

Saudi EFL Teachers' Perceptions of the Communicative Approach

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ABSTRACT

In order to promote language learners' literacy, teachers need to adopt a learner-centered approach, such as CLT. Thus, the current study aims at investigating the Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions of the communicative approach (CA, henceforth). It also scrutinizes to what extent this approach assists teachers in their teaching practices and enables students to achieve better academic results. The study adopted a quantitative research design. For the sake of data collection, a 30-item questionnaire was utilized. The items were distributed on three dimensions: (1) principles of the CA, (2) teacher's role in implementing the CA and (3) secondary school EFL students' motivation when CA is implemented. The study included 33 Saudi secondary school teachers. The findings of the study revealed that teachers have a high understanding of the communicative approach. However, it indicated a lower degree of teachers implementing the approach while teaching. The study found that the students get high motivated when they are taught through the CA. The study recommends special training programs for teachers on CA in order to enable them to teach language skills effectively.

Key words: English as a Foreign Language, Saudi Arabia, Communicative approach

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Saudi Arabia has undergone great political, social and economic development. To meet the new challenges, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has introduced English as a foreign language in schools, institutes and universities since the beginning of the 20th century (Al Ahaydib, 1986). Ever since, the MoE has been totally aware of the high status which English language enjoys globally as a lingua franca, i.e. a common language spoken between people whose languages are dissimilar. Besides, English is of considerable significance internationally in business, science, education, social media and so forth. Thus, the Saudi MoE has made the policy of teaching English according to the contemporary approach of teaching foreign languages. Therefore, the focus in the previous teaching approaches has been shifted from learner to the learning process itself. Faruk (2010) stated that "In fact, Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP) were formulated to ensure Saudi Arabia's sustenance and progress in the world system (p. 73)".

The recent decades in language research have witnessed a clear shift of focus from teachers' behavior to areas of cognition that prompt such behavior. As part of this shift, teachers' beliefs have been recognized to have a pivotal role in language teaching (Yook, 2010). Accordingly, attention to the teachers' beliefs and conceptions should be given principal focus in educational research as they are considered the foundation stones for teachers' classroom practices and

could be the underlying causes of a teacher's instruction success or failure (Pajares, 1992).

Historically speaking, CA was developed particularly by the British applied linguists as a reaction to grammar-based approaches such as the aural-oral approach. (Richards et al., 2007). Unlike the traditional teaching methods and approaches, CA has some distinctive characteristics, such as engaging students in real-life written and spoken situations, enabling them to focus primarily on both fluency and accuracy and developing their communicative competence (Brown, 2007). As Brown, (2007) mentioned, CC includes the speakers' entire conversations and the situations in which some words and phrases are used compulsory or optionally. Additionally, CC puts considerable emphasis on the appropriate use of language, i.e., the proper language for the proper setting.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the various initiatives of the Saudi Ministry of Education to improve the quality and process of English language learning and teaching, Saudi EFL students' proficiency in language has been criticized for being quite low (Alrashidi and Phan, 2015). In Saudi Arabia, EFL teachers, as in other contexts of EFL, are required to follow the CLT method; yet, the teaching of a second language is usually conducted by means of traditional methods of teaching, which often follow a teacher-centered method with the instructor

dominating the setting of language learning. This leads to low levels of motivation for EFL students and results in low communicative performance when students use the language in educational and social settings. As Nunan (1999) stated, teachers must learn what their learners feel and think about what they need to learn and the way they need to learn. Nevertheless, in educational environments, such as that of the Kingdom context, this might conflict with the culture of the educational institution and teachers' perceptions in terms of what a suitable teaching method is.

Several studies have highlighted the application of CLT and Communicative Competence (CC); showing the various challenges encountered with such a method around the world (Alrashidi and Phan, 2015; Raissi, et al., 2013). These studies; especially in the language teaching context of Saudi Arabia, maintain that while the students in this context recognize the significance of learning English in the current age, their outcomes in global examinations show poor performance. Therefore, this study attempts to bridge the gap seen in the literature related to research that discusses the EFL teachers' perceptions and learners' motivation regarding the appropriateness of the CLT application in the Kingdom.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of the current study is to investigate the Saudi EFL Teachers' Perceptions of the Communicative Approach.

