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## Assessment of The Problems of Learning the Aural – Oral Skills at JSS Level in Katsina State, Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT:** *Effective communication in English by students at the Junior Secondary School level as envisaged by the 9 – Year English Studies Curriculum has remained elusive. In this article, effort is made to trace the problems with a view to offering workable solutions. The descriptive survey method was used. Sixty-eight Junior Secondary School students were used in the study. The subjects selected included 384 students. A self – designed questionnaire was used to collect the information required. Analysis of data was done by means of frequency counts and percentage. The study revealed among others, fear of English by students due to its absurdity. Based on the findings, among the recommendations given, was the need for teachers to employ more friendly activities to teach aural – oral skills to make their learning more effective and enjoyable.*

**KEYWORDS:** assessment, problems of learning, aural, oral skills, JSS level, Katsina state, Nigeria

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### INTRODUCTION

English language is the most important subject in the school curriculum. This is so because it is the tool through which information, concepts, skills and values in all other subjects are transmitted (Clifford, 2011). English is also socio-linguistically important in Nigeria. For in spite of its colonial origin, it has become over the years, both the language of official business and a vital link between the various ethnic groups in the country. It thus enjoys a lot of prestige as a language over and above other Nigerian languages. According to Sadiq (2010), it is in effect, the second language of Nigeria. It is essential for success in the educational process and in other areas of national life.

In recognition of this status of SEnglish therefore, so much attention and resources had been, and continued to be devoted to its teaching in Nigerian schools. Surprisingly, and quite disappointingly though, students' proficiency in English seems to be declining rapidly. Banjo, quoted in Umar (2005) laments the situation when he says: "Now the general complaint is that the level of proficiency in the English language within and outside the education system has been falling and with it, understandably the general level of education" (p.8).

It is therefore to be noted, that the problem of poor performance is not confined to English alone. It extends to all other subjects in varying degrees. The close correlation between failure in English and failure in other subjects as revealed by WAEC and NECO results seems to lend credence to the claim that many failures in other subjects stem from failures in English (Banjo, 1971). That is to say, the failures are occasioned by poor mastery and performance in English. This further reveals the close connection between language performance and educational attainment. Nonetheless failure in English has more negative implications than failure in other subjects. Hence a good pass in English is a basic requirement for admission into nearly all post-secondary institutions in Nigeria.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the research are to find out:

1. The problems students face in learning the English aural – oral skills at junior secondary schools in Katsina State.
2. The attitude of students towards learning of the English aural – oral skills at junior secondary schools in Katsina State

### **Research Questions**

The research questions formulated to guide the study include:

1. What problems do students at JSS level in Katsina State face in learning of the English aural-oral skills?
2. What is the attitude of students towards learning of the English aural – oral skills at junior secondary schools in Katsina State?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The design adopted in this study is the descriptive survey. Sixty eight, including public, private and community junior secondary schools were used in the study. 384 students were randomly selected to serve as subjects. A self – designed questionnaire was used to collect the relevant data. Frequency counts and percentages were used to analyse the data.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The success of the learning of speech in the secondary school depends largely on the teacher of speech. Textbooks, ample audio-visual aids, interested and co-operative parents and students are no substitute for an able teacher. For he sets the tone of the class and the spirit of the programme. Baker, cited in Enesi (2001) following a study carried out compiles and analyses the reactions of some secondary school students, and comes up with some qualities of a teacher of speech. In her opinion a teacher of spoken English should determine largely the caliber, quality and success of speech learning in a secondary school. In Nigeria, a teacher of spoken English is also a teacher of all other components of English language.

A lot of observations have been made by researchers and applied linguists on ESL teacher's attitudes. Sani (2001), and Azikiwe (2007) have concluded in their studies that teacher's attitudes are very important factors in the learning process. His attitude towards his students, method and materials are determined largely by his academic and professional preparations. Earlier, Williams (1981) also observes that English language teachers need to be aware of the conflict between the role and status of English language in Nigeria. Adequate professional knowledge and experience, proficiency in the spoken and written English are all qualities a teacher must possess if he is to function as a language model. This researcher is also of the opinion that the English teacher should know the characteristics of both written and spoken English. Aina (2001) further lists the roles of the oral English teacher thus:

1. Providing necessary background experience. This means that the teacher should provide the necessary enriching background experiences in oral conversations, visits to zoos and museums, dramatics as well as oral expressions.
2. Using the right methods of instructions and approach, as well as materials, not textbooks only.
3. Developing students' interests and motivation
4. Accepting the child (p.22).

