



Original Article

International Journal of Educational Research and Technology

P-ISSN 0976-4089; E-ISSN 2277-1557

IJERT: Volume 6 [1] March 2015: 40-48

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ISO 9001: 2008 Certified Organization

Website: www.soeagra.com/ijert.html

Material Evaluation and Analysis: Relevance And Appropriateness of English Language Teaching Modules to Enhance Quality of Education

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ABSTRACT

Teaching materials maintain enormous popularity and should be at the service of the teachers and the learners. The present study was designed to evaluate the appropriateness of Basic Writing Skills module prepared by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Mekelle University. The complaints from students and teachers and the extremely thinness of researches concerning evaluation of teaching materials has attracted the attention of the researcher to consider the problem. As a result, this project was designed to assess how the module is appropriate based on set of evaluation checklists adopted from different sources. To undergo the analysis, 14 teachers who have a concrete ground in designing and evaluating teaching materials were participated. As a result, it was found that the module is good in terms of activities and short summary, the inclusion of several open-ended questions and language. However, it is deficient in the areas of organization, feedback, integration of the macro skills, consideration of higher order thinking skills, and appropriately acknowledging source materials. Therefore, as the module is not at the expected standard in terms of these aspects, it is recommended that various production-oriented tasks should be incorporated; contents should be rich in terms of authenticity incorporating local illustrations; student-student interaction should be promoted through engaging students in more pair and group work activities, and there should be integration among the macro language skills.

Key words: materials evaluation, material design, EFL, coursebook

Received 22.10.2014

Revised 08.12.2014

Accepted 21.01.2015

How to cite this article: Melese Mengesha , Ephrem G/Silassie . Material Evaluation and Analysis: Relevance And Appropriateness of English Language Teaching Modules to Enhance Quality of Education. Inter. J. Edu. Res. Technol. 6[1] March 2015; 40-48. DOI: 10.15515/ijert.0976-4089.6.1.4048

INTRODUCTION

As a global language, communication throughout the world and documented accommodation of knowledge in the world are in the English language. Hence, it has an elemental position as the language of business, technology, politics and education. Thus, anyone who is deficient in command of the language would not have satisfactory access to enough knowledge about the world. Due to this, the English language is taught in schools, colleges, and universities in most parts of the world. Furthermore, many subjects are taught in English language. Many researchers, such as Abebe (2003) and Berhanu (2004), assert that being competent in English is important for a success in the academic contexts. This is basically because students' academic success or failure depends to a large extent on their ability to work out with the language and comprehend the textbooks and notes they receive in the different subjects. Furthermore, almost all the examinations which assess their knowledge and abilities require the competency in the language used to develop the teaching materials. Teaching materials form an important part of most English teaching programs. From textbooks, videotapes and pictures to the Internet, teachers heavily rely on a diverse range of materials to support their teaching and the learning of their students. However, despite the wide commercial availability of English language teaching materials, many teachers design and use their own materials for classroom instruction. It is also true that most teachers spend considerable time finding, selecting, evaluating, adapting and making materials to use in their teaching (Litz, 2001). Teachers do all these tasks to produce modules, handouts, tasks etc to assist their teaching and help their students retain their subject matters. For the EFL learners, modules have become the source of contact they have with the language apart from the input provided by the classroom teacher and other reference materials (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). This shows that modules, as teaching materials, are important resources for teachers in assisting students to learn every course in

