

English as a foreign language teaching approaches in Saudi K–12 education: teacher-centered or student-centered

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Sep 28, 2023

Revised Oct 30, 2023

Accepted Jan 30, 2024

Keywords:

English as a foreign language

Saudi K-12 education

Student-centered approach

Teacher beliefs and practices

Teacher-centered approach

Teaching approaches

ABSTRACT

This study explores the educational methodologies employed by Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher, with a specific emphasis on contrasting teacher-centered approaches and student-centered approaches. Additionally, the research examines the teachers' personal beliefs regarding the most effective approach for implementation in EFL classrooms. To gather data, an online questionnaire was administered to 42 EFL teachers across Saudi K–12 schools in the Southern part of Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire comprised two sections: a demographic information segment and an inquiry into teachers' perspectives and practices. The results of the study showed a dichotomy. While a majority of participants professed that both teacher-centered and student-centered methodologies carry equal importance, a more nuanced picture emerged when examining their claimed practices versus actual classroom behavior. The majority of EFL K–12 instructors in Saudi classrooms leaned toward adopting teacher-centered approaches. These findings hold significant implications for EFL teacher training and professional development courses. This may be due to teachers' lack of confidence in implementing student-centered approaches, the traditional educational culture in Saudi Arabia, or pressure to prepare students for high-stakes exams. The study suggests that teacher education programs should focus on developing teachers' understanding and confidence in using student-centered approaches and that the Ministry of Education should create a more supportive environment for student-centered teaching approaches.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are many different ways to teach English as a foreign language (EFL), and the best approach depends on the specific needs of the students. Two main approaches are teacher-centered and student-centered [1]. Teacher-centered approaches focus on the teacher as the main source of information and instruction. Students are typically passive recipients of knowledge, and the teacher is responsible for assessing their understanding. This approach can be effective for students who need a lot of structure and guidance, but it can also be less engaging and may not allow students to develop their own critical thinking skills [2]. Student-centered approaches, on the other hand, focus on the students as active participants in their own learning. The teacher acts as a facilitator, providing support and guidance as needed, but the students are responsible for taking ownership of their learning. This approach can be more challenging for teachers to implement without training, but it can be more engaging and effective for students in the long run [2].

Teachers are the experts in the classroom, and their perspectives on effective teaching methods are essential for understanding how students learn [3]. They have a wealth of experience and knowledge about what works and what doesn't work in the classroom, and they can provide valuable insights into the challenges that students face and the strategies that are most effective in helping students learn [4], [5]. There are a number of reasons why it is important to examine teachers' perspectives on effective teaching methods. Teachers have a deep understanding of the students they teach. They know their strengths and weaknesses, their interests and motivations, their cultures, and their learning styles [6], [7]. This knowledge can help teachers to tailor their teaching methods to the specific needs of their students. Also, teachers have a wealth of experience in the classroom. They have seen what works and what doesn't work, and they can share this knowledge with other teachers. This can help to improve the quality of teaching overall [5], [8]. Also, teachers are constantly facing new challenges in the classroom. They need to be able to adapt their teaching methods to meet the needs of their students and to respond to changes in the curriculum. By understanding teachers' perspectives, we can better support them in meeting these challenges. So, understanding teachers' perspectives on effective teaching methods is essential for improving the quality of education for all students. By listening to what teachers have to say, we can learn from their experience and knowledge, and we can develop better teaching practices that meet the needs of all learners [3], [9].

In EFL education, pedagogical approaches play a pivotal role in shaping the learning experiences of students. The delicate balance between teacher-centered and student-centered methods has garnered significant attention within educational discourse [1], [10]. This dichotomy reflects the broader philosophical underpinnings of education, where the locus of control in the classroom environment oscillates between the educator and the learner. The Saudi context presents a unique landscape for exploring this paradigm, given its distinct cultural, social, and educational factors that influence instructional practices [11]. EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia has traditionally been teacher-centered, with the teacher playing a dominant role in the classroom [12], [13]. However, there is a growing movement towards more student-centered approaches, which focus on giving students more opportunities to actively participate in their learning.

