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Community-Based English Course in Local Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to investigate how a community-based English language course can assist learners in the development of language skills and local cultural knowledge. The samples were 17 undergraduate English major students in Faculty of Education, Rajabhat Rajanagarindra University. The qualitative method was mainly employed in the study. Data were collected through unstructured interviews and participant observation. The strategies used in data analysis were analytic induction and typological analysis. The findings revealed that motivation, experiential learning, and collaboration played significant roles in the process of language and culture learning. The paper also discusses the significance of local perspectives when the course is designed. Local resources can be utilized and mobilizes for life long learning.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

English is an international language. Smith (cited in McKay 2002, p.11) defines the term 'international language' that it is one which is used by people of different nations to communicate with one another. In academic contexts, Swales (cited in Nunan 2003, p.590)estimated that more than 50% of the millions of academic papers published each year are written in English, and the percentage was growing year by year. It is reported that the total of 337 million represents an estimate of those who have learned English as a first language (L1). The total of 235 million represents an estimate of those who have learned English as a second language (L2). Estimates for the total number of those who have learned English as a foreign language have been as low as 100 million and as high as 1,000 million (Crystal 1997, p.61). English is also currently used in various arenas such as international organizations, the media, international travel, international safety, education, and communications (Crystal 1997). Moreover, access to higher education in many countries is dependent on knowledge of English. Although it may not be the medium of instruction, accessing key information in a great variety of fields is often dependent on having reading ability in English (McKay 2002). Finally, the English language will certainly continue to play an important role as a global language in world communication, international business, and social and cultural affairs (Yano 2000, p.119).

Since English is widely spread and used internationally in various arenas, the English-speaking world will increasingly become more and more diverse and increasingly multilingual rather than monolingual (Pakir 1999). Consequently, the role of culture in EIL teaching has also become one of the main issues in language teaching. One of rationales for culture learning is that culture is necessary because it is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; culture-specific world views are reflected in language (Brown, cited in McKay 2002, p.85). According to Moran, (2000, p.6) many situations or circumstances where languages are taught affect the nature of the culture to be learned. As an international language, English can never be removed from the historical, social, cultural, economic or political contexts in which it is used. McKay (2002) adds that one cannot acquire the language without an understanding of the culture or cultures with which it is associated.

It should be apparent that cultural content is very important when communication takes place among English speakers. Kachru (cited in Jenkins 2003, p.63) asserts that English is an important tool to impart local traditions and cultural values. McKay (2004) maintains that the purpose of an

international language is to describe one's own culture and concerns to others. However, there are some questions raised on how English should be taught and what role culture should play in the teaching of English in many countries and in Thailand. The cultural content of language teaching materials, techniques for increasing awareness of the culture of the target language community, as well as the culture of English as an International Language, have been debated in many academic forums (Dogancay-Aktuna 2005, p.99). McKay states that the teaching of English is becoming more closely aligned with the host culture as those countries use local characters, places, and issues as the content for teaching materials. In order to develop the use of EIL, students need to be encouraged to reflect on their own culture in relation to others as a way of establishing a sphere of inter-culturally (McKay 2002). Britten and Fashi (cited in McKay 2004, p.11) argue that to have a cultural component in language teaching, it can promote international understanding and deepen an understanding of one's own culture. Whereas Suzuki (cited in McKay 2004, p12) points out that promoting Western cultural standards in the use of English often results in Japanese people having a feeling of inferiority. In conclusion, the focus of the content is viewed differently in many countries.

