

An Analysis of Punctuation of Direct and Indirect Speech in the Writing of First-Grade Students at SMK Maospati, Magetan

Diterima:

11 Desember 2023

Revisi:

29 Desember 2023

Terbit:

7 Januari 2024

¹*Resita Asri Hakiki*, ²*Sadinoi*, ³*Dara Ayustina*
Universitas Doktor Nugroho Magetan, Indonesia
E-mail: ressitaasrihakiki@udn.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines the accuracy of punctuation in both direct and indirect speech found in the English writing of first-grade students at SMK Maospati Magetan. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach supported by error analysis, the research identifies the common types of punctuation errors, assesses students' accuracy levels, and investigates the factors that contribute to these mistakes. The data were collected from students' written assignments, classroom observations, and interviews with teachers. Additional sources obtained through library research were used to strengthen the linguistic analysis. The results show that students frequently mispunctuate direct speech, particularly in the placement of quotation marks, commas, capitalization, and sentence-ending punctuation. In indirect speech, students often use unnecessary quotation marks, misplace commas, and produce hybrid structures that mix direct and indirect speech conventions. Accuracy levels were generally low and inconsistent, especially when students encountered complex sentence structures. Contributing factors included L1 interference, insufficient explicit instruction, limited exposure to accurately punctuated English texts, inadequate corrective feedback, and cognitive overload during writing. The study concludes that explicit, systematic instruction on punctuation—integrated with contextualized examples and guided practice—is essential to strengthen students' writing accuracy. Recommendations include enhancing classroom instruction, increasing reading exposure, and designing pedagogical materials that emphasize punctuation in reported speech.

Keywords: Punctuation, Indirect Speech, Writing Accuracy, Error Analysis, Vocational Students.

I. Introduction

Writing is a fundamental component of English language learning, requiring the integration of grammatical knowledge, the ability to organize ideas, and mechanical accuracy. Among the mechanical elements of writing, punctuation plays a crucial role in conveying meaning and ensuring clarity. Punctuation errors can distort meaning, obscure speaker boundaries, and impede effective communication. As highlighted in studies on academic writing by non-native speakers, the accurate use of quotation and speech marking is an essential aspect for producing writing that is both correctly interpreted and professionally presented. (Verheijen 2022).

Writing is one of the fundamental components of English language learning, requiring the integration of grammatical knowledge, the ability to organize ideas, and precision in mechanical aspects of writing. These mechanical aspects include the accurate use of punctuation, spelling, and appropriate sentence structure. Such elements function not only to convey information but also to ensure that the intended message can be clearly understood by the reader. As Raimes (2015) explains, writing is not merely the act of putting words together; it involves organizing ideas systematically and applying grammatical rules accurately so that readers can interpret the message correctly. Mastery of these various elements is essential for producing coherent and effective written texts.

The structures of direct and indirect speech present particular challenges for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as these forms require the integration of syntactic transformations with specific punctuation conventions. Students must determine the correct placement of quotation marks, commas, reporting clauses, and capitalization—rules that often differ significantly from those used in Indonesian. These cross-linguistic differences, as discussed in pragmatic and grammatical literature, can further complicate learners' ability to master punctuation in English. (Raheem and Ghafar 2024).

These difficulties become even more complex when students must understand the grammatical adjustments required in transforming direct speech into indirect speech, such as changes in tense, pronouns, and deictic markers. Xu and Li (2022) emphasize that the accurate production of reported speech demands integrated attention to both grammatical transformations and punctuation conventions. They argue that without clear and form-focused instruction, learners are likely to repeat the same types of errors in their writing, demonstrating limited internalization of the underlying rules.

