原　著

# Punctuation: What University Students Need to Know for Independent Reading

Margaret　Orleans

＜Abstract＞

There is not enough room in the high school English curriculum for dealing with "advanced" punctuation. Through examples of student problems with a popular reading textbook series, this paper illustrates how this lack of knowledge about capital letters, commas, colons, dashes and parentheses interferes with reading comprehension for university English majors. With a better understanding of how such punctuation marks help show the relationships between the parts of sentences in medium-length non-fiction reading passages, these students can become more independent readers of their second language. A mix of consciousness-raising and task-based instruction, along with practice in specific reading strategies, is a good way to overcome this gap in student knowledge.

Keywords：punctuation, independent reader, reading, task-based learning

## Introduction

Japanese high school students are often taught the useful strategy of breaking English sentences into phrases as they read. On the other hand, these students receive little explicit instruction concerning English punctuation beyond the period, comma, question mark, hyphen, and quotation marks, and even less indirect exposure to more "advanced" punctuation such as colons, semicolons, dashes, parentheses, and ellipses. This lack of instruction at the secondary level is understandable, given the time constraints and the massive amounts of content to be covered. But as a result, students at this university still struggle with the meaning of reading passages at the TOEIC 500 (CEFR B1) level, even when such passages are heavily glossed. In fact, they cannot successfully break sentences in such passages into appropriate chunks. Students at the tertiary level, I contend, need a much fuller–if only receptive–understanding of the English punctuation system if they are ever to become independent readers of the language.

The observations in this paper are based on questions submitted by first-year English majors after reading 300- to 550-word non-fiction passages, completing textbook exercises on them, and consulting dictionaries. The questions are usually couched as vocabulary questions, but at the root of the students' inability to understand the meaning of certain words (often proper nouns) and phrases from context is their lack of facility with English punctuation.

## Lacunae in Student Knowledge

Let me begin with the comma. While students have a reasonably firm grasp of the concept that commas often divide sentences into clauses,

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Seinan Jo Gakuin University

they are not as familiar with the use of commas to separate coordinate adjectives. Thus, they misinterpret the following sentence as being composed of three (incomplete) clauses: "Rory and Peter quickly dove down into the dark, swirling water, but there was no sign of Kingsley" (Kiggell and Muto, 2005, p. 80). They think that "dark" functions as a noun, since it is preceded by "the" and followed by a comma, but they cannot make sense of "swirling water," which seems to have no connection to the rest of the sentence.

Likewise, students seem unfamiliar with commas (or dashes or parentheses) to set off appositives. The result is that they do not recognize definitions of terms the writer has provided, not expecting the readers to be familiar with them, or the identifications of proper nouns that usually fall within the same sentence as their first mention in a passage. A related problem is that students do not automatically recognize capitalized words in mid-sentence as proper nouns. For example, when reading, "The half million Marsh Arabs, or Madan, had an unusual way of life growing rice and dates, raising buffalo, fishing and weaving boats and houses from reeds," (Kiggell and Muto, 2006, p. 51), they understand the serial commas that separate the list of participial phrases, but they routinely ask about the meaning of "Madan," which of course is not glossed in the textbook and does not appear in their dictionaries. Strictly speaking, "Madan" is part of a compound subject but it functions as an appositive and would not be set off by commas if it did not.

Moving on to more "advanced" punctuation, as I mentioned above, students routinely fail to identify the intratextual relationships between proper nouns and their explanations (or their full and abbreviated forms) when those relationships are signaled by parentheses or dashes. Some examples follow:

> In spring 2006, they will place six volunteers in a cramped "ground experimental complex" (GEC) for a mock 500-day flight to Mars (Kiggell and Muto, 2006, p 19).
>
> Clearly, this has happened with Greg Miller's invention of Neuticles—artificial replacement testicles for dogs (Kigell and Muto, 2006, p. 79).

In the above cases, students were unable to find an explanation of GEC and Neuticles within the text. In fact, many of them did not even realize they should expect to find the explanation there.

