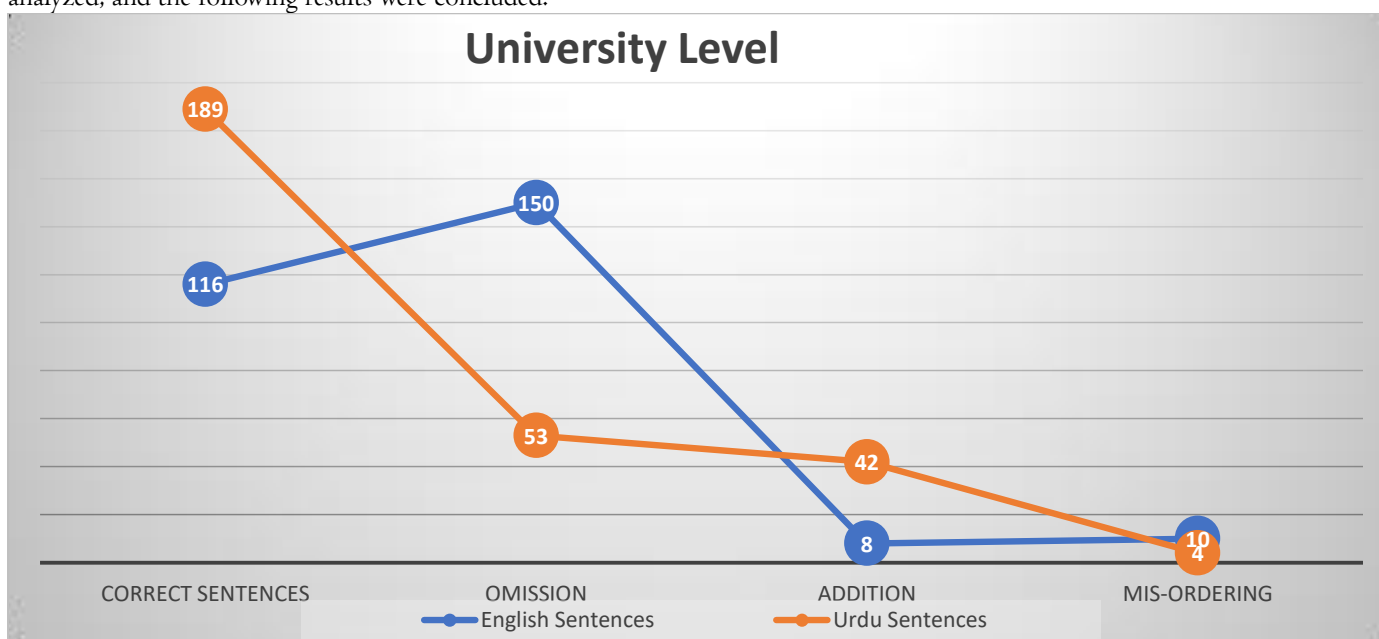
1. Collection of data containing errors
2. Classification of errors
3. Identification of errors
4. Disclosure of errors
5. Evaluation of errors

The responses from the students from each level (university, college, and school) were self-analyzed, identifying the errors and classifying each of them into their respective categories.

#### 4: Discussion

##### 4.I: University Level

A total of 40 responses from the students were chosen from the University of Sahiwal, Sahiwal. The collected responses were analyzed, and the following results were concluded:



4.I.I: University of Sahiwal, Sahiwal (Graph)

A total of 560 sentences were punctuated by the students, out of which 280 were in English and 280 were in Urdu. The graph shows the classification of the total responses into their respective categories. Out of all the English sentences, 116 had proper punctuation applied by the students: 150 had commas omitted, 8 had more commas than needed, and 10 had misplaced commas. Out of the 280 Urdu sentences, 189 were correctly punctuated, 53 had an error of omission, error of addition was spotted in 42 sentences, and 4 contained misplaced commas.

In general, at the university level, it was quite visible that the errors in Urdu sentences were relatively lower than in English sentences. There is a significant difference between these two languages in terms of the error of omission.