Saudi Arabia's educational landscape has witnessed significant transformations in recent years, marked by a growing emphasis on modernizing teaching methodologies and enhancing student engagement. The evolution of EFL instruction within this context necessitates a nuanced examination of the pedagogical strategies adopted by teachers. In Saudi K-12 education, where English holds a vital role as a foreign language, understanding the balance between teacher-centered and student-centered approaches is pivotal. The present study aims to investigate the learning approaches utilized by Saudi EFL teachers, as well as their beliefs about the more effective educational approach. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the question of which teaching approach Saudi language teachers believe is more beneficial. The findings of this study will provide valuable information to English teachers, as they will help to clarify the more successful approach that positively influences the improvement of English learning both inside and outside of the classroom.

EFL educators and researchers have long argued that teachers should shift from focusing on themselves to involving students more in the learning process [1], [2]. This approach, called student-centered pedagogy, emphasizes the importance of knowledge sharing and active student engagement. However, practical factors such as school policies, teacher preferences, and student expectations can often limit the use of student-centered teaching methods. This can create a gap between how students are currently taught and how they ideally should be taught [14].

In China, for example, Chen and Yu [15] stated that English is a compulsory subject from elementary school onwards. The primary goal of English education is often to prepare students for exams. This exam-focused educational policy, combined with traditional teaching methods and the power dynamic between teachers and students, can lead to a situation where students see teachers as experts and themselves as passive recipients of knowledge. Even though student-centered teaching is recommended in theory, and some collaborative activities such as peer feedback are used, many English writing classes in China still rely heavily on teacher-centered methods such as lectures, teacher corrections, and teacher modeling [15]. K-12 education in Saudi Arabia and China is similar in some ways. Both countries place a strong emphasis on rote learning, high-stakes testing, traditional teaching methods, and discipline. However, there are also some key differences, such as Saudi Arabia's more religious curriculum and Chinese students' stronger focus on academic achievement.

In order to close the gap between how students are currently taught and how they ideally should be taught, it is important to create more student-centered learning environments [16], [17]. This can be done by providing teachers with professional development opportunities, creating more flexible educational policies, and changing the culture of classrooms so that students are seen as active participants in the learning process [18]. Maryellen Weimer's book, "Learner-centered teaching," presents a comparison between teacher-centered and student-centered college teaching practices across several dimensions. These dimensions include the distribution of power within the classroom, the purpose of course content, the respective roles of teachers and students, the accountability for learning, and the methods of evaluation. Weimer offers insights

into these differences and subsequently offers recommendations for integrating the learner-centered approach effectively. She differentiates between teacher-focused and learner-focused educational strategies across five aspects: the distribution of authority, the role of course content, the duties of instructors and pupils, the ownership of the learning process, and the objectives and methods of evaluation [19].

Investigated the perceptions of students in Uganda regarding their encounters with instructional methods [20]. The study used a mixed-methods approach, integrating survey data with focus group discussions. The findings of the study suggest that students perceive the instructional methods to be largely teacher-centered and focused on course completion and exam outcomes. Students felt that the focus on completing the course and achieving examination results often overshadowed the cultivation of practical skills. In Algeria, Baghoussi [21] examined the commonness of a teacher-led methodology in EFL settings in Algeria. The study's outcomes supported the theory that, despite being knowledgeable about the effectiveness of various instructional strategies and techniques, educators persist in using a teacher-dominated approach due to a variety of limitations. These limitations are identified as overpopulated classes, conventional classroom setups, the demands of the Baccalaureate examination, and the constrained timing resulting from extensive English language curricula. Yamagata's [22] research revealed that Japanese EFL junior high students learned basic verbs more efficiently through a student-driven method that used a pictorial card game to teach verb meanings, compared to direct teacher explanations. This method proved superior in improving memory retention and accurate verb usage across students of varying skills, motivation, knowledge, and enthusiasm for English. The examples of teacher-centered approaches to teaching EFL in China, Uganda, Algeria, and Japan suggest that teacher-centered instruction is a common practice in many parts of the world, and Saudi Arabia may not be an exception.