When it comes to dashes, some students are unable to distinguish en-dashes (hyphens) from em-dashes. Thus, several students inquired about the meaning of what they misinterpreted as the compound words "can-and" and "do-go" after trying to decipher the following sentence: "We surround ourselves with sophisticated technology, but machines can—and do—go wrong" (Kiggell and Muto, 2006, p. 74).

Another pair of punctuation marks which many students confuse is the colon and the semicolon. While students seem quite familiar with the use of semicolons to separate independent clauses, they are less familiar with their use to separate noun clauses in complicated lists like the one in the sentence below:

> Clearly, this has happened with Greg Miller's invention of Neuticles—artificial replacement testicles for dogs (Ig Nobel Medicine Prize, 2005); Robert Matthews's investigation into whether buttered toast always falls on the buttered side (IG Nobel Physics Prize, 1996); and Daisuke Inoue's (Ig Nobel Peace Prize, 2004) invention of karaoke, which requires people to tolerate each other in a new way. (Kiggell and Muto, 2008, p 79)

Colons seem to be completely new to students, so they cannot take advantage of the fact that they are most often used to introduce salient examples or a short explanation of a new concept. Thus, after reading fairly straightforward sentence like "A good Japanese knife is the result of two things: accumulated knowledge and skill (Kiggell and Muto, 2005, p. 44)" or "Every perfume is made up of three notes: top,

middle and base (Kiggell and Muto, 2005, p. 69)," many students will still be puzzled about what two elements create a good Japanese knife or the meaning of "base."

As these examples (among many) illustrate, too shallow a knowledge of one part of the English grammar system, namely punctuation, is holding students back from developing as independent readers (Celce-Murcia and Hilles, p. 149).

## Approaches to Instruction about Punctuation

Armed with the knowledge that capitalized nouns are proper nouns whose meaning will be given if they are not famous, that commas separate coordinate adjectives and set off appositives, that parentheses and dashes also set off appositives, that semicolons can separate items on a complicated list as well as separating independent clauses, that colons introduce explanations and examples, and that dashes also sometimes serve this same function, Japanese university students would fare much better in tackling the sort of non-fiction reading that is expected of them in textbooks, in research sources, on such high-stakes tests as TOEIC, and in real life situations such as future employment. The question then arises how best to arm them with such knowledge. Ideally, they could acquire it the way native speakers of English do—through exposure to authentic materials. But this is not practical.

Extensive reading provides students with a great deal of natural English which they can imbibe without conscious study, but it is not a solution for a lack of punctuation awareness. For one thing, most students choose fiction for their extensive reading, and this sort of "advanced" punctuation is less common in fiction. For another thing, extensive reading is best done at a level lower than the students' current English level. Thus students in the aforementioned TOEIC 500-550 range should be doing their extensive reading in the 350-450 range, where they know 95% or more of the words they will encounter.

Direct instruction, then, seems to be the solution. But there are some caveats. First, lower-level students tend to tune out technical terms (MEXT 2009). Second, students retain knowledge much better if they actually feel the need for it (Thornbury, pp. 48 and 93). Relating punctuation comprehension to TOEIC success might be a helpful motivator. It might seem that a need for this sort of productive punctuation knowledge could be experienced by students in their own writing, but at the first- and second-year level, few students are ready to produce such high-level forms as expository essays. Thus, I have been experimenting with a four-pronged approach, in three modest stages, to direct instruction about English punctuation.

First, students need to notice the punctuation. This can be accomplished with a sorting task such as asking students to look through the pages of the textbook we've already covered and decide which punctuation marks always appear singly, in pairs, or in series, and to assign to them a spot on a Venn diagram, with examples to justify their decisions. I require students to e-mail me a set of five questions about each reading passage that they could not answer by working through the textbook exercises or consulting a dictionary. As the examples in this first half of this paper illustrate, these questions inevitably involve students' inability to understand words and phrases because of a lack of familiarity with punctuation. It is my experience that students are curious about the answers to the questions they have generated.

Second, once students are more aware of the presence of punctuation, I want them to understand its function, and eventually, to use it to help them discover the meaning of unknown words in a given passage. No class has managed to reach the (not-so-modest) fourth step of appreciating the nuances behind the choice of one of several punctuation choices in

a given context (dashes versus parentheses, for example) in the course of a year's instruction.

