

Appraisal of Written English Composition: A Study of Graduating Students in a Nigerian University

Isah Abdulmumini & Kabiru Musa

Department of English and Literature, Federal University Gusau

Abstract

This article analyses the test scripts of 400 level English students of Federal University Gusau in North-Western Nigeria with a view to identifying the challenges confronting them in written composition. The study population was asked to write their experiences during the 2022 eight month long Academic Staff Union of Universities in Nigeria (ASUU) strike. The students' test script comprise the data for the study. The research uses Fairclough's (1995) Discourse Analysis approach to analyse the data. The research discovers that, a sizeable number of the students committed errors in tense usage, punctuation marks, grammar, spelling, cohesive markers and paragraphing. The study further shows that the standard of written English in the university was very low; hence urgent attention needs to be paid to improve the students' communicative competence in written English. The research equally demonstrates that these potential secondary school English teachers lack the competence to effectively teach Standard English after their graduation. The paper concludes that strict measures should be taken by lecturers and university authorities to help improve the written English skills of the students

Introduction

English composition is a complex system (especially to those who are not groomed in the skill) that is indispensable for users of English. Writing is a process of recording one's experience on paper. Such records which cut across ideas, facts, opinions, sentiments, beliefs, interests, observations etc. provide permanent records which can be referred to when one can no longer rely on one's memory for an undistorted version of the incident. Students' written compositions are part of such experiences. These writing aspects perform several important functions that aid the art of communication. Despite the indisputable importance of the tools of writing for standard English compositions, Nigerian students misuse them to a great degree. It is a fact that these writing ingredients are extremely useful tools not only for students, but teachers and the general public. However, some Nigerian students who major in English fail to live up to the high standard expected of them. In recent times, a number of writers have observed that, the written English of some Nigerian English students are full of grammatical errors of different kinds, hence, the need for a research to be conducted in order to analyse their composition with a view to finding a lasting solution to the problem.

The poor communicative competence exhibited by the observed students in their written compositions leave a lot to be desired. This shows that they lack adequate knowledge of what composition writing is all about; hence, the misuses. Looking at the rate at which the students in question misuse the language in their writing, it is not an overemphasis if one states that their poor performance is as a result of their ignorance or non-challant attitude to the entire subject. This tendency is apparently a carry-over of their poor performance from primary and secondary schools to the tertiary institution. This is the only plausible explanation for their poor

performance in regard to keeping to the rules of writing. That is to say, their writings exhibit overwhelming evidence of faulty grammar, lack of cohesion, poor paragraphing, wrong spellings and defective punctuation. Sometimes, the manner of approach to the questions even during examination is worrisome and calls for action. It is common for such students to offer very few (sometimes meaningless) sentences as response to examination questions. In addition to that, their approach to the questions indicate lack of interest on the subject. This negative attitude has adverse effects on the subject and the fear is that in the near future some of those to handle the subject in schools and other institutions of learning will be people not worthy of doing so considering their lack of competence in the subject. From the researchers' observation, the attitude of final year English students which manifests in their usage of the language led to the conduct of this research.

This article, therefore, undertakes a critical appraisal of the written compositions extracted from an in-class written composition exercise. The analysis was conducted in such a way that many aspects were looked at in order to determine the essays' structures and level of comprehension as well as ability to compose ideas by the students who are being trained as potential English teachers in Nigeria. It needs to be stressed from the outset that, the focus of this article is not on error analysis, rather, it seeks to highlight the errors and analyse them in line with discourse analytical framework. The paper is a qualitative study in which words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs are subjected to critical analysis. The article equally uncovers some missing aspects of grammar in the students' composition. Previous studies in English writing focused on students' errors at different educational levels, especially higher institutions and universities (Muftah & Galea, 2013; Özkayran & Yilmaz, 2020). Available records show that, writing proficiency is considered more complex and challenging than other language skills (Hassan *et al.*, 2021, p. 378).

