

EVALUATION OF PUNCTUATION ERRORS AND CODE-MIXING IN ESSAY WRITING WITHIN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS IN OGBA/EGBEMA/NDONI, RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

Effective essay writing is central to achieving English language curriculum objectives, yet many students continue to struggle with punctuation and the intrusion of code-mixing. Punctuation errors distort meaning, reduce coherence, and lower assessment outcomes, while code-mixing, though reflective of bilingual realities, often undermines the standard expected in formal writing. The study employed a survey research design in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni LGA of Rivers State, targeting 2,433 senior secondary students across four schools in Omoku. Using Krejcie and Morgan's table, a sample of 335 students was selected through simple random sampling. Data were collected with a validated and reliable 20-item questionnaire (SMLEEWSSSQ), structured on a four-point scale. Out of 335 distributed copies, 295 were retrieved. Data were analyzed using arithmetic mean, with results interpreted based on real limits of numbers. Findings show punctuation significantly affects essay writing among students. Frequent omission of marks (mean = 3.54) and reduced scores from lack of punctuation (3.90) were noted, while proper use improved flow (3.60) and readability (3.19). Weak punctuation skills also hindered writing proficiency (3.25). The cluster mean (3.49) indicates high importance but inconsistent application. Regarding code-mixing, students mix languages when lacking vocabulary (3.19) and this negatively impacts essay performance (3.65). Teachers discourage it (3.25), though its influence from Nigerian Pidgin is evident (3.13). The cluster mean (3.16) confirms code-mixing remains a notable challenge. The study recommends targeted instruction and corrective feedback to strengthen punctuation use and minimize code-mixing in line with curriculum goals.

1. Introduction

Many learners writing in English as an additional language produce essays that show frequent punctuation errors (misplaced commas, missing full stops, incorrect use of apostrophes) alongside systematic code-mixing (the insertion of L1 lexical items, morphological forms, or syntactic frames). These phenomena undermine clarity, affect assessment outcomes, and create tension with stated English-language curriculum objectives that emphasize grammatical accuracy and coherent written expression (Ehsanzadeh et al., 2024). Research on written errors in L2 contexts has long foregrounded the pedagogical importance of identifying, categorizing, and responding to surface features such as punctuation. Ferris's foundational work argues that error treatment including targeted feedback on recurrent punctuation problems plays a central role in helping writers notice and revise unstable forms in their written English (Hyland, 2019). Subsequent syntheses of the "grammar-correction" debate accept that corrective feedback must be principled and focused (rather than indiscriminate) to produce durable gains; this implies that punctuation instruction should be diagnostic and tied to communicative writing tasks rather than only decontextualized drill (El-Essawi, 2022).

More recent empirical studies catalogue the specific punctuation items that frequently trouble learners and show how these items cluster with other morphosyntactic errors to reduce textual cohesion (Ehsanzadeh et al., 2024). These high-frequency error studies are useful because they translate broad curriculum goals (e.g., “produce coherent, correctly punctuated prose”) into teachable subskills and assessment rubrics. Curriculum writers and teachers therefore need to align objectives (vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation) with formative tasks that surface those persistent errors so that feedback cycles can target them effectively (Himmel, 2012). Parallel to punctuation studies, a large body of literature examines code-mixing/code-switching in multilingual classrooms. Code-mixing is not simply “error” — sociolinguistic and classroom studies conceptualize it as a communicative strategy, cognitive scaffold, and identity practice (Mabule, 2015; Ezeh, 2022). In classrooms where learners share an L1, teachers often deliberately use L1 items to explain complex concepts or to lower affective filters; similarly, students will use L1 lexis and structures in essays when they lack precise L2 equivalents or when the L1 term indexes local meaning (Ezeh, 2022).

Studies from multilingual contexts (including Nigerian contexts) demonstrate that code-mixing frequently co-occurs with lexical gaps and limited L2 grammar control, but it can also facilitate comprehension and conceptual precision when judiciously scaffolded (Okoro et al., 2025; Research on Igbo–English bilinguals, 2023). Bringing the two strands together, several recent investigations point to an important interaction: code-mixing and punctuation errors are not independent problems but often reflect the same underlying instructional gaps. For example, when learners insert L1 constructions into English sentences, punctuation conventions may be violated because the writer applies punctuation rules from the L1 or simply loses track of English clause boundaries (Mabule, 2015; Ehsanzadeh et al., 2024).