any educational institutions. In Ethiopia, the practice of using modules as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice is a recent practice. Research findings in developing language teaching materials consistently show that there is strong correlation between language proficiency and academic success at all educational stages: materials designed with necessary care and by involving the needs of the target students will help the teachers and learners. In this regard, Tomlinson (1998) says that teaching materials have crucial role in developing quality of education. It is important to remember, however, that there has been a movement to make learners the center of language instruction since the 1970's, and it is probably best to view teaching materials as resources in achieving aims and objectives that have already been set in terms of learner needs because teaching materials should always be at the service of the teachers and learners (Brown, 1995). Consequently, teachers need to make every necessary effort to establish and apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the materials that they use in their language classrooms in order to accommodate the needs of learners and "the aims, methods and values of the teaching program" (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.7). Among the various reasons of students' incompetence, one is the teaching materials used for classroom purpose. Related to this, Brown (1987) says, "Students often make errors due to misleading explanation from teachers, wrong presentation of structure and concepts in a learning material" (p.179). Thus, the main target of this research is to identify the problems users are facing in using Basic Writing Skills module prepared for the teaching and learning activity in Ethiopia: Mekelle University. Many teachers and school authorities believe that there are different factors involved in the Ethiopian students' achievement in English language. One of these factors refers to the quality of the teaching materials used in the process of English language teaching. Informal complaints from students and teachers who have been using this material attracted the attention of the researcher to consider the problem. There has been some discontent among undergraduate students of Mekelle University over the content, language and organization of some modules. Although it is unwise to hastily conclude that our modules are crappy, the situation still points to the need to check if the modules are up to the standard. What the students are saying may contain grains of truth, but the truth may be overlaid with mistaken ideas, or may be far from the reality. Perhaps the only sensible thing would be to lend an ear to student grievances and see if the problems really exist. The researcher strongly believes that it is the teachers themselves, including the researcher, who can discover and address the problems exhibited in the module. Nevertheless, if students are trained wrongly, it will be difficult for the problem to be solved (Tomlinson, 1998). The researcher has also identified that researches concerning evaluation of teaching materials, such as modules, are extremely thin on the ground, particularly at Mekelle University. Materials review is also given scant attention, or ignored completely. Since the course is taught for all students of the colleges of the university, evaluating the quality of the module drops some direction for improvement of the teaching material.

In relation to this, this paper tried to answer the following basic questions:

1. Is the module written according to the standard suggested by scholars?
2. Is the module appropriate to the context of use?
3. Does the material enable to achieve the goals of the language curriculum?
4. What major language problems are observed in the module?

Objectives of the study

Hence, this research has an objective of evaluating the appropriacy and relevance of Basic Writing Skills module to enhance quality education.

More specifically, it aimed at:

- Identifying the consideration of protocols suggested by scholars in the area of material preparation and designing during the development of the module.
- Evaluating whether the content, activities/exercises and methods contained within the module are appropriate to the context of use.
- Exploring whether the module is enabling to achieve the goals and objectives of the language curriculum.
- identifying the major language problems in the material.
- Verifying whether the module is likely helpful to heighten and sustain learners' learning.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

The research used document analysis where the assessment is guided by set of checklists; therefore, the research method employed in this study is exploratory. The study highly emphasized on the result of the evaluation of the Basic Writing Skills (EnLa 1012) course module by different stakeholders.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Chambers (1997) pointed out that evaluating teaching materials is usually more beneficial if it is collectively undertaken by everyone involved in the teaching and learning process. He suggests that when teaching materials are to be used by a large group of people it seems sensible for these materials to be evaluated by all or most of those who are involved in their use. As such, this study relied on the active participation of 14 instructors, including the researcher, of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Mekelle University. Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique since the selected fourteen instructors took ELIP training. Moreover, they are professionals in the area of teaching material designing and preparation.

Data Gathering Instruments

The study employed document analysis as a means of data gathering tool. This is because checking the quality of a teaching material requires a thorough evaluation and critically examining on the basis of preset guiding checklists. The data stem from instructors of Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Mekelle University. The use of such data is justified by the benefit to the study: the researcher can have a better idea of the nature of the problem.

The instructors evaluated the module according to the set of checklist which is adopted from the works of scholars in the area of materials development and evaluation. The researcher browsed the checklists proposed by different authors, such as Cunningsworth (1995); Tomlinson (1998); McDonough & Shaw (1993); Richards (2001); Tucker (1975); Cowles (1976); Richards & Renandya (2002); Williams (1983); Yalden (1987), and Sheldon (1988). After a thorough analysis, the researchers have adopted the checklists recommended by Tomlinson (1998); Cunningsworth (1975), and McDonough and Shaw (1993). The evaluation checklists were set in English because English serves as a medium of instruction at various levels in Ethiopian context.