In Thailand, English has been in the National Curriculum since 1890. In 1960 English was one of the compulsory subjects in primary schools, in 1978 it was one of the elective subjects in primary schools, in 1996 it became one of the elective subjects recommended to teach in primary schools from first grade, and finally in 2001 it has been the first foreign language to be introduced from first grade (Luksaneeyanawin 2005). It is apparent that English has played an important role in Thailand for centuries. According to Raksaphet (cited in Saengboon 2004), knowledge in almost every field is available in English, many well-paid jobs in both public and private sectors in Thailand look for recruits who have a reasonably good command of English. However, promoting the ideas of teaching EIL and its relationship to cultural contents in Thai curriculum is not adequately provided for Thai learners. Greil (2004) conducts the analysis of cultural presentations and references in English textbooks used at secondary school in Thailand. The results apparently raise whether these textbooks establish links to the learners' culture and whether they transmit cultural information about one's own society to the outside world. Griel suggests that these materials need to be inclusive of representations of the learners' own culture from different perspectives and explicitly relate their culture to other cultures in various ways-regardless of the level of English that is being taught. On the other hand, Baker (2005, p.43) argues that teaching methodology needs to mediate between Thai and Western educational values. In fact, there is growing awareness of the importance of culture and context within English teaching in Thailand, and the need for teachers and learners to be aware of the relationship between language and culture (Damnet and Wongbiasaj, cited in Baker 2005, p.43).

The Thai government instituted The National Education Act of 1999, as a result, new directions and guidelines for Thailand's educational system have been reformed such as curriculum reform, teacher recruitment and training, educational administration, and national educational requirements. The Act was designed to provide core guidelines taking into consideration the local community problems and needs. According to Section 23, it is apparent to see the connections between teaching EIL and its relationships to cultures. Knowledge about religion, art, culture, sports, Thai wisdom, and the application of wisdom are emphasized for learners in order to pursue one's career and capability of leading a happy life. In addition, learners should have knowledge about oneself and the relationship between oneself and society, namely: family, community, nation, and world community.

Even though some principles in the Act can be applied to foreign language teaching, more attempt needs to be put in the reformation. According to Todd and Keyuravong (2004)'s research in the process and product of English language learning in the National Education Act, they suggest that 'the carrier content of English teaching should concern Thai and local culture and issues or general and scientific knowledge'. In conclusion, it is clear that local cultural component in English language teaching can promote both international understanding and one's own culture, which can directly be linked to the role of EIL.

It is clearly seen that the objectives of the foreign language curriculum are quite similar to the common aims of language teaching around the world. According to Ingram (2003), most policies and syllabuses see three central goals for language education: the development of language proficiency, the development of cultural understanding, and the fostering of positive cross-cultural attitudes. The objective of developing positive attitudes toward other cultures has also been codified in the form of U.S. national standards for Foreign Language Learning (cited in Bateman 2002, p.318). In Australia, the first national policy on languages (cited in Ingram et al 1999) states, 'Since language and culture are inextricably linked, learning languages can contribute to cultural enrichment and intercultural understanding between members of different groups in several ways. By learning about other cultures one can reflect more objectively on one's own culture and may come to a deeper appreciation of the points of commonality and the differences between them'. In conclusion, it is more likely to state that language and culture cannot be separable particularly when language is taught. McKay (2002) suggests that teaching goals for English as an international language are: 1) to ensure intelligibility among the speakers of English, 2) to help learners develop strategies to achieve comity when English is used with speakers from other cultures, and 3) to develop textual competence.

Cultural content of EIL is presently not limited to only native English-speaking cultures. Source culture materials should be included when English is taught. Foley (2005) claims that communicative competence also involves intercultural competence. Thus, the teaching and learning of English in Thailand also involves an understanding of Thai culture. According to Cortazzi and Jin, (cited in McKay 2002, p.88) there are three types of cultural information: source culture materials that draw on the learners' own culture as content, target culture materials that use the culture of a country where English is spoken as a first language, and international target culture materials that use a great variety of cultures in English-and non-English-speaking countries around the world.

The values of local cultural contents are also one of the basic principles in Rajabhat University Act 2004. According to Section 7, the philosophy of the university is to promote local cultural knowledge in each own community. Moreover, the university shall understand and experience in management in a balanced and sustainable manner. Life-long learning and openness to learners' needs, interests in the community are to be promoted as well. It is apparent to see the relationship between local cultural knowledge and its own communities. According to Section 8, the university is responsive to enhance learners to appreciate their own country, and communities. In addition, learners are encouraged to understand and be proud of Thai and their communities. To support learning for community development and to encourage learning in the learners' communities is also stated.