The importance of English as a global language is undeniable. In recent years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has placed a significant emphasis on teaching English, with the language now being taught from the first grade of primary school. This has led to a growing interest in the most effective approaches to teaching EFL [11]. However, there is a clear research gap in this area. While there is a significant body of research on teaching English in general, there is relatively little research on the specific approaches that are most effective in Saudi Arabia. This is due in part to the fact that the Saudi educational system is relatively new, and there is still a great deal of experimentation and innovation taking place. English language teaching in Saudi Arabia started in the last century and has gained importance over time. Recently, in the 2021-2022 school year, Saudi Arabia began teaching English from the first grade of primary school, following a global trend to start language learning earlier for competitive advantage. This decision reflects the government's commitment to integrating English into education, acknowledging its significance in the interconnected world. The effectiveness of this policy is yet to be determined, but it's a positive stride towards wider English accessibility for Saudi students.

This study aims to investigate the predominant learning approach employed by EFL teachers in Saudi K–12 education classrooms. Additionally, it seeks to delve into the beliefs of Saudi teachers regarding the efficacy of different educational approaches, specifically addressing the question of which teaching approach they perceive as more advantageous. By addressing this inquiry, the study intends to provide valuable insights to EFL teachers, offering a clear understanding of the more effective approach that can positively influence the enhancement of EFL learning both within and beyond the classroom environment. The study will address the following research questions:

RQ1. What type of learning approach do Saudi EFL teachers utilize in their classrooms—student-centered or teacher-centered in K–12 education?

RQ2. Among the available educational approaches, which one do Saudi EFL teachers believe to be more effective in facilitating language learning in K–12 education?

This study's significance lies in its endeavor to compare the effectiveness of various learning approaches in English language instruction. It serves to guide EFL teachers in choosing the most suitable teaching methodology, along with the corresponding techniques and strategies. Given the global importance of English, proficiency in the language is paramount for effective communication across diverse linguistic contexts. Therefore, adopting appropriate teaching approaches and strategies can potentially render the language learning process more engaging, efficient, and impactful. The global prominence of the English language is undeniable, and this significance is mirrored in Saudi Arabia's increasing emphasis on English education, commencing from the primary school level. As a result, it becomes crucial for EFL educators to meticulously identify the pedagogical approach that optimally nurtures learning outcomes, establishes an engaging learning milieu, and addresses students' individual needs.

The student-centered approach, which positions learners as active participants in their learning journey, aligns with this notion, encouraging learners to adapt the learning process to their preferred style and take responsibility for their own progress. This study fills a research gap by employing a robust instrument to examine the instructional approach adopted by Saudi EFL teachers and the approach they perceive as more efficacious. The literature review illuminates the two educational approaches, underscoring the significance

of student-centered pedagogy and its positive influence on learners' achievement of educational goals. Through a meticulous investigation of the approach employed by EFL educators in Saudi classrooms, this study is poised to offer improvement strategies for teachers keen on implementing the student-centered approach effectively. In addition, exploring K-12 education holds immense importance as it shapes the foundation of students' learning journey. K-12 education encompasses primary and secondary schooling, playing a crucial role in developing essential skills, knowledge, and attitudes that lay the groundwork for future academic and personal success.

2. METHOD

The teaching of English in Saudi Arabia has a long history, dating back to the early 20th century. English was first introduced as a foreign language in the country's schools in the early last century, and it has since become a major component of the Saudi curriculum [23]. English is now a compulsory subject in Saudi schools from grades 1 to 12. Students are required to study English and pass the English course in order to graduate. In addition, several Saudi universities use English as a medium of instruction to teach science, technology, and medicine subjects. As a result of these factors, English proficiency is essential for Saudi students who wish to succeed in their compulsory education and university education. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on English language education in Saudi Arabia, and the government has made significant investments in this area. The teaching of English in Saudi Arabia is a complex and multifaceted issue. However, it is clear that English is an essential skill for Saudi students who wish to succeed in their education and careers [24].

The requirements for becoming an English language teacher in Saudi public schools have evolved in recent years. In the past, teachers were only required to have a four-year bachelor's degree in English. However, in the last five years, the Ministry of Education has mandated that all teachers must also have a high diploma in education. The high diploma in education is a one-year program that covers a variety of topics related to teaching, such as teaching methods, assessment, and educational psychology. The program is designed to provide teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to be effective in the classroom. The majority of English language teachers in Saudi public schools are Saudi nationals who graduated from Saudi Universities.