The researcher favored document analysis (by the help of checklists) over questionnaire and/or interviews because the issue of evaluating the appropriateness of the above mentioned module demands thorough and intensive evaluation. Hence, only document analysis is used as a means of gathering the necessary information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings based on the data obtained majorly through the evaluation checklists.

The effectiveness of the module in terms of layout

One of the most useful starting points in any teaching material evaluation is an analysis of its design and layout. According to Litz (2001), "the layout and design of a [teaching material] refers to its organization and presentation of language items and activities" (p.15). To this point the analysis emphasized on the overall organization, introduction, summaries, objectives, illustrations and referencing aspects of the module. Many of the language components are arranged logically. The organization of this particular module is appropriate to some extent, but the researcher has put a reservation on the sequence of some units. A close examination of each unit, for instance, reveals that there is arrangement problem with the first two units. Capitalization and Punctuation, for example, which are included under Unit Two should have come before Types of Sentences which is the concern of Unit One. This is because the knowledge of punctuation and capitalization is relatively less complex than types of sentences. However, the question of how and in what order the structures must be arranged in a structural syllabus is a controversial issue as (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p.88) stated. Nevertheless, my personal experience in teaching this course shows that students learn mechanical skills such as punctuation and capitalization with less effort than constructing communicative and meaningful sentences. Moreover, they learn constructing sentences and correcting faulty sentences better if they are introduced to punctuation and capitalization in advance. Again it is not convincing to present treat types of sentences and faulty sentences under different units. They can be brought together and treated under same unit and put them as subtopics. In addition, Unit Six is all about Fundamentals of Paragraph Development. However, Techniques of Paragraph Development is presented under a separate unit. However, it could be included under Unit Six (Fundamentals of Paragraph Writing) because the so-called "Techniques of Paragraph Development" refers to the types of paragraph. The introductions and summaries of each unit are clear and comprehensive; the objectives are attainable. The language which has been used to formulate the objectives is also clear and understandable for both the teacher and the learners. Nevertheless, it would be good if the objectives were outcome-oriented.

To the durability of the cover and binding, it is difficult to say that the material is long-lasting because the binding is not as such strong, and the cover itself is not hard paper. There is an ordinary (A4 size) paper used as a cover which is covered by a plastic.

Visual materials may range from simple hand-made realia, charts and pictures, to electronic and digital materials. The module does not include any of these illustrations. In addition, the material doesn't consider the different learning styles of students to support the variety of learner types in a particular classroom. Brown (2007) states that there are three learning styles such as visual, auditory and kinesthetic that learners exhibit. He further explains that visual learners prefer reading and studying charts, drawings, and other graphic information while auditory learners tend to prefer listening to lectures and audiotapes. On the other hand, kinesthetic learners are more interested for demonstrations and physical activity involving bodily movement. In fact, successful students utilize both visual and auditory input, but slight preferences one way or the other may distinguish one learner from another. This is an important factor for designing classroom instructional materials. However, the absence of considering the different learning styles of learners will limit the material not to support different learners with different learning styles. Both visual and kinesthetic learners require some kind of illustration to support their learning.

To the positive aspect, the material is not culturally biased and it does not portray any negative stereotypes. Despite this, almost no consideration is given for cultural essences of the country. The module is also acceptable regarding clarity and orthographic beauty. The density of text on each page is appropriate. The font size used to type the material is also normal so that everyone with average vision can read and understand it. To the methodological aspect the writer tried to make the material learner-centered to a limited extent. The expressions used in the module, such as "Dear learner...", "Do you remember what..." indicate the effort to create friendly relationship between the learners and the material.

The writer has developed an interesting material in terms of content, methodology suggested, the readability of the text and providing adequate suggesting for test/evaluation. The reference sections also show that there are many references which have been consulted by the writer. The bibliography/reference section(s), the module used the appropriate APS citation format. However, no in-text citation is found in this module except after some essays. It is difficult to say that all of the ideas which are presented and discussed are the writer's own ideas. Almost half of the materials presented in this module are referred or taken from one source, specifically (Langan, J, 2006, 1985). There are several ideas taken from other sources in each unit, and some of those sources are acknowledged while the other sources are not. The writer has tried to acknowledge sources of some of the passages and paragraphs which are used as samples. Still there are many texts which are taken from other sources but not indicated where they are taken from.