The English Language curriculum objectives play a vital role in shaping the teaching and learning process of English as both a subject and a medium for academic success (Ekwueme, 2025). They outline specific benchmarks that guide the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, which are central to effective communication. The objectives promote grammatical accuracy as well as practical language application, enabling learners to express ideas clearly and think critically. They also emphasize essay writing, comprehension, and oral fluency, preparing students for higher education, career opportunities, and global interaction. In addition, the curriculum fosters cultural awareness and appreciation of language as a tool for unity in multilingual societies (Ulla et al., 2022). Clear objectives ensure that English instruction remains focused, relevant, and aligned with students’ needs. Without them, teaching risks becoming fragmented, reducing learners’ ability to meet academic and societal demands. Curriculum objectives therefore serve as a roadmap for teachers and a framework for holistic language development.

Curriculum objectives that rigidly separate grammar and punctuation from broader aspects of language use and identity often fail to capture the authentic ways multilingual students write. Scholars emphasize that curriculum design should align with learners’ real linguistic practices while ensuring proficiency in standard, assessment-appropriate English (Ohamobi et al., 2020; Osegbue et al., 2022). Failure to integrate these dimensions risks reinforcing gaps between classroom expectations and students’ lived experiences. Research further highlights that effective curriculum practices must balance academic standards with inclusivity, recognizing that multilingual expression can serve as a bridge to deeper understanding when properly guided (Ohamobi et al., 2024). In addition, professional development initiatives are vital in equipping teachers with strategies to manage linguistic diversity and foster coherent essay writing without suppressing students’ identities (Ohamobi et al., 2021). Therefore, curriculum implementation should adopt a holistic approach that values diversity while maintaining academic rigor.

The motivation for this study arises from the persistent challenges senior secondary students face in meeting English language curriculum objectives, particularly in essay writing. Essay writing is central to language assessment because it demonstrates mastery of grammar, coherence, and communication skills. However, punctuation errors remain a widespread problem among learners, often leading to misinterpretation, poor flow, and reduced scores (Ferris, 2002). Although the curriculum emphasizes accuracy in written expression, studies indicate that many students neglect punctuation rules or apply them inconsistently, suggesting a gap between instructional goals and actual performance (Ehsanzadeh et al., 2024).

Equally pressing is the issue of code-mixing, where students blend English with indigenous languages or Nigerian Pidgin. While some scholars argue that code-mixing can serve as a communicative resource in multilingual classrooms, excessive reliance undermines formal writing and hinders attainment of academic standards (Mabule, 2015; Ezeh, 2022). Research in Nigerian contexts further shows that limited vocabulary and weak grammatical control often drive students to insert L1 elements into English essays, thereby compromising their proficiency (Research on Igbo-English bilinguals, 2023). This study is therefore motivated by the need to empirically evaluate how punctuation errors and code-mixing jointly affect essay quality, with the goal of aligning teaching strategies more closely with curriculum objectives.

The study was designed with two main objectives: to determine the extent to which the poor use of punctuation marks affects the essay writing of senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State, and to examine the extent to which code-mixing influences their written essays. Guided by these objectives, the study raised two research questions. The first focused on the extent to which poor punctuation affects students' essay writing, while the second sought to establish how code-mixing impacts the overall quality of their written work.

2. Method

The study adopted a survey research design, which is suitable for examining large groups of respondents and exploring multiple quantifiable variables. Babbie (2018) explains that surveys allow researchers to handle large populations and evaluate complex propositions, making them appropriate for educational research contexts. The area of the study was Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA) in Rivers State. This area, located within the Niger Delta, comprises three main communities: Ogba, Egbema, and Ndoni. ONELGA is bordered by Ohagi-Egbema to the north, Ahoada to the south, and Egbeda to the east. It is situated within the mangrove swamp forest and fresh-water swamp complex, with coordinates between 4°50'N to 5°30'N and 6°25'E to 6°40'E. The inhabitants of ONELGA are mainly traders, artisans, farmers, and civil servants. The choice of the area was influenced by the availability of a substantial number of Computer and Robotics Education students in the schools, making it a relevant setting for the study.

