A Corpus Based Study of Commas Use in EFL Written Performance

Eva Lelakova
University of Zilina, Slovakia, *eva.lelakoval@fhv.uniza.sk*

Michal Toman
University of Zilina, Slovakia, *michaltoman@outlook.sk*

The present paper deals with the Slovak secondary school students' problem of using commas in the complex sentences containing adverbial and nominal subordinate clauses while writing essays in English. It also concentrates on the English teachers' ability to see correct/incorrect usage of commas in their students' works. The research sample is formed by school leaving exam essays written by the students whose English is at an B1 level. The digitalized texts of 115 essays are uploaded in The Main Corpus and divided into 8 different subcorpora referring to different essay's topics. Detailed corpus linguistic and statistical analyses lead to the conclusions that the overall commas use success of the observed EFL students directly depends on how difficult the topic of an essay is, and that the students' error rate in adverbial clauses is much higher than the rate in nominal clauses. The last finding referring to the fact that English language teachers overlook or incorrectly correct commas in a substantial number of sentences makes the authors think about all the possible roots and reasons of the students' inaccuracy in commas usage in their written performance and several suggestions how to solve this problem.

Keywords: secondary school students, English teachers, written essays, subordination, comma errors, The Main corpus-based investigation

INTRODUCTION

The curriculum of the bachelor's degree teacher training study programme *Teaching of English Language and Literature* at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Žilina in Žilina (FHV UNIZA), Slovakia includes also essential linguistic disciplines such as Morphology, Phonetics and Phonology, Lexicology, Stylistics, and Syntax. When dealing with the structure of the sentences, we pay a considerable attention to commas usage for several reasons. Firstly, all prospective English language teachers should distinguish similarities and differences between syntactic and punctuation rules of Slovak and English languages and be able to use them correctly in both languages without any hesitation. Secondly, the students need to be aware of the fact that the accurate punctuation contributes to coherent writing which is much more understandable

especially for native speakers of English. And lastly, future teachers of English need to be experts in this field as they want to hand over the obtained knowledge one day to their own students.

In the third form of their study the students of FHV UNIZA start teacher training practice at regional basic and secondary schools. Observations of the classes are followed by practical teaching in the first and second forms of the MA study programme. And it was exactly the teacher training practice of our students and their real everyday work with secondary schools' students as well as a mutual cooperation with secondary schools' teachers on writing tasks for students which raised several questions in the grammar accuracy teaching (including using commas in complex sentences) and inspired our present research. We addressed the director of the Secondary Vocational School in Žilina as well as the director of the Slovak National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements in Bratislava with the request of making the school leaving exam essays available for our research purposes. Having a suitable research sample containing 115 essays written in the years 2011-2019, we could start innovative observations and analyses of the Slovak secondary school students' EFL written performance with an emphasis on their understanding the subordination rules applied in English sentences. A detailed corpus-based study of correct commas usage and so mastering and understanding the essence of subordination by the secondary school students whose major is English became the main objective of the research. We decided to concentrate on the nominal and adverbial subordinate clauses as the syntactic rules for their usage are clearly stated and easily understood by the students of the lower levels of English. As regards the third type of subordinate clauses – relative clauses, their (non) restrictiveness or (non) definiteness is in many cases very subjectively judged by non-native English language users who don't have sufficient knowledge of the rules they could apply when using them in the written performance. The research of relative clauses correct usage in the written performance of students would bring more valuable, reliable, and universal results in case of B2 and C1 level EFL learners. In the process of analysing commas usage errors occurring in the school leaving exam essays we came across discrepancies in the teachers' evaluation of the essays. This finding as well as subsequent related literature study led us to the decision to deal also with the English teachers' ability to see correct/incorrect usage of commas in their students' works. An in-depth analysis helped us to find out how skilful the students and teachers are in this grammar area, present the possible reasons of the detected problems and bring suggestions how to improve commas usage skills of Slovak EFL learners.

The weaknesses of Czech and Slovak university students in writing academic texts in English and their formal punctuation errors in the essays were analysed by Chamonikolasová & Stašková (2005). They considered a limited number of classes of academic writing or insufficient and inconsistent use of spellcheckers to be the main reasons of the students' writing errors. This study, however, does not deal with commas usage specifically and doesn't have the ambition to do a survey among secondary school students. Incorrect and redundant comma usage after the main clause in front of the subordinate clause was observed by Vinogradova et al. (2021) in the English essays of Russian university students. They statistically confirmed the strong influence of the

native language in making decisions about the use of punctuation marks. Turkish EFL students according to Elkılıç et al. (2009) should be taught punctuation explicitly and compared to Turkish punctuation conventions. Assessing punctuation errors made by secondary school students in Ogun State, Nigeria was done by Adekola & Lawal (2017) who found out that these errors are significantly related to the students' overall performance at school and suggested paying a greater attention to reading and writing comprehension. The third-year students at the secondary schools in Sudan have been tested on the correct punctuation use and the research results showed various errors, including those in the commas usage. (Sanhon & Abdall, 2016) The reasons of their failure were defined as weak knowledge of punctuation marks usage resulting from insufficient explanation from the side of their language teachers and lack of practice enriched by illustrative examples. Incorrect use of commas by British universities students, both native and non-native speakers, was observed and analysed by Lastres-López & Manalastas (2018). Punctuation errors formed 53.4% of all grammatical errors made by the students and incorrect use of comma or its absence were detected in 38.7% of the overall amount of punctuation errors. The most frequent punctuation errors made by Pakistani undergraduate students are comma errors. The authors of the research saw the reasons of the students' confusion in multiple functions of commas. (Ali et al., 2020) Punctuation errors made by the learners of intermediate level at Mianwali college were analysed by Khan & Khan (2016). The research revealed five major mistakes in the use of comma but the one referring to main and subordinate clauses has not been defined, observed, and analysed. More than 60% of EFL learners at undergraduate level in Bangladesh Agricultural University, who undergone the survey, did not master the proper use of comma with list of phrases/clauses in the sentence. (Pathan, 2019) The author suggests more effective teaching and learning of writing skills in the language classroom. Sangeetha (2019) agrees that producing error-free compositions in an academic context is a big challenge for the EFL learners and self-editing in revision process can facilitate their writing skills. Comma errors were detected in 15% of the total amount of incorrectly used punctuation marks by the second semester students of English department of Surakarta University in their essay test. They, in most cases, omitted the comma in the sentence structure. (Laili, 2018) The research findings by Nasrudin (2015) show that the second-grade students of English language studies in SMA Jakarta still make punctuation mistakes (comma errors including) in their narrative writing. Improvement of the teaching skills and techniques of English teachers as well as independent self-study of students outside the classroom are seen by the researcher as a solution to the problem. Melikhova & Skorobogatova (2020) add that foreign writing teaching can contribute both to the formation of other important competences and to the process of mastering a foreign language.