There are no answer keys for the exercises and activities in the module. This would have been provided since students must verify their level of performances.

In general, most teachers responded unfavorably to this particular aspect of the module. Therefore, the Basic Writing Skills (EnLa1012) module is an average teaching material in terms of its design and layout.

The effectiveness of the activities and tasks

All writing components that should be included in the course are included. The problem lies only on the way the activities are designed. They focus on knowledge rather than on skills. Students should be provided with activities that let them write something.

Most of the writing activities are guided writing activities. Either they provide problematic sentences and ask the students to correct them or provide an essay and ask the students to answer questions. On the other hand some of them are completely controlled. No free writing activity has been provided throughout the module. The writer only tried once to ask the students a question that looks a free-writing (page 81) which is still unsatisfactory. This implies that the tasks are not varied enough. For instance, students can be given the opportunity to write their own sentences and let them exchange their works to take peer corrections rather than only giving the lists of erroneous sentences to be corrected. In addition, the module is full of tasks which can be modified and reproduced to be used for assessment purposes.

All the tasks and activities have their own instructions, but the instructions are not specific enough to present precisely whether the learners should exercise the activities individually, in pair or in group. Because of the absence of precise instruction, it can be concluded that many of the activities are individual activities and they do not encourage cooperative learning. In line with this, Clarke (1989) argues that it is important to design instructional materials based on communicative methodology involving authenticity, context and a focus on the learner. The writer relied on the classical model of presentation, controlled practice and production (PPP) approach. This approach is proposed based on the belief that out of accuracy, fluency comes. Nevertheless, current second language acquisition (SLA) researches reveal that teachers cannot really predetermine or presuppose the natural order of learners' acquisition/learning through focused instruction. The suggested better alternative to PPP would perhaps

be a task-based learning (TBL) approach (Litz, 2001). This approach creates the opportunity for the learners to set tasks and encourage cooperative learning to acquire a new language before practicing specific language items. Though the activities are more guided and do not encourage cooperative working, they have slightly the potential to help learners to think critically while they do the tasks. For instance, the activities that require identifying sentence errors also ask learners to correct the faulty sentences. In addition, the activities that require the learners to paraphrase and summarize texts have the capacity to help learners think critically in order to identify the main ideas and use synonymous expressions and words. But it is difficult to say that they encourage students' creativity.

As it has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, the material does not consider the different learning styles of learners. Therefore, it is difficult to say that the tasks appeal to a wide range of abilities and interests of learners in a classroom.

Theoretically, Krashen (1981) proposes $i+1$ to the difficulty of activities in teaching a language. He argues that a task should be a little beyond the current proficiency level of the learner. The underlined assumption of his claim is that if students are engaged in doing tasks, they are learning the language. Therefore, the activities should add one more to what the learners already know. When we evaluate the activities of the module in terms of their difficulty, it seems that the activities fit to the students' academic level and are positively challenging.

To the availability of feedback to the activities, there is no feedback to the learners towards the tasks they do in the entire module. Let alone throughout the activities, there is no either end of chapter or end of module feedback (answer) given.

The effectiveness of the module in terms of skills

This course is completely a writing course. The aim of the course is to develop the writing proficiency of the learners. In the previous course, the learners were introduced with grammar, oral communication and paragraph writing issues. In addition, they have the awareness of sentence construction and composing texts during their preparatory education. Because of these reasons, the students are believed to have a base to some extent. Hence, the writer has based this background knowledge of the learners while writing this module.

Kumaravadivelu (2003, 2006) presents that teaching how to learn a language should emphasize in engaging the learners communicatively and letting them learn the strategies unconsciously. To this particular module, there are few discretely stated strategies to help learners develop their writing skills, but the close analysis implies that the explicitly stated strategies are not what adhered by modern scholars in the area of education.

The integration of writing skills with other language skills is not considered as expected. There is only one instance of integrating writing with speaking may be because both of them are productive skills.

The effectiveness of the language of the module

The language of the module is fine in many aspects: grammar, mechanics and diction. In terms of style, it is academic English as well. However, there is one instance where spelling error is observed (page 10 and 134). The writer spelt the name an author of a referred book in two different ways: Langan, J. (2006) and Longan, J. (2006). In addition, the language is not authentic that will help the learners to practice the language and develop their writing skills in the real-life like situation.