It is also appropriate to see the relationship between English as an international language, English language teaching, Thai curriculum, The National Education Act, and learners' own communities. McKay (2003) suggests that educators should recognize the value of including topics that deal with the local culture, support the selection of a methodology that is appropriate to the local educational context. Local perspectives on English language teaching are to be examined. The teaching methodology is to be relevant and suitable in each community. Consequently, community-based approach is introduced. According to the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001), communities are encouraged to participate more fully in the management of education at all levels. Curriculum and teaching materials are improved to reflect more closely the community lifestyle and environments (Kotkam 2000, p.205). Community-based education could be defined as an educational process by which individuals become more competent in their skills, attitudes, and concepts in an effort to live in and gain more control over local aspects of their communities through democratic participation (Galbraith, 1995). Galbraith contends that the aims and purposes of community-based education usually are directly related to specific community issues such as career training, consumerism, environmental concerns, basic education, ethnic history and culture, governmental policies, and civic and political education. Owens and Wang (1996) use the term 'community-based learning' in his school improvement research. They define community-based learning as the broad set of teaching/learning strategies that enable youth and adults to learn what they want to learn from any segment of the community. Learners are provided

unlimited set of resources to support them to learn. Morgan (2004, p.115) asserts community-based ESL, 'social concerns are often as important as linguistic ones in attracting ESL students to community language programs and that language teachers can address such concerns while organizing courses and lessons in ways relevant to students' needs, interests, and life situations'. Ingram (2003) states that social interaction or community involvement is the central activity where learners use the language in the real world around them as they talk about their own environment and as they interact with speakers of the language who live in the learners' own community or elsewhere in the world. Ingram contends that the classroom activity is designed to support and respond to needs that arise from the community involvement activities and formal teaching and learning either in preparation for the community involvement activities or in response to needs felt of the community.

Finally, Ingram (2003) concludes that community involvement approach can be used as a tool both to stimulate the natural learning strategies and to increase and diversify the community in which learners can be involved as they experience and strive to communicate in the language. However, Todd and Keyuravong (2004) state that community-oriented learning has received almost no attention in English language teaching and warrant research. There is a big number of community-oriented research in other educational fields such as public health, social sciences, and science but not in English language teaching. Then, this study can provide a new direction of course development , where the role of EIL, The National Education Act 1999, Rajabhat University Act, and community-based approach are connected and brought to a new English elective for undergraduate students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- This study addresses the following two questions:
- To what extent does community-based approach assist in the development of learners' language skills?
- To what extent does community-based approach enhance local cultural knowledge?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To investigate learners' language skills through community-based approach.
To investigate whether the community-based approach can enhance local cultural knowledge.

METHOD

Population And Sample
The population was undergraduate English major students who were enrolling in the new curriculum (5 years) at the Faculty of Education, Rajabhat Rajanagarindra University. The number of the population was approximately 36 students. The majority of students were not born in Chachoengsao. They mainly come from Prachinburi, Cholburi, Srakaew, Samutprakarn, and Rayong. Most of them live in the dormitories in town, Bangkhla campus, and surrounding areas.

The sample was purposively selected from the second year undergraduate students. There were 17 students in the main study. The study was part of the course entitled 'English for Academic Communication' which was taught in the first semester of academic year 2006. Consent was given by the head of the Foreign Languages Department. The main study was divided into 2 phases; phase 1 consisted of 30 hours mainly conducted instructions in the formal classroom and phase 2 consisted of 18 hours mainly extended classroom activities beyond the classroom.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Chachoengsao, a small and charming province on the Bangpakong River, is located in the central region of Thailand. The province is famous for both cultural and natural resources. Diversity in cultures – such as 'Ghost Boat', 'Boon Khao Larm', 'Tak Bart Nam Phueng', 'Centipede Flag Pageant', and etc. - can be found in different districts in the province. However, Chachoengsao

people are strongly attached to Luang Phor Sothorn Buddha Image and Wat Sothornwararam, the Sanctity of Chachoengsao. The fertility of the forest and the abundance of natural resources – such as woods, wildlife, freshwater fish, rice, vegetables, and fruits- makes the province becomes one of the largest agricultural communities and natural attractions in the country. Due to these attributes, most of the population are employed in agriculture and fishing. At the same time, Chachoengsao has become a satellite town of Bangkok particularly as a residential hub. In addition, the province promises to be a perfect locale for a university town. The province has also become the trade gateway due to the establishment of the new airport (Suvarnabhumi Airport) and the economic expansion from international companies. The prospect of Chachoengsao as a central agricultural market and a second production development drives Rajabhat Rajanagarindra University- the local university- to keenly develop the strategies to fulfill needs of the province particularly in manpower.