As such, some studies focused specifically on writing skills amongst English language learners, including English writing errors. For instance, Kirkgoz (2010) analysed written errors of Turkish adult learners of English. Another study was undertaken by Muftah and Galea (2013) on error analysis of present simple tense in the interlanguage of adult Arab English language learners. The study revealed that, the respondents committed a common error, which was the omission of the third person singular morpheme *s*. Additionally, Özkayran and Yilmaz (2020) examined English writing errors among university students in Turkey. According to the study, a total of 381 errors were committed by the students, including misformation, omission, and misordering. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, all the above cited researches are mostly on error analysis perspective, however, the present study is on discourse analysis. None of the previous studies focused on analysing essay writing errors among final year English students, particularly in public universities. This is the gap this study intends to fill.

Discourse and Discourse Analysis

The concept of discourse according to Cook (2011) has two different but related senses. The first is 'language in use', which refers to the meanings made in interaction with those features of context which are deemed relevant, e.g. tone of voice of participants, facial movements, and gestures. If the conversation is recorded, its 'text' would be the transcription of the conversation. It also refers to the meanings made in reading too, that is, those meanings we

derive from the text in line with the knowledge we possess, the amount of effort we invest, our values, how we have been educated and socialised, our gender, etc.

A second meaning of discourse is associated with the work of the French social theorist/philosopher, Michel Foucault. Foucault (1972) describes discourse as a way of talking about the words which are tightly connected to ways of seeing and comprehending it. For Foucault, discourses place limits on the possibilities of articulation (and by extension, what to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of a particular institution, political programme etc. According to Schifffrin (1994), discourse is defined in two ways: a particular unit of language (above the sentence); and a particular focus (on language use). These two definitions of discourse reflect the difference between formalist and functionalist paradigms. Johnstone (2008) defines discourse as an institutionalised way of speaking that determines not only what we say and how we say it, but also what we do not say which can be inferred from what we say. Initially the term refers to speech, but later, its meaning extends beyond speech to include every instance of language use.

Discourse Analysis is also concerned with language in use in social contexts and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers (Stubbs 1983, p. 1). Discourse Analysis is a general term for a number of approaches to analysing written, spoken or sign language use. Cutting (2002: p. 28) is of the view that, 'Discourse Analysis takes the concepts and terms of linguistics and then examines their roles in data'. Discourse Analysis is a term used to refer to any study of language beyond the utterance/sentence level (Boxer, 2002).

Critical Discourse Analysis as a new dimension of discourse analysis developed simultaneously with other critical studies in the social sciences. Van Dijk (1991) sees Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as "a field that is concerned with studying and analysing written and spoken texts to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias. It examines how these discursive sources are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political and historical contexts". Breeze (2011) opines that 'Critical Discourse Analysis has now firmly established itself as a field within the humanities and social sciences, to the extent that the abbreviation "CDA" is widely used to denote a recognizable approach to language study manifested across a range of different groups'. What differentiates CDA from other forms of discourse analysis is its critical nature. Critical implies going beyond analysis of the formal discourse features to show connections and causes underlying a discourse.

In the light of the above definitions, this study adopts Fairclough's approach of CDA as the analytical framework for this study's data analysis. Fairclough's (1995) three dimensional models -description, interpretation and explanation as illustrated by Lock (2004) in Mirzaee and Hamidi (2012) is used as analytical framework for this research.

Methodology

Sample sentences were selected from ten written compositions of 400 level university students who major in English. A multidisciplinary approach of discourse analysis was adopted for the analysis. The class where the test was administered comprises students from all the six geopolitical zones of the country. To this end, the excerpts (and sentences in particular) are representative of usages by members of both majority and minority linguistic groups in Nigeria.

The analysis was guided by Fairclough's (1995) three dimensional models – description, interpretation and explanation as explained earlier.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Below are the 10 extracts drawn from the 400 level English students' written compositions which were subjected to qualitative analysis:

Extract 1

ASUU strike is not good to our academic life, as we experienced some sorrowful moment, in the sense that, am suppose to have graduated but due to the industrial action, am still in campus.

During the ASUU strike, I am unable to get employed to any elementary schools all because of the issue of certificate, in the sense that, in any school I applied for they will ask of my certificate. Moreso, during that moment I turn errand boy at home, where by only me will be left at home after everybody have left for different working place.

During the ASUU strike, I missed a lot of white colar job opportunity due to unavailability of my certificate, and school certificate (secondary school) were not allowed.

I regret we going on this industrial action as am praying we never experience industrial actions by our lecturers again. I pray there needs and request be granted as soon as possible.