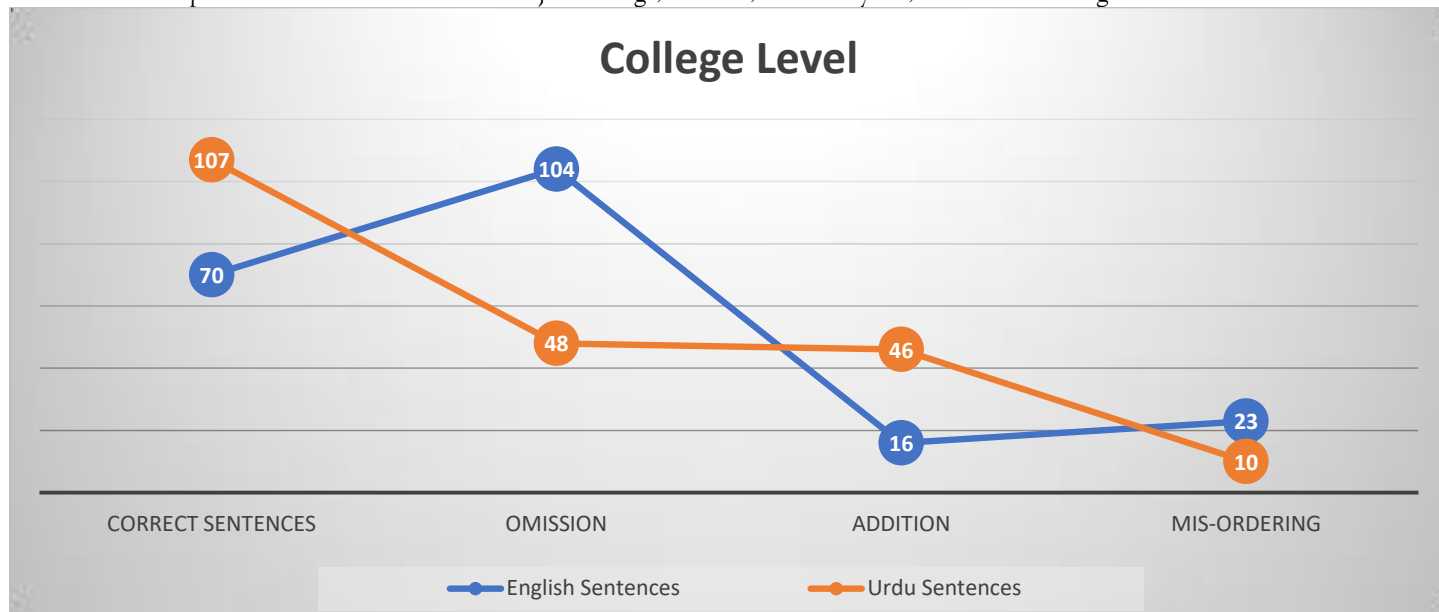
	English	Urdu	Total
No. of Correct Sentences	116/280	189/280	305/560
Error of Omission	150/280	53/280	203/560
Error of Addition	8/280	42/280	50/560

Error of Mis-Ordering	10/280	4/280	14/560
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4.1.2: University of Sahiwal, Sahiwal (Table)

### 4.2: College Level

A total of 30 responses from the students of Punjab College, Sahiwal, were analyzed, and the following results were concluded:



4.2.1: Punjab College, Sahiwal (Graph)

A total of 420 sentences, 210 from the English language and 210 from the Urdu language, were analyzed. In English sentences, a total of only 70 sentences were correctly punctuated, while 104 consisted of the error of omission, 16 sentences consisted of additional commas than required, and 23 were mis-ordered.

On the other hand, 107 sentences from the Urdu language were correctly punctuated, an error of omission was spotted in 48 different sentences, the addition of a comma was visible in 46 sentences, and commas in 10 sentences were placed out of their regular order.