Contrary to the above Olaofe (2013) observes that most English classrooms in Nigeria are faced with teachers whose English is imperfect and lack adequate training. Effective learning cannot take place where the teacher lacks linguistic competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing. He should be able to help the students expand their communicative competence. To be able to do this, he should not only know what he ....is dealing with (language), but also with whom he is dealing –individuals who speak and write.

Although Ayodele (1981) suggests that all teachers irrespective of discipline should have some training in spoken English. This will enhance their conscious use of phonologically correct English and make them correct their students in this respect. Regrettably, it is observed that in most schools, English and non-English teachers do not encourage their students in spoken English. This researcher is of the opinion that this attitude is not unconnected with the general negative attitudes of some Nigerians towards spoken English. Bright and McGregor (1984) are of the views that teachers of other subjects, should also be teachers of English. When the skills of communication are being taught, topics from these subjects are of utmost relevance. According to them and this researcher shares the same opinion too, all teachers of English no matter what subject they teach, should teach English. This is ideal but not many teachers concern themselves about teaching English language to their students. This is because they probably feel that it is not their area of discipline, even though they use it as a medium to teach their subjects.

Examination bodies are not helpful either. They do not encourage the teachers to teach English language especially while marking examination. For instance, errors in the language are not considered in other teaching subjects e.g. Economics, Government and many others. Only the

points made by the candidates are marked and scored. Hence, teachers of subjects other than English concentrate only on their disciplines. The ideal thing is that the teacher sets a good model for his students. On this, Adeyanju (1974) contends that:

*Success in language learning depends above all else, on the quality of the model which the teacher sets for his pupils; but some Nigerian teachers are bad models, not being trained to be other wise and who hardly ever use any of the many language records available, not to mention a language laboratory (p.28).*

Azikiwe (2007) is also of the opinion that the presence of various types of untrained teachers ranging from graduates in English (and sometimes history) without ESL training is still a problem. According to him, lack of competence of most teachers of spoken English is a problem. This explains why many of the English teachers neglect the spoken English component.

Although Enesi (2001) believes that a teacher of speech should be reasonably hale, with no speech defects, aware of his own pronunciation and able to use an acceptable standard form to teach, in Nigeria serious attention is not paid to the English teacher's speech defects and nobody bothers to know whether or not he uses an acceptable standard to teach. What model should be taught has already been discussed earlier in this chapter. The more contact an ESL teacher can have with ESL students, the better. An ideal English teacher should be convinced of why he is teaching what, in any given lesson he is teaching. He should also be aware of the contribution he is making to the final product of a Nigerian-bi or trilingual. The main job of the English teacher at the upper Basic (JSS) is to teach those basic structures which form the backbone of the language.

It has generally been accepted that the standard of spoken English is low amongst all sections of the community. This researcher therefore is of the opinion that spoken English which is important in Nigeria as a medium of education and a means of national and international communication, demands a higher general level of proficiency in performance and understanding than exists at present. An able speech teacher is needed in achieving this aim. Of course, according to Ayodele, cited in Azikiwe (2007) "a non-native English teacher as found in Nigeria faces the triple problems of having to perfect his own receptive and productive oral English skills, of detecting the flaw in the spoken English of his learners and correcting his weakness"(p.1). This researcher shares the same opinion as these are the problems currently present in schools.

Adeyanju (1987) has recommended that every English language teacher should be a language laboratory'. This implies that the oral English teacher should be nothing but a near – native model of spoken English. But unfortunately the situation is not so in most Nigerian schools. To buttress this point, Olaofe (2013) maintains that many teachers withdraw themselves voluntarily from teaching oral skills. The general speaking skills of the instructor and his ability also affect the teaching-learning situation. The success of the JSS English curricula therefore, depends very much on the quality of English teachers in schools.