The existing analyses of the English language learners' commas usage errors carried out by the national and international university researchers bring valuable findings and suggestions of the stated problem solution. There is the evidence that EFL learners both at secondary and university levels have serious problems with commas usage inaccuracy. However, more attention is paid to university students and there is a gap in the research of the correct subordination rules applied by secondary school students in

their written performance. The present study brings new findings from the Slovak secondary school educational environment including both students' and teachers' struggling with the defined problem. The research results will be communicated to the Slovak National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements whose main responsibility, assigned by the Ministry of Education, is providing and evaluating school leaving exams for the secondary schools on the national level. This institute also continuously monitors the results of education, conditions, and development of education at the national level and brings the international comparison.

Literature Review

People in communication naturally connect words and phrases into sentences to give the hearers the greatest possible meaning and to reveal to the recipient of the message the most accurate version of the information conveyed. (Miller, 2008) This arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses allows them "to manipulate the sentences in all sorts of ways to receive and express different meanings they need to put across". (Tallerman, 2011:19) In traditional linguistics, the main assumption of linguists is that phrases and sentences are composed of syntactic units, which belong to a specific grammatical category and serve a specific grammatical and syntactic function in a sentence, i.e., in a language. (Radford, 2004) The phrases in a sentence contribute in a systematic way to the meaning of the sentence. While there is a relation between the structural location of a phrase and its contribution to the meaning, it is also possible to change the structure of a sentence in ways which leave some aspects of the meaning unchanged. (Fabb, 2005) According to Morley (2000), a typical role of the sentence is to express one or more ideas or 'propositions' from the ideational component, each proposition being realised by a clause. A sentence represents an eventuality, and the component parts of the sentence can be thought of as representing component parts of the eventuality. (Fabb, 2005) Aarts (2001) assumes that it is possible to analyse every sentence and realise it from potential levels, so called the rank scale: the word-level, the phrase-level, the clause-level, and the sentence-level. The clause usually expresses a single statement or proposition. Grammatically, it consists of one or more phrases. Clauses do not always have the same grammatical status, and relationships of subordination and superiority can only be established within groupings/complexes of units to the main sentence and in the sentence. (Morley, 2000)

A complex sentence combines two (or more) clauses of an unequal status in such a way that one clause functions as a grammatical part of the other one. (Finegan, 1994) The main clause may be coordinated with one or more other main clauses to form a compound sentence, or it can be inserted into another clause or phrase to form a complex sentence. (Wekker et al., 1985) With a complex sentence, you can economically string together many separate pieces of information that would require many simple/compound sentences to explain otherwise. (Kesselman-Turkel &Peterson, 1982)

Subordination

Subordination, as a feature of a complex sentence, is generally considered to be an index of structural complexity in language. (Rafajlovičová, 2013) It is a phenomenon that was seen in the past as a "negative term which lumps together all deviations from some 'main clause' norm". (Thompson, 1984:86) Subordinate levels move the focus of the sentence from general to specific, zooming in like a movie camera. They can also lead us into new thoughts, nudging us to be ever more specific, to refine and/or detail whatever we have just written. (Landon, 2013) Complex sentences are determined by the positions of included subordinate clauses. As opposed to coordination, which Fabb (2005) considers being in breach of the normal rules of the structure because it requires two or more components of a certain type and combines them to form a larger component of the same type and level, subordination represents a linguistic hierarchical organization of clauses where one clause is subordinate, dependent to the main, independent clause. This dependence is derived from the comprehensive and closed or open meaning of the information that these clauses carry. Semantically, the information contained in the subordinate clause is often presented as back grounded or presupposed in relation to the information contained in the superordinate/independent clause. (Rafajlovičová, 2013)

When a subordinate clause precedes the main clause, it creates an anticipatory link for the following clauses that are immediately integrated into the related sentence, usually in the following main clause. But the subordinate clause that follows the main clause must be added only to the structure after the completed main clause. Clauses at the end of the so-called periodic sentences often function as an integral semantic part of the main clause meanings. (Diesel, 2001; Lakoff, 1984; Pyrcz, 2014) Subordination shows the relative importance of the parts of a sentence and helps make a sentence to fit its content. (Heffernan et al., 2001) It is the way of arranging the parts of the sentence so that what is most important, comes out on top, what is least important, falls to the bottom, and what is moderately important, settles in between. As regards subordinate adverbial clauses, they are movable but when the writer wants to create suspense, or build up to his/her main point, he/she should put the adverbial clause at the beginning of the complex sentence and leave the main clause for the end. Writers like to sprinkle their work with subordinate clauses because they add variety to a sentence structure. A text containing only simple and compound sentences soon becomes weird and boring. Therefore, skilfully used subordinate clauses can add complexity and artfulness to writing.