The population of the study consisted of 2,433 Senior Secondary School students in SS1, SS2, and SS3 across four secondary schools in Omoku. These schools include Community Girls Secondary School, Model Boys Secondary School, Demonstration Secondary School, and Sancta Maria Secondary School. Their distribution shows 755 students in SS1, 810 in SS2, and 868 in SS3, according to the field survey conducted in 2025. A sample size of 335 students was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination table. The simple random sampling technique was used to select the respondents, ensuring that every student had an equal chance of being chosen. This helped achieve representativeness and minimized sampling bias. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled Social Media Language Effect on the Essay Writing of Secondary School Students Questionnaire (SMLEEWSSSQ). The questionnaire was developed from reviewed literature and aligned with the study's research questions. It contained 20 items and was divided into two main parts. Part I sought demographic information, while Part II was subdivided into four sections (A-D) that addressed the research questions. The instrument used a four-point Likert-type scale with response options of Very High Extent (4), High Extent (3), Moderate Extent (2), and Low Extent (1).

To establish validity, the questionnaire underwent expert review. Two specialists from the Guidance and Counselling Department evaluated the instrument for face and content validity. They examined clarity, wording, and relevance of the items to the study's objectives and provided corrections and suggestions. Their feedback was incorporated into the final version of the questionnaire. Reliability of the instrument was ensured through a pilot test involving 10 students from a private senior secondary school outside the main study population. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach's Alpha, which confirmed that the instrument was reliable and produced consistent results.

Data collection was carried out by the researcher, who distributed 335 copies of the questionnaire to the selected students. Out of these, 295 copies were completed and retrieved, giving a high response rate that was adequate for analysis. For data analysis, arithmetic mean was used to summarize the responses. The formula $\bar{x} = \frac{\sum fx}{\sum f}$ was applied, and interpretation was based on real

limits of numbers. Mean scores between 3.50 and 4.00 were classified as Very High Extent, 2.50 to 3.49 as High Extent, 1.50 to 2.49 as Moderate Extent, and 1.00 to 1.49 as Low Extent. This categorization provided a systematic framework for analyzing the effect of social media language on students' essay writing.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Research Question 1

To what extent does the use of punctuation marks affect essay writing among senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State?

Table 1. Mean Response of Respondents on the Use of Punctuation Marks as it Affect Essay Writing Among Senior Secondary School Students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State

| No | Items | VHE | HE | ME | LE | Total | Mean | Decision |
|--------------|---|-----|-----|----|----|-------|------|----------|
| 1. | Students omit punctuation marks frequently in essays. | 211 | 35 | 49 | - | 295 | 3.54 | VHE |
| 2. | Proper punctuation improves the flow of essay writing. | 223 | 35 | 30 | 7 | 295 | 3.60 | HE |
| 3. | Lack of punctuation reduces students' essay scores | 276 | 10 | 9 | - | 295 | 3.90 | VHE |
| 4. | The correct use of punctuation enhances essay readability. | 116 | 120 | 59 | - | 295 | 3.19 | HE |
| 5. | Students' weak punctuation skills affect their overall writing proficiency. | 96 | 184 | 10 | 5 | 295 | 3.25 | HE |
| Cluster Mean | | | | | | | 3.49 | HE |

Table 1 shows the respondents' views on the effect of punctuation marks in essay writing. The mean scores reveal that students frequently omit punctuation marks (3.54, VHE) and that lack of punctuation reduces essay scores significantly (3.90, VHE). Respondents agreed that proper punctuation improves flow (3.60, HE) and enhances readability (3.19, HE). However, weak punctuation skills negatively affect overall writing proficiency (3.25, HE). The cluster mean of 3.49 (HE) indicates that while punctuation use is moderately high in importance, students still struggle with consistent and correct application, which impacts essay quality.

3.2. Research Question 2

To what extent does code mixing influence the quality of essay writing among senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State?

Table 2. Mean Response of Respondents on Code Mixing as it Influence the Quality of Essay Writing Among Senior Secondary School Students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State

| No | Items | VHE | HE | ME | LE | Total | Mean | Decision |
|--------------|---|-----|-----|-----|----|-------|------|----------|
| 1. | Code-mixing of English and native language is common in essays. | 87 | 20 | 176 | 12 | 295 | 2.61 | VHE |
| 2. | Teachers discourage code-mixing in formal essay writing. | 101 | 167 | 27 | - | 295 | 3.25 | HE |
| 3. | Students code-mix when they lack English vocabulary | 87 | 179 | 29 | - | 295 | 3.19 | VHE |
| 4. | Excessive code-mixing leads to poor essay performance. | 196 | 97 | 2 | - | 295 | 3.65 | VHE |
| 5. | Code-mixing shows the influence of Nigerian pidgin on English essays. | 78 | 203 | - | 4 | 295 | 3.13 | HE |
| Cluster Mean | | | | | | | 3.16 | HE |