Most schools do not have oral English as a distinct component on their time-table. Many teach it as part of the lesson for English grammar; the inverted curriculum (Swanson, 1984). This oral English teaching climate can be traced to the human factor. Olaofe (2013) posits that the degree to which a teacher is committed to, and has enthusiasm for standard spoken English would determine whether or not the skill is actively or extensively taught. He laments that most of those who venture to teach the oral skills do so in a very poor manner. This position was proclaimed by earlier language educators.

Banjo (1971) for instance commenting on the low degree of commitment to oral English teaching, opines that this attitude is due to the fact that most English teachers consider it superfluous. They feel that in the process of teaching other areas of language, the learners would catch the correct pronunciation of that language and feel, as earlier discussed, it is socially unacceptable to speak exactly like native English speakers. This researcher is of the view that what Nigerian schools need today among other things, are trained teachers of English who have the confidence and ability or knowledge to teach English sounds, rhythms and intonation, and willing and always able to act as models of pronunciation for the learners.

### **Attitude**

Attitude is another important factor that can influence positively or negatively performance in language learning. Olaofe (2013) points out that attitude is revealed in the child's beliefs and expectations which result in positive, negative, or non – challant attitude with regards to language learning. The attitude cultivated can be facilitative, or inhibitive or lead to joy or frustration as the case might be.

Learners of the L2 come from different cultural, religious, political backgrounds. This naturally affects their performance in the second language. As earlier observed, these backgrounds create ridicule to learners of English who attempt to speak with perfection or near-native speaker fluency. Some students also have been brain washed to think that English is not their language and are convinced not to take its learning seriously (Olaofe, 2013). Such students according to Olaofe always try to question why English must be learnt. Teaching English in this situation therefore requires high amount of motivation.

The attitude of teachers of other subjects towards English is also a thing of concern as pointed out by Sofenwa (1987): “one might even say that English is being taught in a hostile environment where even fellow teachers do not support the work of the language teacher” (p.19).

From the fore-going, one would observe that this factor (attitude) would affect more the learning of aural-oral skills as attitude is expressed more in speech than in writing.

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**Other Factors that Affect Aural – Oral Skills learning include:****Age**

The stage at which learning starts is of uttermost importance. Azikiwe (2007) believes that for mastery of the second language, the language must be introduced quite early in the learner's life. This is based on the assumption that children would learn the sounds and patterns of a new language by sheer imitation, while an adult without copious explanation would find developing the correct pronunciation difficult. Hassan (2009) further explains that by the time a learner is twelve years old, the sound patterns of the mother tongue are so deeply entrenched as habits, that when he studies the L2 he may not even hear the new sounds let alone produce them.

Penfield's study in 1959, as cited in Ogunrombi (1986), suggests that there appeared to be a biological time-table which allows rapid learning of a second language by a child up to the age of ten. This suggests further, in the opinion of this researcher, that the best time to start learning a language, particularly the spoken one is when the learner is young. In support of this, Bright and McGregor (1971) remark that:

*The proper place to work intensely on improvement of Pronunciation is in the primary school "something could be done and should be done in the secondary school, but we should not perhaps aim too high, use too much time or be too disappointed with unspectacular progress (p 186)*

**Time.**

Native speakers of any language have an unlimited time to put their language to use. The second language learner on the other hand in most cases faces time constraint in learning the second language. Tiffen, Gatembay as cited in Kado (2013) attribute poor performance in second language to insufficient time available to the learner. Pascacio as cited in Enesi (2001) commenting on the poor performance of the Filipino learning English puts it more succinctly when he says: "The time allocated to the English language is too inadequate for any meaningful learning of the language thereby causing students to enter into college with an insignificant background in English".(p. 29).

**Classroom Situation.**

The feature of large classes characterising especially public schools in Nigeria is a serious impediment to language teaching and learning. Clifford (2011) in his study of the impact of large classes on learning English as L2 discovers that learners in large classes attain lower linguistic progress than learners in small classes. He further observes that learners in small classes have more chances to access teacher evaluation and to participate actively in classroom discourse. It is interesting to note that this opinion is shared by earlier researchers such as Gatembay (1950), and Strevens (1965) and a host of others.