Commas usage

What writers often tend to get confused about, however, is when and where to place commas in relation to subordinate clauses. Commas mark the grammatical independence, as well as the emphasis between clauses and sentences intended to be conveyed, so that they combine to build an intelligible narrative. (Hundarenko, 2019) They make clear the division between the two parts of the sentence and help to emphasize the logical relationship between them. Without the comma, the two parts of

the sentence slide into one another (Jones, 1994), forcing the reader to stop and figure out where one thought ends and the next begins. This is fundamentally unfair to the reader, who should not be burdened with making an effort to work out what the writer meant. Rather, it is the writer's obligation to make the divisions between thoughts clear so that the reader does not have to expend unnecessary mental energy to follow. (Meltzer, 2019) When commas are used well, they blend into the background – the written text mimics the natural pattern of speech and/or the logical progression of thoughts so seamlessly that the reader does not even notice the punctuation.

Subordination is probably the most complicated thing about the sentence structure that students have to learn, and so they should understand the logic behind it. If they are guided to understand the reasoning behind various rules – then they are more likely to retain important concepts and be able to employ them effectively in their own writing. A motivating factor is the fact that sentence internal punctuation contributes to its overall readability (Hill & Murray, 1998) and correct interpretation of sentences (Briscoe, 1996). Proper comma placement can lead to faster reading times and reduce the need to re-read entire sentences. Commas also help remove or reduce problems arising from difficult ambiguities and see where one clause ends and another begins. (Israel et al., 2012) Introductory adverbial and nominal dependent clauses are followed by a comma. Ordinarily, if they are coming at the end of the sentence, they are not preceded by a comma. As regards their interrupting position, they are conventionally punctuated, too. (Oshima &Hogue 2006; Kane, 2000) Sajid &Siddiqui (2015) explain that the use of comma requires in-depth understanding of English grammar as it can be used in more than 16 various places in a sentence of complex or compound types.

Corpus linguistics

The advent of modern technology has provided access and a new perspective in the linguistic approach to processing diverse language data in research and has brought a new, fast, and accessible method of their examining. Corpus linguistics represents a powerful and versatile inquiry tool used to study natural and authentic language acquisition, processing, variation, and change. (Podesva, 2013; Stefanowitsch, 2020; McEnery & Wilson, 2001; Meyer, 2002; Cheng, 2012; Lacková, 2020) The term *linguistic corpus* refers to a representative, authentic, and sufficiently large collection of samples of language use under investigation. (Stefanowitsch, 2020)

The biggest advantages of the corpus, compiled and analysed in any software, nowadays are global availability, speed of data processing, but above all efficiency in searching for specific elements, features, and forms according to the research goal. For our research, we have chosen an online downloadable software Sketch Engine developed by Lexical Computing Ltd. Its most common function is the concordance which displays all examples of a particular linguistic feature retrieved from the corpus and displayed in context, usually presented as one example per line, with a short section of surrounding text to left and right of the example itself. (Biber & Reppen, 2015; Stefanowitch, 2017) Concordancing originally arose out of a practical need to specify for other biblical scholars, in alphabetical arrangement, the words contained in the Bible, along with citations of where and in what passages they occurred. (O'Keefe & Mc Carthy, 2012)

Hoey et al. say that concordance lines in corpora help to identify what de Saussure called langue. With the help of concordances, formal patterns or tendencies of a language are shown. (Hoey et al., 2007)

METHOD

The present research focuses predominantly on the written performance of Slovak secondary school students studying English as a foreign language and being at a B1/intermediate level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). It also deals with the way how a specific grammar part of the written exam is assessed by English language teachers at the end of the students' study. In Slovakia, the secondary school leaving exams are directly controlled and regulated through 'Act no. 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education' of School Act and the '318/2008 Coll. Decree on the Completion of Studies at Secondary Schools. (Zákony pre ľudí, 2008). They include three main parts: the written form of the internal part – an essay, the external part of the exam – a test, and the oral form of the internal part – an oral exam. When correcting and evaluating essays, teachers follow the manual published annually by National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements. (NUCEM, 2021) In the research we concentrate on the written form of the internal part of the exams which as the only one is not sent to NUCEM but corrected by teachers at schools Based on the theoretical framework and our preliminary observations we formulate three research questions (Q1, Q2, and Q3) linked to the objectives of the study. The research results are expected to give answers to these questions and finally enable the authors to find their possible implementation in the didactic theory and practice.

Research questions are stated as follows:

Q1: Is there a significant dependence of the students' success in the written part of the school leaving exam on the title of the topic?

Q2: Are there more commas usage errors in the complex sentences containing adverbial clauses than in the complex sentences containing nominal clauses?

Q3: Does the assessment of the commas usage (in)accuracy of the essays made by teachers follow the prescribed syntactic rules?

Based on the research questions, research hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H1: The success of the students in the written internal part of the school leaving exam depends on the title of the topic.

H2: The comma error rate in the subordinate adverbial clauses is higher than the rate in the nominal clauses.

H3: Comma errors in the students' essays are identified and corrected by teachers in accordance with the prescribed syntactic rules.

In the quantitative research, predominantly descriptive statistics – statistical analysis of the research data and their subsequent interpretation was applied. The statistical

relationships between the overall correctness & the name of the topic, commas & overall correctness of sentences, and comparison of school years & the teachers' interventions were subsequently investigated. The language data was recorded by using a spreadsheet program Excel and the encoded information was analysed by applying a statistical software Wizard. The choice of the software was based not only on the availability of an acceptable interface but especially on the high quality of the results which the software processing had been offering. We used the Chi-Square Test to verify the potential statistical dependence. In this test, the value of $\chi2$ was compared with the value of c. It holds that if $\chi2 > c$, the statistical significance of the relationship has been confirmed. Conversely, if $\chi2 < c$, it can be stated that the significance of the interdependence has not been confirmed. Finally, the research results were evaluated from different perspectives. The content analysis and meta-analysis referring to the quality and quantity, scientific abstraction, and modelling of the research data were also applied in the research.