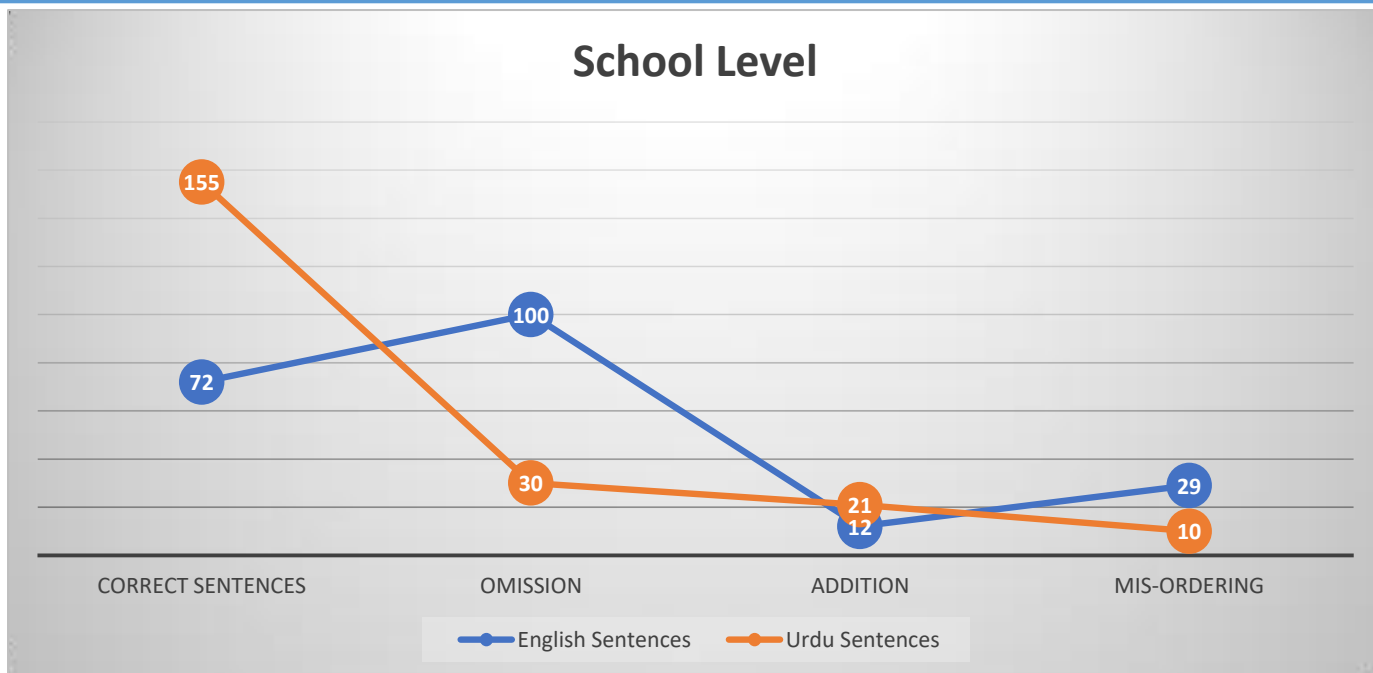
Similar to the university level, English sentences had more mistakes in the punctuation of a comma, while Urdu sentences relatively had fewer errors in them. Almost identical mistakes were spotted in the sentences at the college level, as they were in the sentences punctuated by the students from the university.

	English	Urdu	Total
No. of Correct Sentences	70/210	107/210	177/420
Error of Omission	104/210	48/210	152/420
Error of Addition	16/210	46/210	62/420
Error of Mis-Ordering	23/210	10/281	33/420

4.2.2: Punjab College, Sahiwal (Table)

### 4.3: School Level

In total, 30 responses were analyzed that were collected from Mukkabir Schools, Sahiwal. From the gathered responses and their analysis, the following results are drawn:



4.3.1: Mukkabir Schools, Sahiwal (Graph)

From the total of 420 sentences, 210 were from the English language and 210 were from the Urdu language. The analysis presented these results: For the English language, only 72 sentences were correctly punctuated out of 210, while 100 sentences consisted of the omission of commas from required spaces, 12 sentences had additional punctuation in them, and in 29 different sentences, commas were misplaced.

In the sentences from Urdu, 155 were correctly punctuated out of 210 sentences; 30 sentences fall into the category of omission; 21 sentences contain the error of addition with the placement of additional commas in them; and only 10 sentences have error where commas are misplaced in the sentences.

Similar results were quite visible, as were those from the university and college levels, where the Urdu sentences had relatively fewer errors than the English sentences. But some familiar errors were spotted in these sentences as well. Mainly, the high number of errors of omission in English sentences has been a common error at all three levels.

	English	Urdu	Total
No. of Correct Sentences	72/210	155/210	227/420
Error of Omission	100/210	30/210	130/420
Error of Addition	12/210	21/210	33/420
Error of Mis-Ordering	29/210	10/281	39/420

4.3.2: Mukkabir Schools, Sahiwal (Table)

## 5: Results

The main focus of this study is the analysis of the punctuation of commas by the students and to analyze up to what standards the students are capable of fully performing and punctuating the commas correctly into the required places. For this purpose, students were given a total of 14 sentences each, 7 from the English language and 7 from the Urdu language. The reason for using sentences from two different languages was to analyze if the mother tongue has any sort of influence on the punctuation of the students.