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**Socio-Economic Factors**

Another factor found to significantly affect second language learning is the learner's socio-economic background. Rubin as cited in Iyere (2008), after conducting a research using primary school children as his sample concludes that children belonging to the middle class family receive more help in their language development. Consequently, these children are found to develop an elaborate linguistic structure for talking about objects and their attributes as well as ability to use a greater variety of lexical items to expound categories. Their language use is also found to differ from situation to situation and at the same time possess the ability to make their meaning verbally clear. Other researchers who hold the same view include Tiffen (1968), Williams (1983).

On the contrary however, Burstal (1986) does not believe that socio-economic factors affect student's performance in L2 learning. He discovers and reports that "there is a linear relationship between pupils' social class and their attitude towards learning (French) as a foreign language and their level of achievement in French" (p.83). This, however, notwithstanding, from experience most teachers know that 'children from educated, well-to-do families, who are exposed to such facilities that are likely to aid learning tend to do better in class.

**Psychological Factors**

Psychological factors relate to the individual only as opposed to the group. Aliyu (1995) and Kado (2013) believe that near native fluency in Nigeria is often ridiculed even among elites themselves. So, individual speakers psychologically develop the fear of being ridiculed in an attempt to speak like a native speaker of the target language. This constitutes a sort of psychological block to the learning of English.

**Motivation**

The role of motivation in L2 learning has been widely discussed by psychologists and language educators who include Lambert (1975) Aliyu (1995). Lambert in particular distinguishes between instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. An instrumental motivation deals with reflecting the value and advantages of learning a new language while integrative motivation deals with reflecting a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the native speakers of the target language. However, Lambert (1975) recognizes that instrumental motivation would sustain better the long-term objective needed for the demand to learn the target language.

According to Azikiwe (2007) motivation is the arousal of the tendency to act or behave towards a goal which is preferred to all others. He states that it is the duty of the teacher to do all within his capability to motivate the learner to be interested in what is going on in the classroom. Hassan (2009) contends that the English ESL learner should be made aware of the importance of English language and the advantages arising from acquiring proficiency in it. She claims that if the learner knows the problems he will face in future arising from incompetence in English, he will put in much effort to learn the language.

Olaofe (2013) classifies motivation as integrative, if it is open and positive as reflected in good attitude to the language group or instrumental as in attitude to the learning situation. This is seen in its effect on many variables such as the language course, the teacher, the capacity of the language to fulfill the needs of the learner and the respect accorded the teacher.

Research question 1

1. What problems do students at JSS level in Katsina State face in learning of the English aural-oral skills?

To answer research question 1 opinion of student was sought. In the following table are their responses

Table 1 -Responses of Students on the Problems They Face in Learning of the Aural-Oral Skills.