Research Questions

Based on the aforementioned objective, this research attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the understanding level of the Saudi EFL secondary school teachers of the communicative approach?
2. What is the benefit level of the Saudi EFL teachers of employing the communicative approach while teaching the secondary school students?
3. Does the students' performance who were taught communicatively differ from those taught through other teaching approaches?

Significance of the Study

In foreign language teaching, scrutinizing teachers' beliefs and perceptions plays a vital role in the success of teaching process. This study investigates teachers' perceptions of CC in Saudi secondary schools. It is regarded significant as it raises the teachers' awareness of CC and assists them to understand to integrate CC in their daily teaching practices. It is also considered a serious attempt to encourage teachers to reform their current teaching situation, which places excessive reliance on traditional teaching methods, such as grammar translation and Audiolingualism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Yule (2010, p. 194) defines communicative competence as "the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately, and

flexibly." He lists three components of CC: (1) grammatical competence which assists learners to produce correct spoken and written expressions, (2) linguistic competence constitutes the unconscious knowledge of grammar which enables the learners to use and comprehend grammar appropriately, (3) strategic competence makes the learners able to compensate for language gaps, i.e. the shortage or lack of information using different ways to express their ideas and achieve conversational fluency. These components of the CC have undergone some modifications over the years. "These newer views are perhaps best captured in Lyle Bachman's (1990) schematization of what he simply calls "language competence" (Brown, 2007, pp. 220-221), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the CC in a second language with modern perspectives as shown by Lyle Bachman's (1990) schematization of language competence.

At the advent of twentieth century, grammar-translation, audiolingual and direct methods appeared to be inadequate to fulfill learners needs. Thus, researchers, during this period, have investigated the interpersonal relationship and the communication strategies and attempted to study the nature of CC. As a reaction against the above-mentioned methods, communicative language teaching (CLT) was adopted as a recent language approach (Brown, 2007). Compared to the traditional methods, CA is regarded more innovative and efficient as it takes the positive aspects and avoids pitfalls and shortcomings existed in the former methods. As opposed to the previous methods that focused on accuracy, CC puts more emphasis on fluency and usage, i.e. communication. Fluency is given greater importance than accuracy in order to keep learners fully engaged in functional use of language for meaningful purposes, e.g., requesting, describing, expressing likes and dislikes, etc. (Brown, 2007).

According to many studies, language teachers' perceptions and application of the CLT are inconsistent. While some teachers incline toward it, others are reluctant to integrate it. There are a number of factors have a huge impact on the implementation of CLT, including the beliefs and misconceptions embraced by teachers, the deficiency and incompetence of teachers of English, and the educational systems that force teachers to achieve its goals instead of the goals of CLT. Many teachers, in fact, attribute the difficulty in using CLT to their deficiency in the foreign language. Other teachers have misconceptions or have half-image realization about CLT. Others know what is meant by CLT but lack the ability to use it properly. Lewis (2002) noted that some teachers, even though know much about CLT, are having difficulties in achieving the ends of the approach. The educational systems also play a vital role in discouraging teachers to use communicative language teaching. Besides, teachers' deficiency in English, or at least feeling being incompetent, plays an important role in resorting to approaches other than CLT. Additionally, the problem could be situated in the teachers' unwillingness to change their teaching methods Gamal and Debra (2001). The educational system may contribute to the difficulty in applying CLT by teachers.