The setting in this study mainly takes place in Rajabhat Rajanagarindra University - the only local university in the province- and in different parts of the local communities. The university plays a big role in providing both formal and informal education for local students and the community in Chachoengsao province and its neighbourhood. Based on Section 7 and 8, Chapter 1 in Rajabhat University Act B.E. 2547, the roles and responsibilities of the University which are the conceptual underpinnings of this study are to generate graduates with knowledge and conscience, consciousness on Thai Nationality and culture, love and attachment with local, and promote lifelong learning in the community in order to help local people keep up with innovation and to reinforce knowledge and understanding of value, consciousness, and pride of local and national culture.

The main campus is located in the centre of the province and Bangkhla campus is approximately 30 kilometres from town. The distance from the university to different districts of the province can be reached in 20-60 minutes. The distance from Bangkok to town is only 70 kilometres both by car and by train. Students can travel to and from the university by many means of transportation such as bicycle, motorcycle, Tuk-Tuk, local bus, and car. Moreover, students can access to knowledge without any trouble since the university is fully equipped with internet resources. If they want to utilize the local resources, they can reach by bus very easily. However, the university classrooms look rather traditional due to lack of financial support. This means the rooms are equipped with only overhead projector and microphone. The university can't provide adequate computers or any necessary instructional tools for the learning process.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was a single group design using qualitative method. The method was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the on-going process of the course implementation. Moreover, qualitative data could be used to analyse how students, teachers, and community partnerships made use of community-based approach as a tool in language learning. It could also be used to study how language skills and local cultural knowledge were developed through community-based approach.

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data were collected by participation observation and interview. To gain the process of learning, it was necessary to collect data in the field. The researcher entered the field with students to study how students collected data from the key informants. Data were collected by field notes during the observation with comments written after the field. Additionally, the interviews between key informants and students, and between the researcher and students were recorded with MP3 device. The device was very practical and useful to transfer data into the computer and can be saved to transcribe the recordings. The informal conversational interview was mainly conducted between the researcher and students with interview scripts. With the limitation of time, students in each group were grouped for each interview session. The rehearsal and the real performance of students were videotaped by the researcher assistant. Pictures were also taken by the researcher with digital camera.

Data collected were analysed throughout the study. The strategies used in the study were analytic induction and typological analysis (LeCompte and Preissle 1993, p.253-254). Below is the discussion of these two strategies.

Analytic induction : It involves scanning data for categories of phenomena and for relationships among such categories, developing working typologies and hypotheses on an examination of initial cases, and then modifying and refining them on the basis of subsequent case (Znaniecki & Robinson 1951, cited in LeCompte & Preissle 1993, p.253).

Typological analysis: It involves dividing everything observed into groups or
categories on the basis of some canon for disaggregating the whole phenomenon under study. Such typologies may be devised from a theoretical framework or set of propositions or from common-sense or mundane perceptions of reality (LeCompte & Preissle).

RESULTS

Results are reported under three categories : motivation, experiential learning, and collaboration.

Motivation
The projects developed by students could truly inspire them to have positive attitudes towards language learning and their profession. Students had good opportunities to involve in the tasks that demonstrated students' performance in language teaching. Garder and Lambert's (cited in Brown 2000, p.181) studied the effect of attitudes on language learning and it was found that an English-speaking Canadian's positive attitude toward French-Canadians led to an integrative orientation to learn French, which was found to be a significant correlate of success. Additionally, Garder and Lambert attempted to determine how attitudinal and motivational factors affected language learning success. Motivation is examined as a factor of a number of different kinds of attitudes. Brown, H.D., (2000, p.181) also agreed that second language learners benefit from positive attitudes and that negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation because of decreased input and interaction.