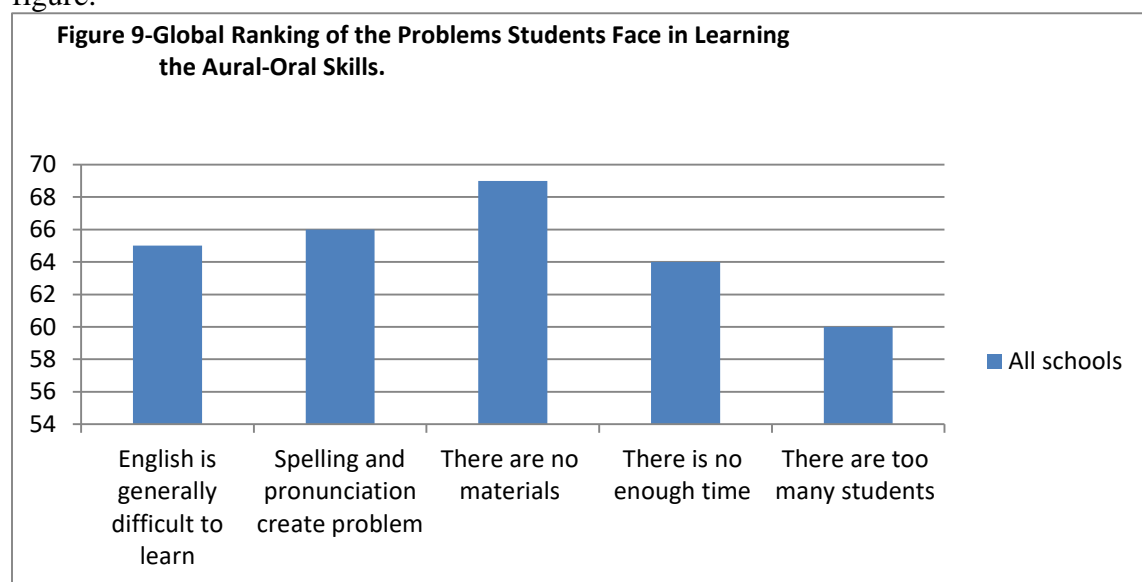
Item	Statements	Public		Community		Private		All schools	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1.	English is generally difficult to learn	150 (68%)	70 (32%)	44 (67%)	22 (23%)	22 (51%)	21 (49%)	216 (65%)	113 (35%)
2.	Spelling and pronunciation of English create problem	153 (70%)	67 (30%)	41 (62%)	25 (38%)	22 (51%)	21 (49%)	216 (66%)	113 (34 %)
3.	There are no materials	161 (73%)	59 (27%)	44 (67%)	22 (33%)	21 (49%)	22 (51%)	227 (69%)	103 (31%)
4.	There is no enough time	147 (67%)	73 (33%)	42 (64%)	24 (36%)	23 (53%)	20 (47%)	212 (64%)	117 (36%)
5.	There are too many students	169 (77%)	51 (23%)	23 (35%)	43 (65%)	04 (9%)	39 (91%)	196 (60%)	133 (40%)

What emerges from Table 1 is that majority of the students across the schools agree that all the areas itemized, create problem for them in learning the English aural-oral skills. However, an overwhelming majority (69%) blames lack of instructional materials. This is worsened by the relationship between spelling and pronunciation of English words, which creates confusion to learners. Two hundred and sixteen (66%) and 227(69%) respondents across the schools respectively, support this. Two hundred and sixteen (65%) respondents believe that English is generally difficult to learn. Similarly, 212(64%) and 196 (60%) respondents agree that lack of enough instructional time and large classes respectively, contribute to the problem of learning the aural-oral skills.



On individual rating the respondents from private schools differ from other respondents. This is because only 20 (47%) agree that there is inadequacy of time to teach the aural-oral skills. In the same vein, thirty nine (91%) also disagree with the existence of large classes in their schools. They however concur with other respondents, that oral English is generally difficult to learn as reported earlier in table 1

Students' Problems in learning the aural-oral skills are also ranked as contained in the following figure:



The above figure displays and ranks all the problems faced in learning the aural-oral skills, as perceived by students. The most outstanding of these, from the bar charts, is that of lack of learning materials. This is followed by the problem created by spelling in pronunciation. Lack of enough time for the teaching of the skills takes the third position. It was followed by the difficulty in learning English generally. The last was the factor of large classes.

Is the attitude of students at JSS level in Katsina favourable to the learning of English aural oral skills?

It is generally believed that the learner is the most important variable in the school environment. Thus the learners' attitude towards what he is learning is of paramount importance in the learning process. It was in this respect that this researcher sought to find out the attitude of the students towards learning English aural-oral skills. Table 2 summarises their responses in this respect.

## Research question 2

1. What is the attitude of students towards learning of the English aural – oral skills at junior secondary schools in Katsina State?

Students opinion on the attitude variable were sought to answer research question 2. The students responses are contained in table 2 bellow:

Table 2 Responses of Students on Their Attitude Towards Learning of Aural-Oral skills.