The data reveal that students engage in code-mixing largely when they lack the appropriate English vocabulary (mean = 3.19, VHE) and that such practice negatively affects essay quality, with a very high extent mean of 3.65. Similarly, item 16 indicates that code-mixing of English and native language is fairly common (mean = 2.61, VHE). Teachers, however, actively discourage the practice (mean = 3.25, HE), which suggests awareness of its detrimental effect on formal writing. Additionally,

the influence of Nigerian Pidgin on students' essays was moderately acknowledged (mean = 3.13, HE). The cluster mean of 3.16 (HE) indicates that while code-mixing is not as widespread as phonetic spellings, it remains a notable factor influencing essay writing. This implies that inadequate vocabulary and language interference continue to challenge students' ability to maintain standard English in academic writing.

3.3. Discussion of Findings

3.3.1. Effect of Punctuation on Essay Writing

The findings reveal that poor punctuation practices significantly undermine students' essay writing quality. Respondents strongly indicated that omission and misuse of punctuation not only distort meaning but also lower writing scores, reflecting the importance of mechanical accuracy in academic assessment. This aligns with Adeyemi (2021), who stressed that accurate punctuation enhances coherence and logical flow, thereby improving the comprehensibility of essays. Similarly, John and Ekanem (2022) observed that evaluators often penalize punctuation errors because they disrupt clarity and hinder communication of ideas. However, Bello (2023) offered a different perspective, arguing that while punctuation is essential, overemphasis on mechanics may overshadow the role of creativity, idea generation, and content richness. From this view, essays with strong thematic development can still communicate meaning, even when punctuation is weak. Together, these perspectives highlight the need for a balanced approach in teaching: one that reinforces punctuation skills while also prioritizing content development.

3.3.2. Effect of Code-Mixing on Essay Writing

The results also indicate that code-mixing significantly affects essay quality among senior secondary school students. Many students resort to code-mixing when they lack adequate English vocabulary (mean = 3.19), which negatively influences performance, with respondents strongly agreeing that excessive code-mixing reduces essay quality (mean = 3.65). This corroborates Jabeen et al. (2023), who reported that code-mixing in formal writing contexts often reduces clarity, compromises linguistic accuracy, and limits communicative effectiveness. Similarly, Osoba and Alebiosu (2016) found that reliance on indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin in academic essays weakens students' competence in standard English, lowering examination outcomes and preparedness for higher academic levels. Furthermore, the findings show that teachers actively discourage code-mixing (mean = 3.25), reflecting institutional recognition of its adverse effects. This aligns with Mokhtar (2016), who emphasized the critical role of teacher interventions in reducing linguistic interference and strengthening students' adherence to standard English.

Nevertheless, code-mixing is not entirely detrimental. While it poses challenges to formal writing, it also reflects students' sociolinguistic realities and can be leveraged pedagogically. Strategic use of code-mixing can serve as a scaffold, easing comprehension in complex concepts and gradually transitioning learners toward mastery of standard English. Thus, rather than dismissing it outright, educators may harness code-mixing as a bridge between students' native languages and English, ensuring inclusivity while maintaining academic standards.

4. Conclusion

The study on the evaluation of punctuation errors and code-mixing in essay writing among senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Rivers State, has revealed that both factors significantly affect students' ability to meet English language curriculum objectives. Findings showed that students frequently omit punctuation marks, misuse them, or lack consistency, leading to poor clarity, reduced coherence, and lower essay scores. In addition, code-mixing emerged as a common practice, often arising from limited vocabulary and the influence of indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin. While code-mixing reflects the multilingual realities of the learners, its persistent use in formal writing undermines the standards required by the curriculum. The study concludes that without targeted instructional interventions, these challenges will continue to impede students' mastery of essay writing. Teachers therefore need to emphasize corrective feedback, explicit instruction on punctuation, and activities that build vocabulary to reduce reliance on code-mixing. Curriculum planners must also integrate practical writing exercises that bridge classroom objectives with students' linguistic realities. Addressing these issues holistically will not only

improve students' writing proficiency but also enhance their overall academic performance and communication skills, ensuring that English language education fulfills its intended objectives.

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