Extract 2

Strike is one of the things i pray against in my stay in school, but unfortunate for me the

ASUU, Academic Staff Union of Universities embark on strike on 14th, february 2022.

We are expose to so many things like sewing.

Extract 3

What happened during the break, the break was boring, just sitting at home living with the same people every day, travelling every now and then, and praying to God with the hope that the ASUU strike will be called off unfortunately it didn't happen until after eight good months. But Alhamdulillah we were alive and healthy.

I did nothing during the break honestly just travelling.

Extract 4

During the break I Went to many places and was busy doing jobs in different places as to my earns meet and I went to library to read and went for many research programs to unable to know about the world and many things that is around I went to some fun place during weekends. and I read many books, articles, newspaper journals magazine, and educational and motival books I travelled to some places

like Kaduna, Abuja, Sokoto and Lagos to see many exciting places. and visit different family members. and we went fun areas and went singing cooking composition and reading and I won the competition.

Extract 5

My experience for pass nine months was not easy at all, I started a little but it fail due to the situation of the our country and there was not enough capital to support the business, so unfortunately I had to travel back home to help my parents in the farm. I spend 5 months with my parents, for that period of time I feel like running away because the work in the was too much for me to handle, so when I heard that the school have resume I was very happy because I will be able to come and continue with my studies, but at first when the school are on strike I was not happy because I will not be able to graduate at the right time expecially with my mate.

Extract 6

There is nothing much to say about it, but to tell the truth I am not excited about the strike because it has affected our studies basically. I start teaching in one school in my town and gratefully I gained some experience and expand my knowledge and it helps a lot to remind me of my studies during the period of the strike.

finally, we are back from the long Journey of the strike and I am for ever grateful to God by doing so. Alhamdulillah we are insha Allah fully back to continue from where we stop.

This is my only experience from this period, I haven't travelled any where am always indoors from what I have said earlier, I go to my teaching school and back home.

Extract 7

The 2022 strike started february 14th and I went home february 20th To sure of the strike, but to my greatest surprise I was told from home to go see my aunty who was down with illness in Zaria before coming back to Kaduna, so I arrived at Kaduna park, and I was picked by my mum that was when I decide to tell about my plan to learn some trade like make up and photography but I ended up learning make up for about 4 months and then begin to learn how to drive car and later started my home lesson with some children. It was a great experiences with lot of achievement. I was about to open my own store, be my own boss before the call off. God has been really good to me and my family it was not an easy experience cause I went through a lot, from the learning experience down to end of it. At least am A proud make up artist, and a driver and a teacher, but I spent a lot of money in buying my product and other things needed. it was really not a bad experiences but an achieved one that we hope.

Extract 8

The strike was really not a bad experience for me, but I had a mixed feeling that almost lead to depression. I did my best to overcome all bad feeling coming as a result of not graduating from school at the suppose time.

I used my break to start up a small bussiness of selling perfumes, attended a one month make up training, did an online class of human resource management. The experience were really great. Meeting people that has a lot of interlectual plans was my most greatest moment too.

I most say, I found who I really want to be during the break and I never going to regret it.

There are a lot of financial breakdown but God took control over the problem. Family was great in helping out in all possible way they could help me cause they saw my determination on the good choices I picked to help myself. It felt more like the strike was a blessing to me even though I had really want to graduate and the strike was making my dream come to pass.

Extract 9

During the eight (8) months ASSU strike, I was not happy because the strike affected our graduating in September 2022. The strike really affected me because some of my plans were delayed. I have been in Gusau during the strike, I only travelled to Kaduna state during the big sallah to see my relatives there, while in Kaduna I went to visit a family friend that was adducted my bandits from Kaduna, I went to kogi state to see my mum who has been ill, which I spent some months there.

After spending some months in kogi state I came back to Gusau, journeying back to Gusau was not easily, I was scared because of the abduction of travelers along funtua- Gusau road, but Alhamdulillahi I reached home safely. So ater my journey from kogi stae and Kaduna while finally in Gusau, I was thinking of the hard work to learn or work to engage myself in before ASSU call off the strike, I first want to a tailoring shop very close to my house, I do go to the shop once in a while because my boss teaching me does not come to shop everyday.