It was truly found that motivation was one of the factors that affected language learning. Three types of activities conducted by students were career-related or instrumental. Students actively learned and developed the projects (Service Learning Project, Local Cable Television Broadcast Program, and Radio Broadcast Program) due to motivation as part of English language major students and pre-service teachers. Motivation could be clearly seen in cognitive perspective. Students in service learning project initiated key informants through observation and interview. They gathered information about 'Kanom Jak' (coconut meat mixed with black sticky rice flour and wrapped up with palm leaves) , the famous OTOP of Chachoengsao, and design the course syllabus for G. 6 students whose school was in suburban area. They attempted to integrate English language into local cultures and design the syllabus. The course syllabus and lesson plan were gradually revised through weekly discussion with the teacher. Excerpts of a group interview are presented, where cognitive perspective could be identified.

Teacher: Why do you choose 'Kanom Jak' as the theme for your teaching?
Student: Data from the questionnaires we collected from G.6 students in Noi Arjangriyangkoon school have shown that Kanom Jak is the most preferable theme.
Teacher: How do you start with the syllabus development?
Students: We went to Wat Sothorn last week and interviewed a few stallholders. They were very kind to us. They told us how to make 'Kanom Jak' and asked us to try it. We spent almost an hour talking with them. Even though they were very busy, they were willing to give us the information. Then we had group discussion how to make use of information. Finally, we think that we are going to teach primary students English vocabularies which will cover the ingredients of "Kanom Jak" and how to make 'Kanom Jak'. We took a lot of pictures and they can be part of materials used in the class. Additionally, question words can be part of the lesson plan.

Teacher: The syllabus you design should be relevant to the learning standards and benchmarks of foreign language learning based on the Basic Education 2001. I can lent you a book.
Students: Now we are very happy that we can approach the stallholders and it is better to gather information from them. We enjoy entering the field and talking to them. The field is very closed to the university and we can go there as much as we want. We experience the utilization of local resources which is very useful to us.

Motivation is seen in the process of language learning and it can also be seen in culture learning. Hadley, A.O. (2001, p.147) pointed out that the meaningfulness and familiarity of second language materials play a crucial role as learners begin to develop their second language skills. Ausubel (cited in Hadley 2001, p.145) agreed that learning must be meaningful to be effective and permanent. For material to be meaningful, it must be clearly relatable to existing knowledge that the learner already possesses. Students were driven to explore knowledge in the field and they agreed that it was very helpful to use their prior knowledge in local cultures to comprehend contents and this can bring to the project development. An interview with students in cable television broadcast program revealed that background knowledge in 'LuangPhor Sothorn Image of Chachoengsao province' helped them to use context clues in reading. They agreed that they could guess some unfamiliar vocabularies because the contents were very authentic. Contextualize materials seemed not too difficult to comprehend. The process of language and culture learning are facilitated by authentic materials used in the course.

Involvement in the community could also change students' attitudes towards local cultures. All students viewed local cultures differently. They developed a sense of pride and value in Chachoengsao's cultures. Below are excerpts conducted after the projects were finished.

Teacher: Have any of your interests, feelings, or values changed as a result of this learning experience, or this project? And how?
Student 1:   Yes. I change my thoughts and I can see the values of our cultures particularly the Bangpakong river. The river belongs to everyone in the community and it also belongs to me.
Student 2:   Yes, I have changed my interests. I want to tell everybody that he should preserve our local wisdom.
Student 3:   Yes, I am interested more in Chachoengsao cultures and I can get knowledge from this course. I feel that this course is very important because it teaches everybody how to value and preserve his hometown.

To conclude, students were motivated because they perceived the value of conducting the projects which were very valuable and meaningful to the learning in campus. They were proud of self-exploration. It is deniable that they could connect the process of conducting projects to their future careers as English language teachers.

Experiential Learning
It is clear that people can and do learn languages without the type of support associated with a formal learning context (Tudor 2001, p.78). The naturalistic form of learning of a language can take many forms, depending on the context in which the language is being learned and the purposes of learning. Data collected through observation and interview revealed that the use and practice of authentic materials in the real context enabled them to conduct the projects confidently. Students from service learning project agreed that the process of conducting activities was directly related to learning goals and it helped apply in their future. One of students reported that 'the project was very authentic and it helped me prepare to learn how to be a good language teacher in the future. I learnt how to gather information from the community and the resources were very valuable for our children to learn English and our cultures. Moreover, this is a good opportunity for me to have teaching experience even though we are in the second year. I think that we should have this kind of project annually. I can experience he authentic use of language and it is fun to enter the field and talk to local people'.