Item	Statement	Public		Community		Private		All Schools	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1.	I Speak English often.	93 (42%)	127 (58%)	30 (45%)	36 (55%)	28 (65%)	15 (35%)	151 (46%)	178 (54%)
2.	I avoid speaking English because it is not my language.	78 (35%)	142 (65%)	22 (33%)	44 (67%)	15 (35%)	28 (65%)	115 (35%)	214 (65%)
3.	Oral English is easy to learn.	63 (29%)	157 (71%)	30 (45%)	36 (53%)	25 (58%)	28 (42%)	118 (36%)	211 (64%)
4.	Leaning Oral English is more important than learning, reading, writing and grammar.	95 (43%)	125 (57%)	25 (38%)	41 (62%)	21 (49%)	22 (51%)	141 (43%)	183 (57%)
5.	It is not necessary to learn stress and intonation since they are not present in my language.	61 (28%)	159 (72%)	24 (36%)	42 (64%)	06 (14%)	37 (86%)	91 (28%)	238 (72%)
6.	Generally, students enjoy learning oral English lessons.	95 (43%)	125 (57%)	31 (47%)	35 (53%)	25 (58%)	18 (42%)	151 (46%)	178 (54%)

Table 2 reveals that the attitude of majority of students does not favour learning of the aural-oral skills. Item 1 shows that 178(54%) respondents disagree that they speak English often. Item 3 reveals that 211(64%) students disagree that oral English is easy to learn. Conversely, item 4 reveals that 183(57%) respondents reject that learning oral English is more important than learning the other skills. Item 6 also indicates that 178(54%) disagree that students generally enjoy learning oral English. However, the table also reveals that students are not biased against the language itself as indicated by items 2 and 5. Two hundred and fourteen (65%) students disagree that they do not speak English because it is not their language. But 238(72%) reject that learning stress and intonation is unnecessary for not being a feature in their languages.

Peculiarity of the private schools as usual manifests regarding their attitude towards learning the skills under investigation. Their responses to item 6 for example, indicate that 25(58%) agree that students generally enjoy learning oral English. Their responses also to item 1 show that 28(65%) agree that they speak English often. However, in response to item 3, even the private schools students disagree that oral English is easy to learn.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

As far as the students are concerned, one of the major problems militating against learning the aural-oral skills were linguistic in nature 227(69%) and 216(66%) of respondents involved in the study complained of the inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation and the inherent difficulty in learning English respectively. This confirms Gimson's (1970) dismay, that "the ambiguities of English spelling remain to puzzle the native speaker and to frustrate the foreign learner". This is why like Umeh (1989) points out, "English language is notoriously difficult to master, its pronunciation is baffling, and it's spelling illogical".

It was also worthy of note, that the state of the teaching of the aural-oral skills in public schools which constituted the majority of schools studied, was the worst compared with both private and community schools. In fact, if this study was confined to the public schools, the findings would be better imagined than seen. This is consistent with the fact that the public schools experienced the worst in terms of the problems associated with both the teaching and learning of the aural-oral skills. Private schools on the other hand, were shown to have more percentage of teachers who excelled in almost all the variables investigated.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings and literature review the following recommendation are offered:

- (i) Teachers should sensitize students to understand the importance of learning the aural-oral skills.
- (ii) Efforts must be made to use more friendly learning activities such as: drama, poetry, drills, film and the radio etc. to make learning of the aural-oral skills more lively and worthwhile. This way, students are likely to change their attitude towards learning the two skills.

- (iii) Integrated approach (with other skills) in the teaching of aural-oral skills is also recommended. That way; students would be made to see the relationship among the skills. This is capable of bringing to limelight that oral skills can be instrumental to learning the other skills.
- (iv) To ease the hardship teachers encounter in teaching the aural – oral skills class room should be decongested.
- (v) Special programme should be put in place to re – train teachers of English to cope with teaching of the aural – oral skills.

## CONCLUSION

From the study its conclusive that a less teachers of spoken English of the quality required are adequately provided learning of aural – oral skills will continue to suffer. The success of the learning of speech in the secondary school depends largely on the teacher of speech. Textbooks, Sample audio-visual aids, interested and co-operative parents and students are no substitute for an able teacher. For he sets the tone of the class and the spirit of the programme Bowers (1995). Its equally important that attitude of learners at the JSS level should be turned around to understand and love learning the spoken English. The implication of the poor state of affairs of teaching and learning the aural – oral skills is that the general learning of English and by extension the education system will be negatively affected. This is because the aural – oral skills as stated by the curriculum are the ‘bed-rock’ of the English language.

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