The participants of this study were English subject teachers at Saudi schools. The sample was a random sample of 42 teachers who were recruited via WhatsApp groups that were managed by school teachers and administrators. The WhatsApp application has proven to be an efficient and practical tool for data collection, utilized by numerous researchers to gather information from participants [25], [26]. In addition, it is an effective method to reach participants in different geographical locations. The participants in this study are teaching at different stages, including primary, middle, and secondary. They had various years of experience. The data collection instrument was an online questionnaire that was created using Google Forms.

The chosen method for collecting data was through a questionnaire, as it was deemed appropriate for gaining a deeper understanding of the issue at hand and for addressing the study's questions and research objectives. The questionnaire aimed to investigate the teaching approach employed by Saudi EFL teachers in their classrooms and to explore their beliefs about the most effective teaching method. Comprising 30 items, the questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section, which contained five items, focused on the participants' demographic information. Meanwhile, the second section comprised 25 statements extracted from an online questionnaire available in [27] which has been employed by various researchers [28], [29].

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was reviewed by three professors from the English language department at a Saudi public university. The final version of the questionnaire was then uploaded to Google Forms and distributed among English language teachers in Saudi public schools. Alongside a cover letter explaining the study's title and objectives, the questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section consists of five questions that seek information about the participants, including gender, the level or stage they teach, and years of experience. The fourth item inquired about the participants' preferred teaching approach, revealing their supposed practice, while the fifth item solicited their perspective on the more effective approach, exposing their beliefs.

The second section of the questionnaire encompassed 25 items and functioned as an assessment of the extent to which teachers employ a student-centered approach in their English teaching. This section aimed to uncover both the teachers' actual classroom practices and their real-world implementation of student-centered teaching. Each of the 25 statements was rated on a five-point scale ranging from "always" to "never." Participants used this section to gauge their usage of the student-centered approach. The determination of their actual classroom practices was based on total scores calculated using a scoring system: one mark for "never," two for "rarely," three for "sometimes," four for "often," and five for "always."

the analysis of the first part of the questionnaire involved examining the frequency and percentage of responses. For the second part of the questionnaire, which comprised 25 statements, an assessment rubric designed available in [27] was employed. The participants' levels as student-centered teachers were determined based on their overall scores, utilizing the scores scale provided in the questionnaire. Figure 1 presents the scores scale obtained from [27] which was utilized to assess the respondents' levels as student-centered teachers.

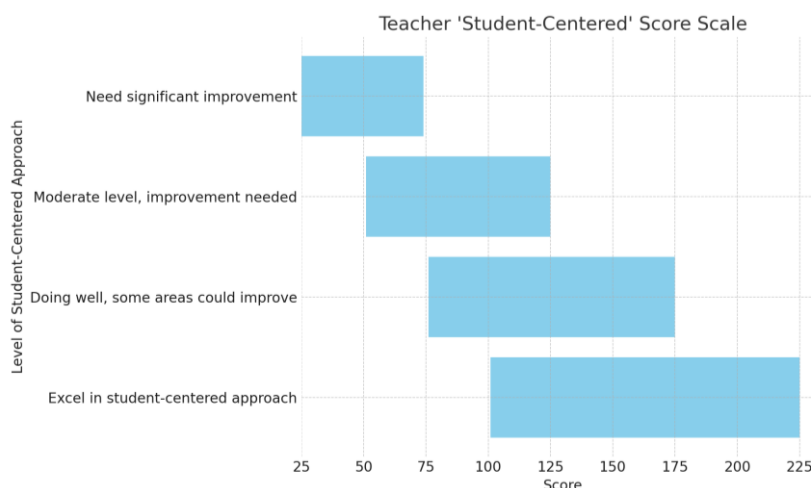


Figure 1. Teacher 'student-centered' score scale

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study were presented in three sections. The first section compiles the demographic details of the participating teachers, cataloging their educational background, years of service, and the varied educational settings in which they operate. The second section investigates the self-professed beliefs and intended practices of these teachers, revealing their preferred instructional strategies and their perceived role in student learning. The final segment of the study scrutinizes the teachers' actual practices within the classroom. This assessment, derived from a comprehensive questionnaire, juxtaposes the teachers' declared teaching methods with their practical application, allowing for an evaluation of how closely their implemented practices align with their stated pedagogical beliefs.