The responses were gathered from the students and analyzed. A quantitative approach was used to categorize each of the errors found in the punctuation into their respective category, i.e., error of omission, error of addition, or error of mis-ordering.

Mostly, the number of correct sentences found in the Urdu language is significantly higher than number of the sentences in the English language. This was seen mainly due to the fact that the error of omission is found extremely high in numbers (particularly in the English language) in the responses of the students. The error of omission had a clear pattern visible where certain mistakes were being repeated in responses by almost every student. We will discuss this in detail later in this section. At all three levels (school level, college level, and university level), the errors of addition were relatively low in numbers, and no massive difference in

numbers was found between the sentences of the Urdu and the English language. For the error of mis-ordering, almost similar results were seen to those found in the error of addition. No high numbers or massive difference in between the languages were spotted.

Later on, the categorized errors were observed in an attempt to determine if there were any particular patterns or certain mistakes being repeated in the responses. The errors showed the following results:

The error of mis-ordering has been the least found error among all of the responses; it was barely seen in the responses of either of the languages. There was no specific pattern or repeated mistakes found related to this type of error. A misinterpretation of the statement can be a reason for the occurrence of this error. Moreover, the error of addition is also often found in some of the responses, where students placed more commas than were required in the sentences. Similar to the error of mis-ordering, no particular patterns or errors were noticed that could prove that this error occurs due to some influence. This error seems to be quite irregular and was observed in various parts of different sentences. From the responses, it was quite visible that there were mainly issues where almost students from all three different levels (university, college, and school level) had issues with solving, particularly these two sentences: "He lost his money, reputation, and his friends." And "For dinner, I made pasta, salad, and garlic bread."

In these two sentences, students mainly omitted using a comma in between "reputation and his friends" and "salad and garlic bread" which can actually be considered an influence of the mother tongue (Urdu). Abiding by the grammatical rules of the language, a comma before the word "اور" is not placed, the translation of which in the English language is the word "and." It can be stated that this continuous repetition of the error of omission in students' responses is due to the influence of the grammatical rules followed by the students in their mother language. The error of omission has been the major concern in the responses of the student as it's relatively more often found in all of the different levels analyzed, and particularly in the English language.

The influence of the mother tongue on the second language seems to be clear. Particularly, through the error of omission, where a clear pattern of omitting a comma was seen in the responses of almost every student. The number of correctly punctuated sentences in the English language is significantly lower than the number of sentences in the Urdu language. On the other hand, the errors found in the Urdu language are also comparatively fewer in number. This massive difference between the errors can also be considered due to the lack of proper teaching of grammatical rules or the usage of good examples for elaboration. Lack of practice with real-life examples can be a reason for this influence. Most of the examples used for the elaboration are complex, far from everyday life, and hard to understand for most of the students.

Easy-to-understand examples should be included in the elaboration of the usage of punctuation instead of teaching the grammatical rules or using complex examples. A mere focus on grammatical rules is not good or helpful enough for the students to then practically apply them in the needed situations.

## 6: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify and classify the errors in the punctuation of commas by the students at three different levels and to spot if these errors might be occurring due to any sort of influence of the mother tongue. According to the analyzed data, the responses from the students showed the main error being the error of omission, where in two particular sentences, similar mistakes were being repeated by almost every student. Some errors, such as the error of addition or the error of mis-ordering, were completely random and followed no particular pattern or specific mistakes. The results showed the influence of the first language on the second language through the particular error of omission in punctuating the comma made by the students. Overall, it can be concluded that the influence of the language is possibly a reason for the lack of practical usage of real-life or easy-to-understand examples and the mere focus on the grammatical rules.

### 6.1: Limitations and Future Scope

It is difficult to generalize the results only on the basis of a small sample size and by analyzing only the punctuation of the comma. On the basis of the findings of the present study, a wider and deeper analysis of other forms of punctuation will shed more light on the causes of these errors or the influence of the languages on each other.

### 6.2: Scope of this Study

To assist students in a better understanding of the punctuations, the study explores various categories of errors made by the students in punctuation of the comma. Better applications of punctuation should be included in the syllabus and curriculum so the students can have a better understanding of the proper usage of punctuation in order to make their writings effective and worthwhile.

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