Once students are wondering about specific punctuation marks (or specific contexts) (Willis and Willis, 2007), it is possible to use one of four strategies: contrasting them with similar marks, providing powerful mental images, extrapolating from contexts in which students are already familiar with the punctuation, and—that old favorite high school teachers' technique—giving them a perfect example to memorize. Thus, for example, a colon might be contrasted with the more familiar semicolon. While a semicolon (apparently composed of a period and a comma) generally tells us to pause at the end of a complete idea (independent clause) before going on to another--closely related--complete idea, a colon (with nothing hanging down to remind us to stop) is a sign to read ahead to find a rewording or some examples of the idea we just read about which will help us understand it better. Arrows, pointing down after a semicolon or straight ahead between the dots of a colon, can help reinforce this idea. Students are usually familiar with colons after the names of speakers in a dialogue, so this experience of reading on to see what that character has to say can be expanded to the role of a colon within a sentence of nonfiction pointing ahead to examples or rephrasing.

Dashes can be usefully contrasted with hyphens. Students usually realize that hyphens connect words that are split at the end of a line of text or serve as compound adjectives (five-year-old brother), so an image of a hyphen as a harness on a service dog, keeping the animal in close contact with its human, serves as a sharp contrast to a dash. The latter can be likened to an animal control pole, which holds a vicious dog away from the handler, while still maintaining a connection between them.

To me, the perfect example for parentheses is a telephone number: in (801) 555-1212, the digits in parentheses are necessary only in certain circumstances. But Japanese telephone number conventions are different. If students were all familiar with Felix the Cat, parentheses could be likened to the handles on his magic bag of tricks; the information inside should be accessed when the reader finds herself on the spot. How about ears? Can parenthetical information be usefully compared to the unspoken information we hold in our mind (between our ears) until it's necessary for clarification? Or is it better to expand the use of parentheses from their familiar context of marking stage directions in a skit to their role within a non-fiction passage? Without direct instruction, students seem to understand (and use) ellipses to indicate unfinished ideas in spoken English. From that usage, they can be helped to unpack the meaning of the formal use of ellipses in quoted material.

Once students see the benefit of using punctuation to uncover meaning, other tasks can be set. For example, they can be asked to identify all the proper nouns within a passage and list what punctuation, if any, helped them locate explanations of those nouns. They can be challenged to write a list of "how-to" steps for next year's class when tackling an unknown word in a passage. They can try to predict whether the explanations (appositives) for future unknown words will come before or after the words themselves. Most of all, they can practice explicit strategies for using punctuation marks to uncover meaning in texts (Thornbury, 2006).

## Conclusion

Productive use of English punctuation involves additional necessary knowledge, such as the distinction between Japanese and English quotation marks and the use of capital letters in titles, that is not really important when it comes to independent reading. But receptive knowledge of how capital letters, commas, parentheses, dashes, colons, and other "advanced" punctuation marks are used in formal writing, coupled with explicit strategy

use in uncovering intratextual relationships, will go far toward empowering students as independent readers of their second language. Such knowledge is best acquired and longest retained when it involves student curiosity, hypothesis forming and testing, and use of vivid images.

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# 句読法：学生が自立的な読解に必要なもの

マーガレット・オーリンズ

＜要　旨＞

高校の英語教育課程では、”上級の”句読法に取り組むための十分な機会がありません。本稿では、一般的な読解用教科書シリーズを使った学生の抱える問題例を通して、大文字、コンマ、コロン、ダッシュ、括弧についての知識不足が、いかに大学の英語専攻者の読解力の妨げとなっているかを明らかにしています。

句読点が、中編のノンフィクションの読み物において文節間の関連性を示す手がかりとなり得ることを理解することで、学生達は自立して第二言語の書物を読むことができるようになります。

特別な読書法を使った練習に並行して、意識の向上と課題達成を目指した教育を実施することは、学生の知識不足に対処するための効果的な方法です。

**キーワード：句読法, 自主的な読者, 読解力, 課題達成型学習**

西南女学院大学人文学部英語学科