3.1. Teachers' demographic information

A total of 42 English subject teachers in K–12 education participated in the study, with a gender distribution of 47.6% male and 52.4% female. Their teaching experience was distributed as: 42.9% secondary school teachers, 21.4% middle school teachers, and 35.7% elementary school teachers. All participants had over 5 years of teaching experience, and 35.7% had more than 20 years. Further details on participants' bioinformation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' bio information

Item	Frequency	Percent (%)	
Gender	Male	22	52.4
	Female	20	47.6
Years of experiences	6-10 years	5	11.9
	11-15 years	9	21.4
	16-20 years	13	31
Teaching stage	More than 20 m years	15	35.7
	Elementary	15	35.7
	Middle	9	21.4
	Secondary	18	42.9

3.2. Beliefs and supposed practice

Question 4: participants were asked to self-report their teaching approach to teaching English. The results indicated that 52.4% (n=22) claimed to use a student-centered approach, while 47.6% (n=20) claimed to use a teacher-centered approach. Question 5: participants were asked about their views on the relative

merits of teacher-centered and student-centered approaches. A majority (n=25) (59.5%) believed that both approaches are beneficial, noting that teacher-centered approaches provide essential knowledge and skills, while student-centered approaches enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills. (n=9) 21.4% favored student-centered teaching for its emphasis on self-directed learning, and (n=8) 19.0% supported teacher-centered teaching for its foundational role.

3.3. Real classroom practice

The second section of the questionnaire, comprising 25 items, assessed participants' real classroom practice based on their 'student-centered' approach towards students using a rubric designed by [27]. Table 2 presents the outcomes of this section. Among the teachers, 23 teachers scored between 101 and 125, indicating an excellent 'student-centered' approach, projecting them as result-oriented and respected teachers. Teachers have an excellent 'student-centered' approach towards students. Additionally, 12 scored between 76 and 100, signifying a proficient 'student-centered' approach, though they could further improve specific areas. In general, they are doing well as a 'student-centered' teacher. Five teachers scored between 51 and 75, representing a moderate 'student-centered' approach. Teachers have a moderate level of 'student-centered' approach. They need to identify areas for improvement to be more approachable to students. Two teachers scored between 25 and 50, signifying room for improvement. These two teachers need to improve their approach towards students. They need to show more concern for the well-being of the students. With a little more effort, they can be a 'student-centered' teacher. Refer to (Table 1) in the results section for clarification of the score scale's meaning.

Table 2. Teachers' real classroom practice

Scores	Frequency	Percent (%)
25–50	2 teachers	4.7
51–75	5 teachers	12
76–100	12 teachers	28.5
101–125	23 teachers	54.7

This section discusses the findings of the study related to teachers' beliefs about the effectiveness of teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches to teaching English in K–12 Saudi education. The majority of the participants (25 teachers) believed that both approaches were equally effective. This is consistent with the research conducted by Bai and González [30], in which they aimed to uncover the perspectives of grade 12 EFL teachers regarding the teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches. The outcomes of their study revealed that instructors exhibited favorable attitudes towards both approaches. However, 9 teachers believed that student-centered learning is more beneficial than teacher-centered learning, in contrast to 8 teachers who believed the opposite. The findings also demonstrated that the relationship between some teachers' beliefs and their real classroom practices differed. For example, five teachers believed in teacher-centered teaching but used student-centered teaching, and one teacher believed in student-centered teaching but used teacher-centered teaching. This suggests that teachers may not always implement their beliefs in their classroom practice. There are a number of possible reasons for this, such as a lack of understanding of the approach, a lack of confidence in using the approach, or a belief that the approach is not appropriate for the students or the context.