In his study, Hameed (2020) examined the beliefs of the Saudi EFL teachers on implementing CLT. The results of his

Table 1. Language competence (Bachman, 1990, p. 87)

1. Organizational competence		2. Pragmatic competence	
(a) grammatical	(b) textual	(a) illocutionary	(b) sociolinguistic
vocabulary	cohesion	ideational	dialect
morphology	rhetoric	manipulative	register
syntax	organization	heuristic	naturalness
phonology		imaginative	culture

study revealed that the teachers had a positive idea of the CLT application; especially, regarding students' and teachers' roles. Likewise, Siddiqui and Asif (2018) scrutinized the perceptions of some Saudi EFL teachers and found that they believed that the CLT method was a useful method to teach English to a homogeneous class. On the contrary, Alharbi (2022) stated that the difficulty of implementing CTL in the Saudi education falls into four broad categories: (1) system related difficulties which include overcrowded classes, the absence of audio-visual equipment and lack of teacher training programs, (2) teacher-related difficulties were mainly related to conflicting thoughts about CLT, low trust in these approaches, preference for the conventional models of learning, deficiencies in teachers' second language, and focus on improving skills that can be used in exams and (3) student-related difficulties related to their passive learning method, low-level proficiency, fear of their marks being affected negatively if they were paired with other weak students during communicative practices, and lack of stimulus to learn the second language. In the same vein, Abrejo et al. (2019) revealed that shortage of time, large classrooms, and lack of resources, were the primary issues that deterred Pakistani teachers from integrating CLT in their teaching. In the Bangladeshi context, Rahaman's (2013) study revealed teacher encounter many challenges, including their misconceptions and lack of knowledge and application of CLT besides the traditional system of examination, the lack of administrative resources for support, and large and unequipped classes.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The current study adopted a quantitative research design to investigate the Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions of the CA. It involved 33 secondary school English teachers in Taif, Saudi Arabia. The study included male and female teachers of English, in public schools, whose ages range from 30 to 50 and who have been teaching English as a foreign language for at least 15 years. Those teachers used to teach students of low proficiency who started studying English in the fourth grade in elementary school. That is the students taught by teachers in the sample had been studying English for 6 years. For the sake of data collection, a 30-item questionnaire, adapted from Al-Maliki (2014), was utilized. The items were distributed on three dimensions: (1) principles of the CA, (2) teacher's role in implementing the CA and (3) secondary school EFL students' motivation. To ensure the validity and consistency of the questionnaire, a pilot study was carried out. It included 23 Saudi teachers of English whose constructive feedback improved the overall instrument. In order to

test the stability of the questionnaire, the researcher applied Cronbach's Alpha, which revealed that the instrument was reliable. As far as data analysis is concerned, the descriptive statistics were carried out to analyze the questionnaires. The data were computed by means of the statistical package SPSS. Accordingly, the frequency of distribution, percentages and standard deviations were considered. In order to identify the levels of performance among the participants of the study, their responses were estimated according to Mubarak (2013), as follows:

Table 2 highlights the levels of performance among the selected participants while estimating their responses according to Mubarak (2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To get to the results of the study, data collected via applying the study tool to (30) Secondary EFL teachers which have been analyzed. They were displayed according to the sequence of the questions. Then, they were discussed in the light of the study's theoretical trends and previous studies, as follows:

Results and Discussion of the First Question

The first question was: what is the understanding level of the Saudi EFL secondary school teachers understanding of the communicative approach?

In order to answer this question, arithmetic mean and standard deviation have been estimated for each item of the first axis of the questionnaire and its total mark. Table 3 displays the results of this procedure.

Table 3 illustrates the sample responses average of the first dimension (Teachers' level of understanding of CA). It shows that it was high with mean value (3.49) and standard deviation (1.04).

- The Saudi EFL teachers' responses to the communicative approach were so high to only one statement, high to (5) statements, medium to (3), and low to one statement.
- Statement (10) was at top with mean (4.20), statement (8) came next with mean (4.17), statement (9) came at last with (2.20) which was preceded by statement (2) whose mean is (2.70).

The current result differs from (1994) study results which showed that the Vietnamese teachers did not get a lot sides of these educational approaches. The same to Karavas-Doukas (1996) study results which revealed insufficiency of the Greek teachers understanding to these approaches while teaching English Language.