Adverbial and nominal clauses have clear and stable rules (including comma usage rules) in the English language syntactic system, so the research process was sufficiently universal, reliable, and objective. In the first step, we searched for all occurrences of the dependent clauses through their natural subordinators and other subordinating signals. In the second step, we examined how many complex/compound-complex sentences contained/missed commas, and how many of these commas were in the right place in the sentence. Thirdly, we focused on the overall grammatical correctness of the observed sentences. A sentence was marked as incorrect if it contained a comma error or any other kind of error, whether grammatical, syntactic, or a spelling one. Another important step in the analysis was to focus on the error rate and the teachers' work with the essays, especially from the point of view of proofreading. Based on the collected sentences, we examined if the teachers had noticed specific mistakes, and how successfully they were able to quantify and evaluate them.

Building Main Corpus

The research sample consisted of 115 essays being written by the secondary students of the fourth (final) year of their study in the academic years 2011/2012 – 2018/2019. First, the essays were transformed into the digital form. We distinguished 8 topics on which the individual essays have been written – My School (1), My Favourite Book (2), Moving to Slovakia (3), My Dream Job (4), Holidays, Customs and Traditions in My Family (5), Fashion and Clothing (6), Education (7), and Sport (8). Since Sketch Engine also serves as corpus building software, we could compile The Main Corpus with the subcorpora named after the essays' topics. Thus, we were able to monitor and evaluate the individual linguistic data in each essay separately. The linguistic data analysis started with setting the concordance frequency. From each subcorpus we managed to collect all the complex sentences with their main and subordinate clauses based on an in-depth subordinators' observation.

I.   *<s> I am very pleased that you write me. </s>*
II.   *<s> For longs year I everyday come to **that** building. </s>*

Sentence I. is the complex one with the initial main clause followed by a subordinate nominal *that-clause* introduced by a subordinator *that*. On the other hand, a demonstrative pronoun *that* in the second simple sentence II., representing just one main clause, does not function as a subordinator at all. In this way, we filtered and listed only those sentences that were complex and comprised adverbial or nominal dependent clauses. We did not include zero-that clauses in our investigation. However, their specific syntactic features will deserve a deeper analysing in future.

After the filtering process, the sentences' overall accuracy and correctness were analysed. We considered them to be incorrect if they contained the mistake in terms of syntax, grammar, spelling, overall structure, and meaning. Naturally, if there was a comma in the wrong place, or it was absent, we also considered such sentences to be incorrect.

I.   <s> *They mustn't be together**, because** she can die.* </s>
II.   <s> *I chose this book **because** I like fantasy and interesting stories.* </s>

For the comma, which the teachers marked as incorrect, we used the *,* symbol. The places in the sentences, where the teachers noticed a syntactic problem and added a comma, were marked with (*). The symbols were applied for the purpose of quick and easy identification of the corpus data.

I.   <s> *I think *,* that change is needed, because it is horrible.* </s>
II.   <s> *I think (*) it is because people want to by stylish.* </s>
III.   <s> *On the other side, some think**,** that fashion is not important at all.* </s>

In the Sentence I., the teacher clearly marked that the comma is not supposed to be there, and he/she evaluated it as a mistake. In the Sentence II., the teacher noted down that the comma in the sentence is necessary for the overall grammatical correctness of the sentence. In the Sentence III. the comma was not noted down by the teacher, so we marked it as a "correction mark missed".

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To find the answers to the first research question, we examined the statistical relationship between all the topics and their overall accuracy. For this purpose a statistical software Wizard was used. It calculated the chi-square test with a tolerable error of 5% and a confidence interval of 95%, confirming the dependence if $\chi^2 > c$; $c = 14.067$ at χ^2 (7). The significance of the interdependence between the topics and the overall correctness rate was confirmed. Using the same software, the calculation of the z-score with a tolerable error of 5% and a confidence interval of 95% was also performed, while the dependence was confirmed in the case if $z > c$; $c = 1.96$. The z-score test was used to examine the relationship between specific topics and the overall accuracy of students (see Table 1). The significance of the interdependence between the topic 'Moving to Slovakia' and 'My Dream Job' and the overall correctness rate was confirmed.

Table 1
Statistical verification of overall correctness versus topics

Topics	Chi-Square Test	Overall correctness
All	χ^2 (7)	15,057
	c	14,067
	Significant	yes
Topics	z-score	Overall correctness
Moving to Slovakia	z	2,498
	c	1,96
	Significant	yes
My Dream Job	z	2,005
	c	1,96
	Significant	yes

Chi-Square Test: χ^2 > c = yes; z > c = yes

35.09% of correct cases compared to 64.91% of incorrect cases were detected in the topic 'Moving to Slovakia' (3). Based on the comparison of the presented percentage values and the chi-square test, it can be stated that this is a statistically significant difference. The topic 'Moving to Slovakia' is the least successful of all topics when the correctness of applying comma usage rules is taken into consideration. One of the possible explanations for this unsuccessfulness can be that the students were not sufficiently prepared for writing an essay on this topic. When preparing for this type of the written exam, it is necessary to follow the recommended rules and methods. The second reason seems to be the real complexity of the topic. There is a high chance and probability that the students had a problem describing situations syntactically and stylistically correctly, as well as they had the problem using appropriate grammar structures and vocabulary. On the other hand, statistically significantly more cases (64.44%) were correct within the topic 'My Dream Job' (4), compared to 35.56% incorrect cases. The topic seemed to be more appropriate for thinking and explaining thoughts of B1 level students, when they were directly required and expected to describe and explain their dreams, ideas, and thoughts.

Other examined topics had approximately an equal level of success and correctness, so they were not so directly dependent on the complexity and difficulty of the topic. The complexity of the topics is very relative. It depends not only on the efforts of the teachers to prepare students well but also on the students' abilities and language skills for using the language actively and effectively, as well as their motivation and interest in language and the specific essay topics. We considered it essential to confirm the relationship between the correctness of comma usage and the overall correctness of complex sentences by running a test. Its main finding is that up to 95.83% of the cases that were marked as "comma correct" (n = 48) were also "overall correct" in contrast to 4.17% of the examined cases (comma correct), which were also "overall incorrect". This suggests that the most common error in subordinate sentences is the comma usage error.