Extract 10

my experience during the break was so hectic to the extent that I have to look for job doing in my state but saddenly the salary there was too poor I had to travel to lagos and start a business there with a brother and hopefully it all went well I was able to make a living there and time goes on there.

The union workers in the market begin to harass the marketers that which lead to riots which lead to closure of the market for two weeks which was terrible for me.

Above are excerpts from the 400 level English students' written composition of the Federal University Gusau in November 2022 after the 2022 ASUU strike. For ease of reference, some sentences were randomly selected from the ten extracts and used as samples in the analysis.

To start with, grammar is one of the aspects that the students under study lack in their essays. Looking at the excerpts of the students' essays, a number of faulty and shaky grammatical sentences can be found. Consider sentences 1-5 below:

- 1) I started a little but it fail due to the situation of our country.
- 2) Meeting people that has alot of interlectual plans was my...
- 3) God took control over the problem.
- 4) Infact I helped out in the little way I can to show them how appreciated I am with all they do for me.
- 5) I had that the school have resume.

Greenbaum and Nelson (2002, p. 16) define grammar as 'the set of rules that allow us to combine words in our language into larger units'. Looking at the students' sentences in the above extracts, one can say that grammatical knowledge is lacking, because the respondents do not conform to standard in their essays. Greenbaum and Nelson (2002, p. 18) have this to say: "Standard English is the national dialect that generally appears in print. It is taught in schools, and students are expected to use it in their essays." At the final year level, the above sentences indeed show poor competence in the subjects' use of the English language. This is because the importance of grammar can be appreciated in the construction of simple sentences in undergraduate academic texts. Failure to observe the rules of grammar can affect the way their readers comprehend and interpret their essays. This means that, as an undergraduate student, the writer must first of all be able to construct simple sentences before attempting to construct compound and complex sentences which are being violated here.

It is obvious that, during the process of learning a foreign language, mistakes and errors "are unavoidable constitutes" (Li, 2021, p. 238). Although the terms 'mistakes' and 'errors' appear to be interchangeable, they are not the same. A mistake is a type of performance fault in which the learner wrongly uses the language. On the other hand, an error is a structure that deviates from the standard language reflecting the interlanguage ability of the learner (Kirkgoz, 2010). Errors usually happen due to learners' lack of knowledge, and they usually occur continuously. The errors tend to occur in many aspects of grammar (Mashoor & Abdullah, 2020).

This research also found that the respondents produced errors in spelling in their compositions. This manifests as in the underlined words in Sentences 6-10 below:

- 6) Meeting people that has alot of interlectual plans was my...
- 7) I used my break to start up a small bussiness of selling perfumes.
- 8) I got to find out what teens suffer from and also tried to create solusion for them.
- 9) I will not be able to graduate at the right time expecially with my mate.
- 10) I was told from home to go see my anty who was down with illness in Zaria.

11) While in Kaduna I went to visit a family friend that adducted by bandits.

The above sentences indicate another instance of poor writing skills in the students' written composition. It is obvious that people who are learning English as a second language often have problems with the spelling of English words but English students in the university are not supposed to be committing these minor errors, especially in their final year. This observation aligns with Greenbaum and Nelson's (2002) view that, "English spelling, like English punctuation, is a convention that is helpful to the reader. Spelling mistakes distract and irritate readers. Good spelling is usually considered a sign that the writer is educated" (p. 246).

Furthermore, NOUN (2010) highlights the reasons for the problems encountered while spelling English words to include:

- i) The illogical relationship between the sound and the spelling of English words;
- ii) The habit of not reading carefully to see how unfamiliar words one comes across are spelt;
- iii) The habit of not listening carefully to hear how English words are pronounced by native speakers or proficient non-native speakers;
- iv) The habit of not pronouncing or articulating the English words correctly sometimes gives rise to wrong spelling when writing down the thoughts in learners' minds.

Another cause of poor writing detected in the students' essays is lack of proper use of punctuation marks. This type of error indicates the inability of the respondents to use the punctuation marks appropriately due to lack of knowledge on how to do so. Capitalisation is one of the punctuation marks that most of the students fail to apply at the beginning of sentences and to indicate proper nouns. Consider sentences 12- 17 below:

- 12) family was great in helping out in all possible way...
- 13) ... the ASUU, embark on strike on 14th, february 2022
- 14) I went to kogi state to see my mum who was been ill...
- 15) After spending some months in kogi state I came back to gusau, journeying back to gusau was...
- 16) ...when i reached Niger state, i met some policemen on the road, one among the policemen stoped the vehicle i was in.
- 17) finally, we are back from the long journey of the strike...