Such findings highlight the need for explicit pedagogical guidance to support EFL students in managing the dual challenges of grammatical restructuring and punctuation accuracy (Xu and Li 2022). These difficulties become even more complex when students must understand the grammatical changes that accompany the transformation from direct to indirect speech, such as shifts in tense, pronouns, and deictic markers. Xu and Li (2022) emphasize that the accurate production of reported speech requires integrated attention to both grammatical transformations and punctuation conventions. They assert that without clear and focused instruction—particularly form-focused instruction—learners are likely to repeat similar errors in their writing. (Kellem and Halvorsen 2018). One contributing factor to the persistence of these errors is students' limited exposure to authentic English texts that model accurate use of reported speech. In many secondary schools, English instruction tends to prioritize content comprehension rather than mechanical accuracy, including punctuation and structural transformations. Previous studies have shown that EFL learners often overlook mechanical aspects of writing when explicit instruction is absent or when authentic textual models are insufficient. Research on academic writing among EFL students further reports that recurring errors in capitalization, comma usage, and sentence-final punctuation remain among the most frequent issues. In response to these challenges, the value of form-focused instruction (FFI) has gained increasing recognition. Recent pedagogical studies indicate that both integrated and isolated forms of FFI can support learners in identifying error patterns and understanding the rationale behind punctuation rules and structural changes in reported speech. This approach allows teachers to emphasize quotation marks, comma placement, pronoun modification, tense shifts, and the organization of reporting clauses more systematically. Empirical research on EFL writing consistently demonstrates that students' accuracy improves significantly when they receive guided practice and explicit feedback on mechanical errors. (Kellem and Halvorsen 2018).

Accordingly, as highlighted by language pedagogy researchers, there is a clear need for instructional approaches that explicitly teach punctuation conventions, including when and how to use quotation marks, commas, periods, and capitalization, as well as how to correctly transform direct speech into indirect speech. Such an approach—one that balances attention to both form and meaning—is believed to help students not only generate ideas but also convey them with accuracy and clarity, ensuring that their writing is easily understood by readers.

Selain itu, Raheem dan Ghafar (2023) juga menyatakan bahwa pengajaran mekanik seperti tanda baca, kapitalisasi, dan struktur pelaporan harus diberikan secara eksplisit karena pembelajar EFL cenderung melewati aspek-aspek tersebut ketika tidak diberikan arahan langsung dalam proses pembelajaran menulis. Mereka menunjukkan bahwa peningkatan signifikan terjadi ketika siswa memperoleh latihan yang menekankan pentingnya tanda baca dalam membangun kejelasan makna dan struktur teks. In this context, the ability to organize ideas is crucial, as writing is not merely about conveying information but also about arranging it in a logical and structured sequence. Ferris (2017) argues that learning to write in English requires the development of deep critical-thinking skills, which enable writers to structure their ideas effectively within a text. Organizing ideas clearly and logically forms the foundation of coherent writing, allowing messages to be communicated effectively and helping readers follow the writer's line of thought with ease.

At the same time, mechanical accuracy in writing is equally important. Proper punctuation, spelling, and capitalization constitute essential mechanical components that determine whether a piece of writing can be understood clearly. Incorrect punctuation, for instance, can alter the meaning of a sentence and obscure the intended message. In this regard, Graham (2019) emphasizes that mastery of mechanical aspects is crucial, as even minor errors can undermine the overall message—particularly in more formal written communication. According to him, *“Writing competence demands not only generating ideas but also applying conventions that guide readers’ interpretation.”* Hyland (2016) further observes that learners of English often struggle to integrate these various elements. They must not only master grammar and vocabulary but also understand the conventions that govern English writing. This becomes even more challenging for learners whose first language differs significantly from English, such as Indonesian. These structural and conventional differences often complicate the writing process, requiring students to adapt to new rules governing punctuation, capitalization, and textual organization. The importance of instruction that focuses on mechanical skills in writing is also highlighted by Emilia and Hamied (2015), who assert that in EFL contexts, explicit teaching of mechanical rules—including punctuation and sentence structure—deserves special attention. Instruction that prioritizes content without addressing mechanics, they argue, may produce writing that is difficult to understand despite having well-formulated ideas. Therefore, they recommend that explicit mechanical instruction be incorporated into English language curricula.