The remaining 4 percent error rate refers to the errors that have a different meaning in the text. The overall grammatical correctness of the collected and investigated subordinate clauses is described in Figure 1.
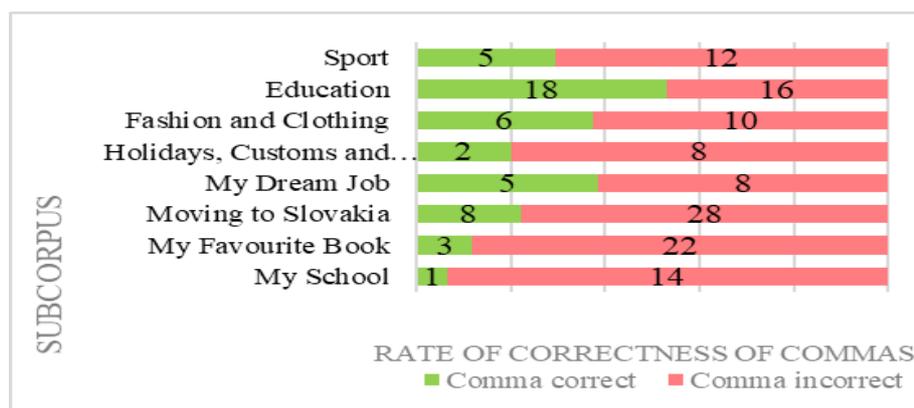

Figure 1
Correctness of clauses containing a comma

The rate of incorrectness for clauses containing commas is up to 71%. In the topic 'My School' it is even up to 93%. The best results were achieved by the students selecting the topic 'Education' – there was a success rate of 53%. Depending on the complexity and relative difficulty of the topic and the natural need to use adverbial and nominal clauses, success and error rates varied significantly across topics. In general, however, the error rate of the selected clauses in the whole corpus is up to 49 percent. We further conclude that almost half of the sentences used by the students contained a mistake or a combination of more mistakes.

As regards the second research question, after a detailed quantitative analysis, we conclude that the number of adverbial clauses exceeded the number of nominal ones in each subcorpus. The largest number of adverbial clauses was among the ones introduced by the subordinator *because*. Resulting from the obtained data, we can assert that the majority of adverbial (n=48) and nominal (n=26) clauses occur in the topic 'Education' (7) in the school year 2017/2018 despite the fact that this topic is on the second place in terms of the total number of words and the size of subcorpus. Interestingly, the topic with the largest number of words, 'Sport' (8) in 2018/2019 contains a very small number of the examined clauses. Table 2, Table 3, and Figure 2 transparently show individual as well as general frequency of adverbial and nominal clauses in subcorpora of the Main corpus. It is evident that adverbial clauses (n=268) are more frequently used by students than nominal clauses (n=125). This can be explained by the fact that the students of a B1 English level try to explain their thoughts and answer the questions they have in their minds preferably by the sentences containing adverbial clauses. With their help, they add an explanatory detail to their writing and explain how, when, where, why, or under what condition things happen(ed). (YourDictionary, online) Nominal clauses most often replace the objects or complements in complex sentences they use.

Table 2
Adverbial clauses (AC) and comma usage in individual subcorpora

| Subcorpus | School Year | Frequency | | Commas | | | Correctness | | Teachers' Cor.Marks | | | |
		All Clauses	AC	+ Comma	Comma Correct	Comma Inc.	Correct	Incorrect	Marks	Correct Marks	Incorrect Marks	Missed
1.	11/12	31	27	10	0	10	15	12	3	3	0	9
2.	12/13	46	44	20	2	18	24	20	7	5	2	15
3.	13/14	45	39	25	3	22	11	28	13	13	0	11
4.	14/15	32	27	9	3	6	15	12	1	0	1	6
5.	15/16	33	28	10	2	8	10	18	3	3	0	10
6.	16/17	39	28	12	5	7	14	14	7	7	0	2
7.	17/18	68	48	25	12	13	19	29	19	19	0	5
8.	18/19	36	27	13	3	10	14	13	6	6	0	6
Total:		330	268	124	30	94	122	146	59	56	3	64

Table 3
Nominal clauses (NC) and comma usage in individual subcorpora

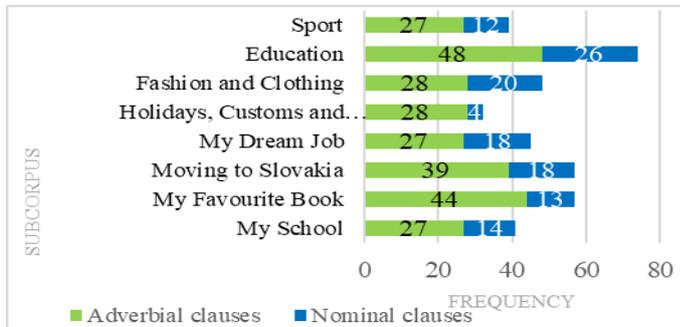| | School Year | Frequency | | Commas | | | Correctness | | Teachers' Corr. Marks | | | |
		All clauses	NC	+ Comma	Comma correct	Comma Inc.	Correct	Incorrect	Marks	Correct Marks	Incorrect Marks	Missed
1.	11/12	32	14	5	1	4	10	4	4	4	0	1
2.	12/13	36	13	5	1	4	7	6	0	0	0	5
3.	13/14	32	18	11	5	6	9	9	6	6	0	3
4.	14/15	50	18	4	2	2	14	4	1	1	0	0
5.	15/16	10	4	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0
6.	16/17	35	20	4	1	3	12	8	1	1	0	3
7.	17/18	61	26	9	6	3	14	12	3	3	0	1
8.	18/19	39	12	4	2	2	8	4	1	1	0	0
Total:		295	125	42	18	24	76	49	16	16	0	13

Figure 2
General frequency of adverbial and nominal clauses in individual subcorpora