Table 2. Rubric for Evaluation of Teachers' Responses

Very high (Strongly agree)	High (Agree)	Medium (Agree to some extent)	Low (Disagree)	Very low (Strongly disagree)
4.20-5	3.40 – 4.19	2.60 – 3.39	1.80 – 2.59	1.00-1.79

Table 3. Teachers' responses to 1st dimension (Teachers' Level of Understanding of the CA)

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Level of understanding	Order
1	Secondary school learners have a lot of opportunities in pair and group work.	4.03	0.85	High	4
2	Secondary school EFL teachers waste a lot of valuable time on pair and group work.	2.70	1.21	Medium	9
3	In pair and group work, secondary school learners get distracted from the actual instruction.	3.27	1.11	Medium	7
4	Secondary school EFL students learn English effectively when English language is used as a means for teaching forms of the language (i.e. grammar, vocabulary) in isolation from contexts of English.	3.40	1.28	High	6
5	Secondary school EFL students learn English effectively when English is used as a means for doing something, such as greeting, requesting, etc.,	3.97	1.03	High	5
6	The level of the learners' communicative competence is enhanced by selecting the appropriate and correct English forms.	4.10	0.99	High	3
7	Teaching English forms should be taught in isolate statements rather than in their context.	2.90	1.42	Medium	8
8	Secondary school EFL learners must be presented by coherent texts so that they will readily understand them and participate effectively in conversation.	4.17	0.65	High	2
9	In applying the communicative approach, the Secondary school EFL teacher must teach ONLY the formal style.	2.20	0.92	Low	10
10	In applying the communicative approach, the Secondary school EFL teacher must teach BOTH the formal and informal style.	4.20	0.92	So high	1
Total score		3.49	1.04	High	

The researcher ascribed the existence of the Saudi EFL high understanding to the communicative approach to many factors, as the trainings given by the educational instruction to the EFL teachers, specially training them on the modern teaching approaches, which improved their knowledge of the best teaching approaches adopted while teaching English language. Also, the modern techniques, specially related to the social communications skills, contributed to forming of positive tendencies towards communication. This helped the Saudi teachers get a lot sides and based of the communicative approach. The modern technics –specially the newest– supported the teachers understanding and facilitated its application. This agreed directly with (2001) Gamal and Debra study results which showed that the new teachers perceived the communicative approach better than the old teachers who tended to use the traditional approaches while teaching the English language.

According to statements, statement (10) came first of the tenth axis statements, this statement refers to teachers who use the formal and informal approaches while teaching English through this approach. This gave a wide chance to apply this approach dynamically in teaching the English language; that is why, the Saudi EFL teachers responded to this side of the communicative approach in a very high degree. Statement (8) came also at second, it showed that the communicative approach contained the re-use of the secondary school students to serious linguistic statements in

their conversations in a way enabled them to understand it well. This represented an aim of the English language teaching aims at the secondary school; that is why, the teachers' responses were high at understanding and importance level.

Statements that came last, statement (9) was the latest among these axis statements, and it showed that teachers used only the formal approaches in teaching English language, which did not match to the communicative approach according to the Saudi EFL teachers. That was why their responses refused this principle.

Statement (2) came before the last, it showed that the communicative approach is a waste of time, so the teachers' responses disagreed with this meaning. However, teachers saw that it is not a waste of time. This ensured that teachers realized the importance of the communicative approach as a good investment of the class time while teaching students.

Results and Discussion of the Second Question

The second question was: **What is the benefit level of the Saudi EFL teachers of employing the communicative approach while teaching the secondary school students?**

In order to answer this question, arithmetic mean and standard deviation have been estimated for each item of the first axis of the questionnaire and its total mark. Table 4 displays the results of this procedure.

Table 4 illustrates that:

- The sample responses mean on the axis (teachers role in implementing the communicative approach) was medium, that the responses mean was (3.27), and standard deviation was (1.09).
- The Saudi EFL teachers' responses showed that there is a role of teachers in implementing the benefits of the communicative approach in teaching, it was so high in (2) statements, high in three statements, medium in (3), and low in (2) statements.
- Statement (4) came first according to the mean, which was (4.27), then, statement (9) came next with mean of (4.20), while statement (8) came latest with (1.70) mean, preceded by statement (3) with (2.57) mean.