Litz (2005) states that after the introduction of the 'Communicative Approach' to language teaching in the 1970's and 1980's, it has been believed that authentic reading, speaking, listening, writing, and grammatical language models should be used to teach English language learners. It is also claimed that the activities or tasks associated with the language skills should be authentic and suitably graded to the level of the students with whom the skills are being used. This clarifies that if the language used to develop teaching materials is genuine and represents the real-life, our students' learning the language will be heightened. In addition, authenticity of the medium of instruction increases learner motivation.

The effectiveness of the module in terms of contents

It is unquestionable that contents of any teaching materials are supposed to be helpful and momentous at least for the learners and appeal to their interest. This drops some grain that subjects included in a teaching material should be interesting and motivating.

From the thorough evaluation made by the researcher and the other stakeholders, it is found that the content of the module is comprehensive. In terms of the motivating nature of the contents, assuming the academic level of the university students, the complexity level of the contents of the module seems fine. However, some contents of the module including names of people and historical notions included in some paragraphs are far from students' experience and background. So, contextualization of contents seem missed to some extent. There is a single effort observed in the module to include some local issues like 'the Nile Grand Renaissance Dam'. But in most cases major room is given for foreigner concepts. The

result of the evaluation also reflects that the themes, situations and topics of the tasks have direct connection with the units/lessons.

General reflection

The aim of letting the students learn Basic Writing Skills in higher education institutions is to shape them with the capability of using the target language and developing the skills of writing effective texts. Teaching materials that are designed to equip the learners with the needed knowledge and skill have a tremendous role to achieve this aim. If the materials miss or are unable to achieve this purpose, they will cast enervating effect on learning a second/foreign language. On the basis of this agenda, the module was prepared based on the assumption that it will help learners develop such skills.

The materials which are compiled in this module are good enough to help learners develop their writing skills. The writer has also tried to list down many potential sources for further reference. However, besides listing the references referred by the writer, it would be worthy if possibly the best sources for further skills development are indicated. The content of the module seems large volume to some extent. But most of the pages are occupied by the tasks which can be done out of the classroom. Therefore, it is fair to say that the module fits to the educational program in relation to time.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The discussion in this paper covered a wide range of issues related to the analysis and evaluation of the quality of the locally produced teaching material to teach the course Basic Writing Skills (EnLa1012). The appropriateness of a teaching material to teach a specific course can be judged on the basis of many grounds. Wrongly designed teaching materials can cripple the academic and career competence of students unless they are developed carefully and evaluated periodically.

To achieve the academic goals of the university, locally developed teaching materials, such as modules, should be revised and up-dated in terms of content and tasks. The revision will open the door to incorporate newly emerged thoughts to the contents, methodology and social issues included in the teaching materials. Unless adequately addressed, ensuring quality education will be certainly affected and pose serious risk for the further advancement of the knowledge society. The tasks and exercises should be designed in such a way that they enable the learners critically analyze and criticize texts and components of texts. Producing citizens with critical thinking skills will have a tremendous implication on the overall enhancement of a particular nation. Hence, teaching materials should be in a pole position to encourage independent (autonomous) learning so that students will be capable of dealing with problems by themselves.

Besides this, locally developed teaching materials are expected to serve the target users by providing issues and concepts that address the background of the learners. More attention should be given to the varieties of social and cultural issues of the learners than foreigner concepts and names. More than this, teaching materials need to be revised periodically so that recent thoughts and findings in the area of language studies will get room in order to address the learners with up-to-date information and advancements.

Generally, the analysis of the teaching material implies that there is a problem on the organization of the module, feedback on the exercises and activities is missed, the integration of skills is not considered, and contextualization of contents seem missed to some extent.