The third research question, which we wanted to find the answer on, was referring to the proper assessment of the commas usage (in)accuracy of the essays made by teachers. Figure 3 represents the ratio of correctly and incorrectly marked errors as well as completely overlooked and missed errors that the teachers were obliged to correct.
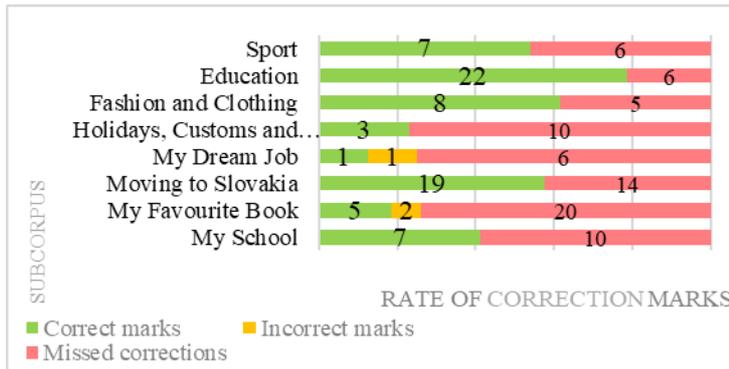

Figure 3
Teachers' correction marks

The total number of errors that the teachers properly corrected and marked was 72 out of 75. A more serious problem, however, was that teachers missed the errors that needed to be corrected 77 times. This number even exceeds the total number of errors that the teachers detected.

To compare the school years and the teachers' interventions, the calculation of the chi-square test with a tolerable error 5% was performed. For the confidence interval it was 95%. The dependence was confirmed if $\chi2 > c$; $c = 14.067$ at $\chi2$ (7). The calculation of the z-score was performed with a permissible error of 5% (with a confidence interval of 95%), while the dependence was confirmed if $z > c$; $c = 1.96$. The significance of the examined relationship between the school year and the teacher interventions was confirmed in the case of the school years 2012/2013 and 2017/2018 and for all investigated school years together (see Table 4).

Table 4
Comparison of the most and least successful year in terms of teachers' interventions

Year	Chi-Square Test	Errors in teacher interventions
All	$\chi^2 (7)$	23,258
	c	14,067
	Significant	yes
Year	z-score	Errors in teacher interventions
2012/2013	z	3,188
	c	1,96
	Significant	yes
2017/2018	z	2,763
	c	1,96
	Significant	yes

The overall percentage of undetected errors, i.e., the missed corrections in essays, is 19.59%. The number of occurrences of "examined subordinate clauses" in 2012/2013 was 57. Teachers did not detect or mark an error in 35.06% of cases. The stated percentage is statistically significantly higher compared to the average number of undetected errors. The number of occurrences of "examined subordinate clauses" in 2017/2018 was 74. Teachers did not detect an error in 8.11% of cases. The stated percentage is statistically significantly lower compared to the average number of undetected errors. The results show that regardless of the topic or the school year, teachers had constantly a high error rate.

Evaluation of the research questions and hypotheses

Based on the research finding supported by the quantitative and qualitative analyses and verification tests we can fully answer the research questions and confirm/reject the research hypotheses. We claim that there is a significant dependence of the students' success in the written part of the school leaving exam on the title of the topic (Table 1). We also assert that the overall success of the class directly depends on how difficult the topic is regarding the required vocabulary, the width and range of the topic, specific phrases, and word expressions (Figure 1). The present evidence confirms the first research hypothesis (H1). The data in the summary tables Table 2 and Table 3 as well as in Figure 2 show that the error rate in adverbial clauses is much higher in comparison to nominal ones. There are 146 incorrect adverbial clauses and only 49 incorrect nominal clauses detected in the essays of students. These research findings confirm also the second research hypothesis (H2). As regards the teachers' assessment, alarming research results refer to the fact that the teachers completely overlooked 77 comma errors in their students's essays. Although we found the answer to the third research question, the third hypothesis (H3), stating that comma errors in the students' essays are identified and corrected by teachers in accordance with the prescribed syntactic rules, was not confirmed.

CONCLUSION

The research findings have shown that adverbial clauses are more frequently used by the Slovak students of a B1 English level than nominal clauses as this is an easier way for them to explain their thoughts and answer the questions they have in their minds. Nominal clauses most often just replace the objects or complements in complex sentences they use. The writing success of students significantly depends on the complexity and relative difficulty of the topic and the natural need to use adverbial and nominal clauses. We further conclude that almost half of the sentences used by the students in the observed essays contain a mistake or a combination of more mistakes. Regarding the teachers' input, when correcting essays, they missed the errors that needed to be corrected 77 times. This number even exceeds the total number of errors that the teachers detected. Regardless of the topic or the school year, teachers have constantly a high error rate.

The results of the present research clearly indicate the severity of the situation on the part of the students as well as their teachers. There exist two interconnected factors influencing the educational process – didactic materials including teaching aids and the teacher's ability to work with them effectively. Most teaching and learning materials aimed at B1 level L2 learners, however, do not include commas practice and exercises on developing academic writing skills. They focus on the development of major communication skills & competencies in spoken and written performance, logical vocabulary expansion, and listening and language recognition. Nonetheless, they do not mention and analyse texts cohesion and coherence.