The current result matched with Liu (2005) study results which showed that this approach helped teachers in Taiwan to some extent, while it was different from Gamal and Debra (2001) study results; which showed that the approach helped them a lot. It also differed from Penner (1995) study results which showed there were no clear benefit from this approach in teaching.

The researcher related medium degree of benefit from the communicative approach in teaching English in secondary school to the fact that applying the approach was in its beginning. While teachers in Missan Educational Bureau did not use this approach in their classes, they still recognize its benefits.

Respecting statement (4) advance among all the questionnaire second axis, it showed teachers accepting students' errors as a natural part of the learning process as a benefit of applying this approach. That is what the researcher related to the positive view to both student and teacher effort. Learners, while learning process, make errors, teachers tried to correct it, as well as they accepted these errors and that is why teachers treated their students humanely.

Statement (9) refers to teachers who used the communicative approach to facilitate the learning process. This is what the researcher related to teachers communicative way by which they deliver information to students. Then students learnt from their own interaction. A teacher is a facilitator not a dictator. A student is a researcher who has an active and efficient role.

Statement (8) came last among the second axis statements, it refers to the sample refuse to the idea of considering teacher as the only talkative throughout the learning process. This indicates that teaching using the communicative approach ensures the interaction between teachers and learners, which guarantees an active role of student.

With a lower degree came statement (3) at penultimate, showed that teachers refused the idea of correcting students' errors the focus should be on the verbal fluency only. That is what researcher ascribed that to teachers' recognition to the importance of understanding the verbal text used by students while interacting. However, verbal fluency importance, but it is not the only component in teaching content. Dialogue between students and their understanding to verbal text concern teachers while teaching using the communicative approach.

Results and Discussions of the Third Question

- This question states that: Does the students' performance who were taught communicatively differ from those taught through other teaching approaches?

Table 5 illustrates that:

- The sample response mean on axis (secondary school students' motivation) was high. It recorded (3.85), with standard deviation of (1.07)
- The Saudi EFL teachers' responses refer to students' motivation towards learning English which was very high at only one statement, and high at (9) statements.

Table 4. Teachers' responses to 2nd dimension (Teacher's Role in Implementing the CA)

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Level of Implementing	Order
1	Secondary EFL teacher's corrections of students' errors must focus on developing the meaning of the foreign language.	4.03	0.93	High	3
2	Secondary EFL teacher's corrections of students' errors must focus only on the accuracy of English (i.e. grammar, spelling and syntax).	3.57	1.19	High	4
3	Secondary EFL teacher's corrections of students' errors must focus only on the fluency.	2.57	1.04	Low	9
4	Correction of students' errors is seen as a natural part of the learning process.	4.27	0.83	So high	1
5	Correcting all learners' errors out of context can lead to effective learning of English.	3.20	1.19	Medium	6
6	Secondary school EFL teachers must minimize their attempt to correct students' errors.	3.50	1.28	High	5
7	In applying the communicative approach, the teacher dominates all the activities.	2.80	1.27	Medium	8
8	Secondary school EFL teachers must be the only speaker throughout the lesson.	1.70	0.92	Low	10
9	In applying the communicative approach the Secondary school EFL teacher is the manager, guide and facilitator of the learning process in the classrooms.	4.20	1.03	So high	2
10	Especially since they are easy to teach, the only strategies required to teach English effectively are presentation, drilling, and repetition.	2.90	1.18	Medium	7
Total score		3.27	1.09	Medium	

Table 5. Teachers' responses to 3rd dimension (Students' Motivation when CA is implemented)

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Level of Motivation	Order
1	Secondary school students' motivation is at its highest when teachers use the CA.	3.87	1.04	High	4
2	Secondary school EFL teachers must encourage student to communicate in the target language.	4.27	1.05	So High	1
3	The introduction of enhances secondary school students' motivation as it focuses on realistic use of the language.	3.83	1.02	High	6
4	CLT creates ample opportunities for learners to participate in classroom discussion.	3.77	1.25	High	7
5	CLT involves interesting activities for secondary school students.	3.70	1.15	High	8
6	Secondary school students' motivation is instrumental.	3.63	1.22	High	9
7	The CLT engages secondary school EFL learners in language games and role play.	3.87	0.90	High	5
8	CLT attracts secondary school students to learn the target language for the purpose of communication (integrative motivation).	3.90	0.92	High	3
9	CLT attracts learners to learn the target language for practice reasons such as passing an exam (instrumental motivation).	3.53	1.22	High	10
10	Motivation helps Saudi students' progress in learning the target language.	4.17	0.95	High	2
Total score		3.85	1.07	High	