It is disheartening to see these types of error being committed by final year students of English studies. If mistakes like these are not corrected at this level, when do we expect them to eliminate them? Punctuation marks constitute one of the devices a writer can use to a great advantage by inserting appropriate punctuation marks in the right places. By so doing, a writer can get his meaning across to his readers without comprehension problems. It is, therefore, very necessary that a writer masters the important punctuation marks in order to make the essence of their written compositions clear to their readers. According to Dignen (2017, p. 11) "when you write, you use punctuation to make your meaning clear."

The respondents' essays also contain some degree of challenges with the use of cohesive markers. The students' essays under investigation contain a lot of misuse of cohesive markers. See sample paragraphs below:

A) Strike is one of the things i pray against in my stay in school, but unfortunate for me the ASUU, Academic Staff Union of Universities embark on strike on 14th, february 2022.

We are expose to so many things like sewing.

B) What happened during the break, the break was boring, just sitting at home living with the same people every day, travelling every now and then, and praying to God with the hope that the ASUU strike will be called off unfortunately it didn't happen until after eight good months. But Alhamdulillah we were alive and healthy.

I did nothing during the break honestly just travelling.

The way the above two paragraphs were written indicate that most of the students do not have adequate knowledge on how to join ideas in their composition which is another serious abuse to the English language. The students start and finish without any indication that a master is writing. The ideas are just written at random (consider the last sentence in sample text A above where the respondent writes *we are exposed to so many things like sewing* as if something bad happens but he was trying to share a good experience to the reader. Inability to join ideas in a piece of writing renders it meaningless. Cohesion is the semantic relation between one element and another in a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In other words, a text is cohesive when the elements are tied together and considered meaningful to the reader. Cohesion occurs when the interpretation of one item depends on the other, that is, one item presupposes the other (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). It needs to be stressed that ideas in an essay must be joined together for meaning to be established. Cohesive markers must be used in any meaningful write up (even those written by non-English practitioners) but unhappily, they are being abused by the English students in question. Cohesion concerns the ways in which the components of the surface text (the actual words we hear or see) are mutually connected within a sequence. Widdowson (1978) thinks that cohesion is the explicit relationship between propositions of sentences.

In the case of the above extract, the text lacks coherence because the writers have chosen to write any how as if they were not English students in the university. Considering Zongyan's (1992) view, who proposes that 'cohesion is the lexical and grammatical devices', one cannot call the above extracts as unified whole because cohesive elements are not justified in the extracts which constitutes an abuse to the English composition.

The respondents are also prone to making errors in paragraphing. From the data presented, the students' approach to paragraphing is worrisome. They abuse the paragraph as if they lack the knowledge of what paragraph is all about. From the excerpts, some essays contain only one paragraph while others have multiple paragraphs but with only one or two sentences which does not conform to the standard composition writing. Consider another sample below:

my experience during the break was so hectic to the extent that I have to look for job doing in my state but suddenly the salary there was too poor I had to travel to lagos and start a business there with a brother and hopefully it all went well I was able to make a living there and time goes on there.

The union workers in the market begin to harass the marketers that which lead to riots which lead to closure of the market for two weeks which was terrible for me.

The paragraph according to NOUN (2010) is one of those writing qualities which prevent print-fright, provide bridging breaks in continuous writing, and offer the readers manageable units of thought or material upon which to focus their attention at any time; hence it provides them with a valuable aid to memory. A paragraph is good if it develops a unit of information fully. Such unit of information is usually identified from the first or the last sentence in the paragraph. But the unit of information may also be identified by establishing what all the sentences refer to in various ways. When one of the sentences in a paragraph provides the unit of information in that paragraph, we call that sentence the topic sentence. However, when there is no topic sentence, but all the sentences in the paragraph expand one single idea or point, we call that idea or point the controlling idea. In fact, all manner of errors can be found in the above essays from the 400 level English students written compositions. They range from errors that should have been taken care of from the primary through secondary levels up to the tertiary level. No single error-free sentence in the extracts. From their attitude, the students in question can be said to be writing at the primary level, although in a university. To add to that, most of them are not ready to take steps in correcting those errors being in their final year in the university.