The findings showed that the supposed practice of the respondents and their real classroom practice were considerably consistent as they revealed that student-centered teaching is implemented by most of the participants. Based on the responses of teachers to the fourth question on the questionnaire which was "Which approach do you use to teach English?", more than half of them (22 teachers) claimed applying student-centered in teaching EFL students. Likewise, the results of the test in the second part of the questionnaire demonstrated that the vast majority of the participants (35 teachers out of 42) adopt the student-centered approach in their EFL classrooms.

In comparing the results of the teachers' supposed practice with their real practice, the responses of 64% of the participants (27 teachers) regarding the approach they anticipated using were consistent with their actual classroom practices. However, contradictions between both practices were noticed, as was the case between their beliefs and supposed practice. For instance, 19 teachers supposed they use teacher-centered teaching although their scores (on the test of the second part of the questionnaire) illustrated that they are good and excellent as student-centered teachers. These discrepancies in the participants' responses, in their beliefs, supposed practice, and real practice, are identical to the findings in the Chinese context. Zhang and Liu [31] realized that teachers also follow conventional beliefs and methods, which involve teacher-centered and textbook-focused teaching, a strong focus on grammar and language structure, practices like recitation and imitation, along repetitive exercises, and they maintain a sense of teacher authority. Some of these conventional beliefs, such as recitation and practice, have

strong roots in Chinese educational traditions, while others are influenced by practical factors like the pressure of knowledge-based assessments and limited available resources.

There are a number of possible explanations for these discrepancies. One possibility is that the teachers may not properly perceive the differences between teaching approaches and, therefore, could not determine by themselves which approach they use in their EFL classes. Another possibility is that the implementation of the approach they believe in might be affected by the environment, context, and reality of the classrooms as well as the age of the students. This suggests that the teachers may have a good understanding of the theoretical aspects of the different teaching approaches, but they may not be as proficient in implementing these approaches in their own classrooms. This is a potential area for professional development for teachers, as it would help them to bridge the gap between their beliefs and their practice.

3.4. Pedagogical implications and recommendations

Teachers should be aware of the different approaches to teaching English and the potential benefits of each approach. This will allow teachers to make informed decisions about which approach is best suited for their students and the context. Teachers should reflect on their own beliefs about teaching and learning and how these beliefs influence their practice. This will help teachers to identify any potential biases or assumptions that may be influencing their teaching. Teachers should be provided with professional development opportunities that help them develop the skills and knowledge they need to implement different approaches to teaching English. This will ensure that teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively implement different teaching approaches in their classrooms.

Future research should investigate the factors that influence teachers' choice of teaching approach. This will help to identify the factors that may prevent teachers from using different teaching approaches in their classrooms. Future research should investigate the effects of different teaching approaches on student learning. This will help to determine which teaching approaches are most effective in promoting student learning. This study has a number of limitations, such as the small sample size and the fact that the study was conducted in a single context. Future research could be conducted with a larger sample of teachers from different contexts. Additionally, future research could investigate the factors that influence teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning. Furthermore, an interview with the participants would have been good to determine whether their beliefs about teaching approaches would be consistent with their real practice. In addition to the interview, observation would improve the study's validity, and determine the approach EFL teachers utilize inside classrooms, however, due to time constraints, this was not possible.

4. CONCLUSION

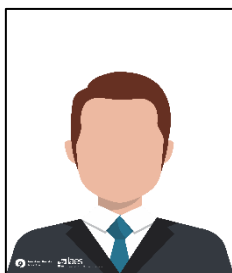
The research delved into the pedagogical styles practiced by EFL instructors in Saudi educational settings. It indicated a preference among these educators for employing a learner-focused methodology. Nonetheless, there's a recognition of the significance of both teacher-driven and learner-driven methods. This points to the possibility of educators adapting their teaching style to cater to their student's specific requirements and the teaching context. The implications of this study for educational practice are multifaceted. It underscores the necessity for educators to comprehend various English teaching methodologies and their respective merits. It also highlights the need for educators to introspect on their pedagogical convictions and the influence of these beliefs on their teaching methods. Moreover, it suggests the importance of providing teachers with continuous professional development to enhance their competencies in applying diverse pedagogical strategies. For scholarly inquiry, the study paves the way for further investigation into what guides teachers' selection of instructional methods. Future studies could also explore the impact of these diverse methodologies on students' academic progress.




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