Accordingly, as emphasized by Indonesian language-pedagogy researchers, there is a need for teaching approaches that explicitly address punctuation conventions, including when and how to use quotation marks, commas, periods, capitalization, and how to accurately transform direct speech into indirect speech. This balanced approach—attending to both form and meaning—has been shown to help students not only generate ideas but also express them precisely and comprehensibly. This aligns with Utami's (2018) findings, which demonstrate that explicit instruction on punctuation and sentence structure significantly improves the mechanical accuracy of EFL students' writing at the secondary level. She affirms that *“mechanical instruction is necessary to ensure that students understand the functional role of punctuation in marking meaning relations across clauses.”*

II Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the types, patterns, and underlying causes of punctuation errors in students' use of direct and indirect speech. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth examination of linguistic phenomena as they naturally occur in students' written texts. According to Sandelowski (2015), qualitative descriptive research is appropriate for studies that aim to provide a comprehensive and straightforward description of a phenomenon without imposing complex theoretical interpretations. The design enabled the researcher to identify recurring error types, interpret the factors contributing to those errors, and derive pedagogical implications relevant to EFL writing instruction. This approach also allowed the analysis to focus on both the mechanical and grammatical dimensions of students' writing, including punctuation accuracy, structural transformations, and the application of English writing conventions.

In line with Creswell and Poth (2018), who emphasize that qualitative designs prioritize contextual understanding and detailed examination, this study sought to explore students' written performance within the authentic context of classroom learning. The design thus offered a suitable framework for analyzing reported speech accuracy and error patterns, as well as understanding how instructional and linguistic factors shape students' writing outcomes.

3.2 Participants and Data Sources

Data were drawn from first-grade students' written assignments requiring them to construct sentences using direct and indirect speech. Additional data were collected from classroom observations and interviews with the English teacher. Secondary data from

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linguistic references and previous studies enriched the analytical framework.

3.3 Instruments

included:

3.3.1 an error identification rubric based on Ferris (2016) and Corder (1981);

3.3.2 grammar and punctuation reference books;

3.3.3 coding sheets for classifying errors;

3.3.4 documentation of student writing samples.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved:

1. gathering students' written assignments containing direct and indirect speech;
2. Identifying punctuation errors;
3. classifying errors according to type;
4. triangulating interpretations with grammar references and previous research.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model:

- (1) data reduction (identifying and categorizing errors),
- (2) data display (organizing patterns), and
- (3) conclusion drawing (interpreting underlying causes).

Simple frequency counts were used to illustrate error prevalence.

3.6 Validity

Validity was ensured through methodological triangulation, cross-checking with grammar references, source triangulation across multiple writing samples, and peer review by fellow English instructors.

III. Findings and Results

1.1 Overview of the Data

The analysis revealed systematic punctuation problems across students' written work. Errors appeared consistently in both direct and indirect speech, reflecting weaknesses in mechanical accuracy and conceptual understanding of reported speech structures. Students performed better with simple and familiar patterns but showed significant difficulty with more complex or unfamiliar forms.

Reported speech is a form of conveying someone's utterance, thought, or message without reproducing the exact original wording, instead expressing the core meaning in an indirect sentence structure. This process involves grammatical adjustments such as changes in tense, pronouns, time–place references, and syntactic structures to fit the context of reporting.

1.2 Punctuation Errors in Direct Speech

As Hyland (2016) asserts, “*Mastery of punctuation in direct quotations requires accurate control of comma placement, quotation marks, and capitalization, as these are conventionalized in English and differ from many learners' L1 norms.*”

The most frequent errors identified include:

- Misplacement or omission of quotation marks, including incomplete quotation enclosures or unnecessary use around isolated words.
- Omission or incorrect placement of commas, particularly before quoted sentences following a reporting clause.
- Inaccurate capitalization within quotations.
- Incorrect positioning of sentence-final punctuation, often placed outside quotation marks due to first-language (L1) interference.