When consulting available Pre-intermediate Student's books (Solutions 2012, Maturita Solutions 2017, New Headway 2012, Success 2007, New English File 2019, SURE 2014, Laser, 2017, and Gateway to Success 2013), we found out that there is no exercise primarily focused just on the commas and there is no space in the books devoted to the basic rules for the commas usage. All these teaching sources work with commas only very marginally, alongside sentence-building exercises. And so, today it is only up to the teachers themselves to decide how deeply and in what detail they will practice commas usage with their students. To start the problem solving, we have decided to define the levels of influence, roles, and competencies of the participants of the educational process in Slovakia (Figure 4).
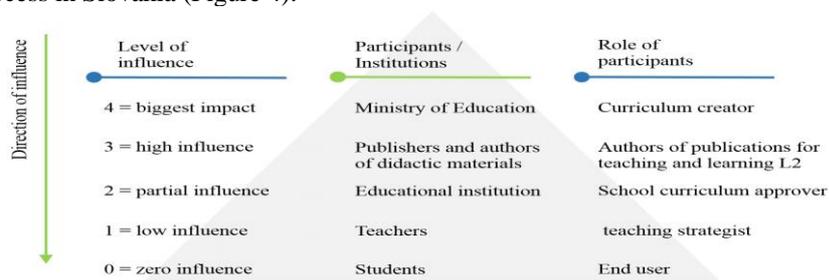

Figure 4
The influence and competencies of participants of the educational process

The greatest ability to intervene in the educational process change has the Ministry od Education working on innovation and curriculum adaptation for secondary schools (Štofková et al., 2016). We believe, it is possible to modify the curriculum so that the comma topic is incorporated to such an extent that it is possible to objectively evaluate it and expect its knowledge from students. Independently, even without the intervention of any formal institution, the authors of the books and didactic materials used in the educational process may incorporate, at least partially, the rules of commas usage into their works. They can either supplement existing exercises with the comma tasks or come up with a new type of exercise, which would focus primarily on commas and recognition of individual clauses and sentence patterns.

As we are convinced that the students should not be assessed, evaluated, or rated for the aspect of language that has not been sufficiently and soundly explained to them, we suggest a shortlist of optional solutions: Teachers' perspective – teachers should prepare a sufficient number of examples, exercises, and didactic games on commas usage. Institutional perspective – teacher training institutions and centres should organise regular workshops for the teachers to train them how to correct written performance of their students. Publishers' perspective – publishing houses should directly focus on the topic of subordination and comma usage when editing and publishing new didactic materials (including textbooks, workbooks, and grammar books)

Throughout the whole research process, we discovered various perspectives and diverse views on the phenomena of English commas usage and corpus linguistics, and its wide use in applied linguistics. But most of all, we managed to identify the importance of the teacher's knowledge and role in the educational process, especially when preparing students for the school leaving exams. We assume that teachers have the power to put the last touch on the final version of the curricula; they are sufficiently free to use their own ways, methods, and approaches to teaching. Hopefully, they are aware of their responsibilities for showing and teaching the students how to acquire the best possible knowledge of the foreign language.

Without further in-depth and long-term research and broader public and academic debate it is impossible to define exactly essential changes in the professional training of future language teachers. But evidently, comma usage drill during the university studies, attending various English grammar-oriented courses as well as preparatory courses preceding school leaving exams can be very helpful and beneficial.

REFERENCES

Aarts, B. (2001). *English Syntax and Argumentation.* New York: Palgrave.

Adekola, B. O., & Lawal, O.F. (2017). Assessing Punctuation Errors Made by Secondary School Students in English Language Comprehension in Ogun State, Nigeria. *International Journal of English Language Teaching, 4*(2), 39-44. doi:10.5430/ijelt.v4n2p39

Ali, S.S., Amin, T., & Ishtiag, M. (2020). Punctuation Errors in Writing: A Comparative Study of Students' Performance from Different Pakistani Universities. *Sir Syed Journal of Education & Social Research, 3*(1). 165-177.

AllAboutCorpora. (2020). *Corpus Software.* Retrieved 08 December 2020 from https://allaboutcorpora.com/corpus-software-2.

Biber, D., & Reppen, R. (2015). *The Cambridge Handbook of English Corpus Linguistics.* Cambridge: CUP.

Briscoe, T. (1996). The Syntax and Semantics of Punctuation and its Use in Interpretation. *Proceedings of the Association for Computational Linguistics Workshop on Punctuation.*

Chamonikolasová, J., & Stašková, J. (2005). Some Difficulties Facing Native Speakers of Czech and Slovak in Writing in English. Theory and Practice in English Studies 3: *Proceedings from the Eighth Conference of British, American and Canadian Studies.* Brno: Masarykova univerzita.

Cheng, W. (2012). *Exploring Corpus Linguistics: Language in Action.* London: Routledge.

COE. (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume. *Council of Europe.* Retrieved 21 November 2020 from https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages.

Diesel, H. (2001) The Ordering Distribution of Main and Adverbial Clauses: A Typological Study. *Language, 9*(1), 433-455.

Elkılıç, G., Han, T., & Aydin, S. (2009). Punctuation and capitalisation errors of Turkish EFL students in composition classes: An evidence of L1 interference. In Padem, H. (Ed.), *Proceedings of International symposium on sustainable development.* International Burch University. 279-284.

Fabb, N. (2005). *Sentence Structure.* London: Routledge.

Falla T., & Davies, P.A. (2016). *Maturita Solutions. Pre-Intermediate Student's Book.* 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Falla, T., Davies, P.A. (2017). *Solutions. Pre-Intermediate Student's Book.* 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Finegan, E. (2008). *Language: Its Structure and Use.* Boston: Thomson Wadsworth.

Heffernan, J.A.W., et al. (2000). *Writing: A College Handbook. Instructor's edition.* New York: W.W. Nortorn & Company, Inc.

Hill, R. L., & Murray, W. S. (1999). Commas and Spaces: The Point of Punctuation. *11th Annual CUNY Conference on Human Sentence Processing.*

Hobbs, M., & Keddle, J.S. (2014) *SURE. Pre-intermediate Student's Book.* Innsbruck: Helbling Languages GmbH.

Hoey, M. et al. (2007). *Text, Discourse, and Corpora: Theory and Analysis.* London: Continuum.

Hundarenko, O. (2019). Challenges of Teaching Academic Writing Skills in ESL Classroom (Based on International Teaching Experience). *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, *11*(4), 70-83. doi:10.18662/rrem/158

Israel, R., Tetreault, J., & Chodorow, M. (2012). Correcting Comma Errors in Learner Essays and Restoring Commas in Newswire Text. *Proceedings of the 2012 Conference of the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Human Language Technologies.* Montreal, Canada, June 3-8, 284-294.