EVALUATION CHECKLIST FOR INSTRUCTORS AND INVESTIGATORS

Table 1: Checklists for the Evaluation of the module in terms of its layout and design

	Evaluation Checklists	SA	A	NS	D	SD
A	The organization of the module is clear and easy to follow.					
B	The chapters provide clear introductions and summaries.					
C	An adequate set of evaluation suggestions are included.					
D	The material's objectives are apparent (clear)					
E	Illustrations are appropriate for the age, ethnicity, sex and socioeconomic level of learners.					
F	The images depict (show) a variety of cultures of Ethiopia.					
G	There is an optimum density of text and font size on each page.					
H	The suggested methodology is learner-centered.					
I	The material is supported by additional references.					
j	The references are properly cited.					

Any remark?

Table 2: Checklists for the Evaluation of the module in terms of its activities

	Evaluation Checklists	SA	A	NS	D	SD
A	There are task-based and authentic activities.					
B	There are opportunities in the activities for learners to discuss on topics studied in other subjects such as science and history and do cross-disciplinary projects.					
C	The activities allow learners to use the target language to communicate with each other, or the teacher in authentic situations by integrating reading with the other skills.					
D	The activities encourage students to utilize higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.					
E	The activities incorporate	Individual works				
		Pair works				
		Group works				
F	The module provides feedback to learners throughout the activities.					

Any remark?

Table 3: Checklists for the Evaluation of the module in terms of its pedagogical aspect**Table 3.1 Fluency**

	Evaluation Checklists	SA	A	NS	D	SD
A	The module explains how to assess students' reading rate.					
B	The module explains how to promote students' oral reading.					
C	The module explains how to enhance students' comprehension.					
D	The module explains how to direct aulend monitor reading.					

Any remark?

Table 3.2: Vocabulary

	Evaluation Checklists	SA	A	NS	D	SD
A	The module provides instruction about important frequently used words in a text before reading.					
B	The module provides instruction about difficult words such as compound words, homographs, homophones before reading text.					
C	The module provides instruction about using word parts (prefixes, suffixes, base words, and Greek and Latin roots).					
D	The module provides instruction about using dictionaries.					
E	The module provides instruction about ways of using context to understand word meaning.					
F	The new vocabulary words are repeated in subsequent lessons to reinforce their meaning and use					
G	The number of words in a text is manageable.					
H	Adequate vocabulary list or glossary is included.					

Any remark?

Table 3.3: Text Comprehension

	Evaluation Checklists	SA	A	NS	D	SD
A	The module provides guidelines for teaching comprehension strategies.					
B	The module explains how to promote and monitor student use of active comprehension strategies before, during, and/or after independent silent reading.					
C	The students are taught interactive (top-down and bottom-up) techniques for learning new words.					
D	The module pays attention to sub-skills such as reading for gist/skimming, note-taking, note-making, scanning etc.					
E	There is sufficient range of engaging and level-appropriate reading material					
F	The module makes comprehension easier by addressing one new concept at a time instead of multiple new concepts.					

Any remark?

Table 4: Checklists for of the Evaluation of the module in terms of language

	Evaluation Checklists	SA	A	NS	D	SD
A	The language used in the module is authentic, that is, real-life like English.					
B	The language is clear and grammatically correct.					
C	The language represents a diverse range of registers.					

Any remark?

Table 5: Checklists for the Evaluation of the module in terms of content

	Evaluation Checklists	SA	A	NS	D	SD
A	The content of the module is relevant to the students' needs as language learners.					
B	The units and exercises are connected in terms of theme, situation, topic and/or pattern of skill development					
C	The module includes a detailed overview of the functions, structures and vocabulary that will be taught in each unit.					
D	The content is accurate and up-to-date					

Any remark?

Table 6: Checklists for the Evaluation of the module in terms of whole aspects

	Evaluation Checklists	SA	A	NS	D	SD
A	The module is appropriate for the language-learning aims of the university.					
B	The material fits into an educational program in relation to time.					
C	The module places emphasis on lifelong learning by suggesting uses of the target language for personal enrichment and enjoyment.					
D	The material is suitable for different learning styles.					
E	The text selections are representative of the variety of texts (literary genres).					
F	I would choose this module to teach/learn Reading Skills.					

Any remark?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Our special debt of gratitude goes to the instructors who participated in the evaluation of the module for the purpose of this study. We also owe heartfelt and special gratitude to Mekelle University for granting us financial support for the completion of the research.

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