These patterns indicate that English-specific punctuation conventions have not been fully internalized and remain strongly influenced by Indonesian writing norms.

As Nordquist (2020) notes, “*Direct speech punctuation errors most often involve misplaced quotation marks and incorrect positioning of sentence-final punctuation.*”

1.3 Punctuation Errors in Indirect Speech

Commonly observed errors include:

- Unnecessary use of quotation marks in indirect speech.
- Misuse of commas, especially before *that*.
- Hybrid forms combining features of direct and indirect speech.
- Inconsistent capitalization of subordinate clauses.

These findings suggest conceptual confusion between quoting speech verbatim and reporting its meaning.

1.4 Students' Accuracy Levels

Overall accuracy remained limited. Students demonstrated partial mastery of simple structures but struggled with:

- varied positions of the reporting clause,
- complex sentence constructions,
- grammatical transformations (e.g., tense shifts), and
- distinguishing the structural differences between direct and indirect speech.

Their knowledge appeared more procedural (memorized) than conceptual (internalized).

1.5 Contributing Factors

The analysis identified several contributing factors:

1. First-language (L1) interference from Indonesian punctuation conventions.
2. Lack of explicit instruction on punctuation rules.
3. Limited exposure to authentic English texts.
4. Insufficient corrective feedback from teachers.
5. Cognitive overload during writing tasks.
6. Low metalinguistic awareness of the communicative function of punctuation.

1.6 Discussion

The findings affirm that punctuation in both direct and indirect speech remains a major challenge for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The range of student errors indicates that the problem is not merely mechanical oversight but stems from linguistic transfer, instructional gaps, and conceptual misunderstanding. Therefore, effective instruction must integrate explicit teaching, guided practice, adequate feedback, and sustained exposure to accurate writing models.

IV. Conclusion, Suggestions, and Recommendations

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that students' punctuation performance in both direct and indirect speech remains considerably limited. Errors in direct speech predominantly involve misplaced or omitted quotation marks, incorrect comma placement, inconsistent capitalization, and improper positioning of sentence-final punctuation. In indirect speech, students frequently produce unnecessary quotation marks, misused commas, hybrid constructions, and inconsistent capitalization.

These recurring errors indicate that students' understanding of English punctuation conventions—particularly those governing reported speech—has not yet been fully internalized. Their difficulties stem from a combination of first-language interference, insufficient explicit instruction, limited exposure to accurate writing models, and low metalinguistic awareness. Overall, students show partial procedural mastery of basic patterns but lack conceptual depth and flexibility when dealing with complex structures. The findings reinforce the view that accurate punctuation in reported speech requires not only mechanical precision but also conceptual understanding of syntax, discourse, and communicative intent.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, several suggestions are proposed to improve students' mastery of punctuation in reported speech:

1. **Strengthen explicit instruction**

Teachers should provide systematic, step-by-step explanations of punctuation rules for both direct and indirect speech, supported by clear examples and contrasts.

2. **Integrate guided practice and modeling**

Students should engage in structured practice activities using authentic examples from literature, academic texts, or classroom dialogues to reinforce correct punctuation habits.

3. **Provide regular corrective feedback**

Feedback should be timely, specific, and focused on recurring patterns of error to help students internalize the rules more effectively.

4. **Increase exposure to authentic input**

Reading materials rich in dialogue and reported speech should be incorporated to help students observe and internalize standard punctuation conventions.

5. **Raise metalinguistic awareness**

Students need to understand the communicative function of punctuation, not only as a mechanical requirement but as a tool for clarity, accuracy, and meaning-making.

5.3 Recommendations

To achieve long-term improvement in students' punctuation proficiency, several pedagogical and institutional recommendations are offered:

1. **Curriculum Enhancement**

Schools should ensure that punctuation—especially in reported speech—is explicitly included in the curriculum and assessed systematically across grade levels.

2. **Professional Development for Teachers**

Teachers may benefit from workshops or training sessions on effective ways to teach punctuation, error analysis, and grammar instruction for EFL contexts.

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