The use of community for learning resources and activities enabled students to connect what students learn in the academic work with other areas of their life. Students experienced the real-life settings academically and socially while conducting the project. Ingram (2003, p.15) contended that it is very essential that a language course provide diverse experience but also be coherent and integrated with clearly established goals and objectives reflective of the learners' long term and on-going development needs. Some may argue that it is not likely to learn English language in the real situations because students merely have opportunity to use language with English native speakers. Rather, students can have many forms of exposure to English language such as field trips, magazines, tourist brochure, radio and television program, and other publications produced by the relevant community.

It is advisable to use authentic materials relates to language skills practice. One of the principles of experientially based views of learning is a preference for authentic materials (Tudor 2001, p.81). Experiential approaches to learning favour the use of authentic or naturally occurring materials, i.e. materials not written for language teaching purposes. Interestingly, one of students in cable television broadcast program commented 'Even though we don't have the opportunity to teach young children, our project is very interesting. We have gained considerable experience from what we have done. The production of cable television broadcast program taught us how to use language correctly particularly in speaking skills. It is very important to spell or pronounce English words or sentences correctly because we are the presenter of the program. Our tasks are more or less similar to English language teaching '.

Collaboration
Using community-based approach to develop an English course in local context allows stakeholders to participate in a course development. The approach tended to utilize and mobilize local resources for language learning. The course is designed to enhance students' language skills and local cultural knowledge, and this brings the involvement of community. The process of course development allowed local people in the community to become a part of stakeholders. It was evident that the course could not successfully develope if collaboration did not take place. When students entered the field to gather data, support from community was very crucial to pursue the projects. It was very fortunate that our students could build relationships with partnerships very well. Students who went to teach young students in a small primary school learned that collaboration was a key to success. Having been explained the objectives and expectations of service learning as it relates to the objectives of G.6 level, the school principal and all teachers actively organized the date, time, meals, and classroom management for students. Additionally, they gave students comments and suggestions for further project. For example, they commented that the teaching was very useful to young students mainly because of several reasons. The school lacked English language teacher and this was one of the reasons why young students had to learn English subject with science, computer, or social sciences teachers. The principal kindly asked our students to come back to teach English or do any other activities for young students. He agreed that the activities could directly give mutual benefit to those who involved in the process of the project.

It is appropriate to note that service learning project was designed through collaboration between community partners (stallholders or local people who were tied to students' communities), principal, teachers, and students. Students and community partners attempted to make the project as meaningful as possible because they realized that they have mutual trust, mutual respect, and mutual benefit.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Community-based approach can be used in language and culture learning. The success of the process of course design studied in this study indicates that community-based approach could assist students in the development of language skills and local cultural knowledge. However, students in the study were motivated because they were English major students in Faculty of Education. The process of project development immensely related to their learning goals and future career. As a consequence, it is likely to consider the contextual dimension when course is

designed. The source contents which were familiar to students could enable them to comprehend and process the language more effectively. It is therefore important to take into account the motivation of various students involved in the study.

Community-based approach also establishes the authenticity in language learning. Students utilized local resources for learning process and learning activities. The projects they conducted corresponded to language tasks and language use in their real life. For example, the syllabus they developed relates to the tasks in teaching profession. Moreover, the projects could truly create the opportunity for students to engage in both academic and social life. It is suggested that academic achievement should be balanced with social engagement. It is therefore very significant to provide opportunities for students to learn or work in real life or authentic settings. This can promote life-long learning.

It is appropriate to value the knowledge and wisdom of community partners who can be rich and valuable resources when the course is designed. As a consequence, collaboration will take place if the course can satisfy community partners' needs or interests. Students could easily build rapport with the stallholders because they were very pleased if their OTOP could be presented in cable television broadcast program or in syllabus design. The principal and teachers collaborated with our students because the project produced useful results. It is suggested that the activities or materials designed in the course should benefit community partners or stakeholders. Finally, it is recommended to replicate this study in different contexts to compare results.

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