Olaofe and Kasim (2013) are of the view that the dwindling quality of undergraduate written English is worrisome to many people. That is why this section of the article tries to address some of the common errors in undergraduate written English. This is one by selecting ten representative essays written by these students. From the foregoing, it appears clear to the reader that, the 400 level English students lack proper knowledge of the tools of standard writing which is a slap to the English students and by implication to the academic circle (the university system) where these students as well as potential English teachers are produced. Their attitude in composition writing at the final year level of their studies indicates lack of preparedness to handle the subject in the future which shows an abuse to the language.

In the light of the above, Abdullah *et al* (2021) are of the view that, some mistakes happen due to students' carelessness. They know the right forms, but due to some reasons such as memory lapses, physical states such as tiredness, psychological conditions such as strong emotions, or being in a hurry, they commit such mistakes. In addition, one may begin to wonder why the entire excerpts do not capture other aspects that add beauty to the essays in question. These include proverbs, figures of speech and idioms even if they were from the students' native languages. What this simply implies is that, the students are just in a hurry to graduate and do not bother how their essays can paint them black in the eyes of their readers. They are therefore not ready to present themselves as English teachers worthy of emulation. According to Manfredi (2019) 'the proverb intervenes in discourse to air a thought, to sum up public opinion, to clarify a point, to spur a debate or to bring humour to serious matters' (p. 6).

In a nutshell, the tools of writing are skills which have to be carefully learnt and acquired by English writers with great diligence. Writing is one of the four skills in English that all English students are supposed to master; the others are listening, speaking and reading. These skills are classified into two main categories, the receptive and productive skills. These skills lie at the heart of any meaningful writing. The great value of these skills for enhancing the quality, clarity and explicitness of meaning is evident. They raise the status of a piece of writing and the attention which it can win because the features attract positive and favourable attention to the knowledgeableness of a writer. Every serious writer should therefore give serious attention to knowing and using them simultaneously.

Causes of Abusing the English Language in Writing

So many factors are responsible for poor written compositions. They include ignoring essential features of writing such as grammar, cohesion, good paragraphing, punctuation and spelling, among others. For the purpose of this research, only the above five areas were covered by the article due to its limited scope. Very much like written compositions, answering essay examination questions requires accurate use of sentence structure forms, relevant sentence patterns and error-free sentences (Olaofe & Kasim, 2013). Olaofe and Kasim also add that it is important to look at the examination questions to identify the task or key words, think about the demands of the key words and plan how to address them as accurately as possible before answering the question.. But it should be remembered that, the four writing skills as well as the writing ingredients have to be handled properly in order to have a standard write up.

The importance of grammar can be seen in the construction of simple, compound, complex and compound-complex sentences in undergraduate academic texts. It can radically affect the way your audience reads and understands your essay (Olaofe & Kasim, 2013). This means that undergraduate students must first of all be able to construct simple sentences before attempting to construct compound and complex sentences. There is no hard and fast rule about the length of a paragraph. A writer is at liberty to determine the length and content of any paragraph they create while writing but at the same time, the paragraph should not be vague and banal. The writer might have written a page and feels it is too long for their reader to hold the thoughts together. At that point, they can look for a minor boundary where the separation of ideas can be easily done. The writer must however make sure that there is, at least, a major point that can hold the other minor points in the paragraph together. According to Olaofe and Kasim (2013) all undergraduate students should strive for error-free written English for optimum performance in their respective fields of study.

Conclusion

The findings show that the written compositions of 400 level English students' do not correspond to the high standard of written English expected of graduating students of English. This issue does not augur well for the country, nor does it speak well of the university that produced them. The article reveals the manner in which English is misused by the present-day generation of English students in a Nigerian university. The essays written by the students contain many errors that included grammar, punctuation, paragraphing, cohesion, spelling and more. The research shows the need for lecturers in departments of English and Literary Studies

nationwide to redouble their efforts so that their students' communicative competence in the use of English can be enhanced. Likewise, university administrations should invest more in the required infrastructure to boost the performance of their students in the use of English.

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