Johnes, B.E.M. (1994). Exploring the Role of Punctuation in Parsing Natural Text. COLING. Volume 1: *The 15th International Conference on Computational Linguistics.*

Kane, T. S. (2000). *The Oxford Essential Guide to Writing.* New York: The Berkley Publishing House.

Kesselman-Turkel, J., & Peterson, F. (1982). *The Grammar Crammer. How to Write Perfect Sentences.* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Kilgarriff, A. et al. (2014). The Sketch Engine: Ten Years On. *Lexicography, 1*(1). 7-36.

Khan, A.B., & Khan, M.Y. (2016). Punctuation Errors made by the Learners of Intermediate Level at Punjab Group of Colleges, An Error Analysis. *International Journal of Institutional & Industrial Research, 1*(1). 26-29.

Lacková, M. (2020). Corpus-based Analysis of Lexicosemantic Behaviour of Nervous System Diseases Names. *Arab World English Journal, 11*(4), 50-65. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no4.4

Laili, F. N. (2018). *An Error Analysis on the Use of Punctuation Marks in Students' Writing.* Surakarta: Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta.

Lakoff, R. (1984). The Pragmatics of Subordination. *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 481-492.

Landon, B. (2013). *Building Great Sentences. How to Write the Kinds of Sentences You Love to Read.* Plume. Great Courses edition. The Penguin Group.

Lastres-López, C., & Manalastas, G. (2018). Errors in L1 and L2 University Students' Writing in English: Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation. *Revista Electrónica de Lingüística Aplicada, 16*(1), 118-134.

Law for people. (2008). 245/2008 Z.z. par.74. School law. Retrieved 04 November 2020 from https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/2008-245#p74

Melikhova, I., & Skorobogatova, A. (2020). Foreign Language Writing in the Context of Modern Language Education in Non-Linguistic Majors. *International Journal of Instruction, 13*(2), 151-164. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.13211a

Meltzer, Erica L. (2019). *Commas and Subordinate Clauses.* Retrieved 10 December 2020 from https://thecriticalreader.com/commas-and-subordinate-clauses/.

McEnery, T., & Wilson, A. (2001). *Corpus Linguistics: An Introduction.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Meyer, C.F. (2002). *English Corpus Linguistics: An Introduction.* Cambridge: CUP

Miller, J. (2008). *An Introduction to English Syntax.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Morley, D. (2000). *Syntax in Functional Grammar.* London: Continuum.

O'Keeffe, A., & Mc Carthy, M. (2012). *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics.* London: Routledge.

Oshima, A., & Hogue, A. (2006). *Writing Academic English.* New York: Pearson Longman.

Oxenden, C., Latham K., & Seligson, P. (2019). *New English File Pre-Intermediate – Student's Book.* 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nasrudin, H. (2015). *The Students' Error in Using Punctuation Marks in Narrative Writing.* Jakarta: Faculty of Tarbiya and Teachers' Training.

NUCEM (2021). *Maturita 2022. Basic Information.* Retrieved 23 November 2021 from https://www.nucem.sk/dl/5013/Z%C3%A1kladn%C3%A9%20inform%C3%A1cie%20MS%202022.pdf

Pathan, A.K. (2019). The Most Common Comma Errors Made by the EFL Learners at Undergraduate Level: A Survey. *BEST: International Journal of Humanities, Arts, Medicine and Sciences. 7*(11), 1-8

Podesva, R.J., & Sharma, D. (2013). *Research Methods in Linguistics.* Cambridge: CUP

Parsons, J. (2007). *Success. Pre-Intermediate Student's Book with CD-ROM.* New York: Pearson, Longman.

Pyrcz, H. (2014). *Writing With Style: Grammar in Context.* North York: Oxford University Press.

Radford, A. (2004). *English Syntax: An Introduction.* Cambridge: CUP.

Rafajlovičová, R. (2013). *Subordination in Different Text Types.* Prešov: Filozofická fakulta Prešovskej university v Prešove.

Samhon, E.A.M., & Abdall, A.Y. (2016). Common Punctuation Errors Made by Secondary Schools Students in English: A Case Study at Secondary Schools, Nyala Locality. *Journal of Humanities, 17*(4), 73-87.

Sangeetha, V. (2020). Inculcating Self-editing Skills for Enhancing Writing Skills of the EFL Students. *International Journal of Instruction*, *13*(1), 509-522. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.13133a

Sketch Engine. (2020). *Learn How Language Works.* Retrieved 15 December 2020 from https://www.sketchengine.eu/.

Soars J., & Soars L. (2012). *New Headway Pre-Intermediate Student's Book*. 4th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spencer, D., Cole, A., & Edwards, L. (2013). *Gateway to Success B1 Student's Book pack.* London: Macmillan.

Stefanowitsch, A. (2020). *Corpus Linguistics. A Guide to Methodology*. Berlin: Language Science Press.

Štofková, J., Štofková, Z., & Štofko, S. (2016). Increasing the quality of the educational process through implementation of practice requirements in the university study programme. *8th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies EDULEARN16.* 1548-1554.

Tallerman, M. (2011). *Understanding Syntax*. London: Hodder Education.

Taylore-Knowles, S., & Mann, M. (2017). *Laser B1. Student's Book with eBook*. London: Macmillan.

Thomas J. (2016). *Discovering English with Sketch Engine. A Corpus Based Approach to Language Exploration.* Brno: Versatile.

Thompson, S. (1984). *Subordination in Formal and Informal Discourse*. Georgetown: Georgetown University Press.

Vinogradova, O., Viklova, A., & Smilga, V. (2021). *Punctuation in L2 English: Computational Methods Applied in the Study of L1 Interference*. Moscow: HSE University.

Wekker, H., & Haegeman, L. (1985). *A Modern Course in English Syntax*. London: Croom Helm.

Yourdictionary. Retrieved 16 December 2020 from https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/parts-of-speech/adverbs/adverb-clauses.html