- Statement (2) was the highest at mean among this axis statements. It recorded a mean of (4.27), then statement (10) came next with mean of (4.17). Statement (9) was the latest with mean of (3.53), preceded by statement (6) which mean was (3.63)

The current result matched with the results of Gamal and Debra (2001) study, which showed that students who learnt throughout this method achieved good educational benefits while it was different from Karavas-Doukas (1996) study results that refer to indefinite study results using this method.

The researcher attributed the high motivation of secondary schools students who learnt using the communicative method comparing to those who learnt by using other methods to the advantages of the method which made the learning environment attractive and interesting. Therefore, student participates effectively in the learning process and apply what he has learnt while interaction with working teams.

This advantages created integrative motivation leading to the improvement of students' educational performance constantly. That is why communicative method is a good approach for secondary school students.

Regarding Statements, statement (2) came first among the questionnaire third axis statements and statement (10) came next. This showed that teachers who used the communicative approach encouraged their students to get the purpose of the learning process, and motivation improved students' performance. That is what the researcher related to teachers' recognition of the importance of students achieving all learning process objectives. The highest motivation degrees enabled students to do their best and being aware permanently during the learning process.

Statement (9) came at last, preceded by statement (6). Both of them showed that students taught by the communicative approach did not have the idea of learning in order to pass the exam (*instrumental motivation*). The researcher wants to say that the communicative approach promotes

high levels of integrative motivation for students. Therefore, the approach helps students achieve the best results in learning English language.

CONCLUSION

The culmination of this study provides a comprehensive overview of the research findings that were centered on the efficacy of the communicative approach to English language teaching at the secondary school level. It is argued that this topic is indispensable in the sphere of pedagogy as it addresses significant challenges in language acquisition, the roles of teachers, and students' motivational levels.

The central hypothesis of this investigation posited that the communicative approach, with its inherent focus on interaction and practical language usage, can amplify the efficacy of English language learning amongst secondary school students. This proposition was extensively supported by the empirical data gathered and the subsequent analysis conducted.

The outcomes of this study revealed three crucial points. Firstly, an elevated comprehension of the communicative approach amongst teachers was exhibited, as demonstrated by a mean score of 3.49, accompanied by a standard deviation of 1.09. Secondly, the degree to which teachers applied the communicative approach was slightly lower, with a mean score of 3.27 and a standard deviation of 1.09. Lastly, a high level of motivation was reported amongst secondary school students who incorporated the communicative approach, as shown by a mean score of 3.85 and a standard deviation of 1.07. These findings provided robust empirical backing to the central hypothesis and underscored the effectiveness of the communicative approach in English language teaching at secondary school level.

Contrary viewpoints, that favor traditional methodologies, primarily focusing on grammar rules and vocabulary

acquisition, may be offered. However, this study compellingly demonstrates that the communicative approach, by providing a more comprehensive and functional understanding of the English language, and mirroring real-world language use, can be more advantageous to learners.

To pragmatically implement these research findings into actual pedagogical practices, a set of recommendations were derived from the study. The training programs for teachers are proposed to incorporate the communicative approach to fortify their comprehension and employment of this pedagogical methodology. It is suggested that teachers should be urged to combine both formal and informal methodologies in their English language lessons. It is also recommended that self-confidence amongst students should be nurtured, and the concept that learning encompasses the possibility of making mistakes and learning from them, should be promoted. Teachers should be reinforced as facilitators of the learning process, thereby empowering learners to assume responsibility for their own learning. In addition, it is advocated that supervisors should guide teachers in the benefits of the communicative approach, supplying them with educational models for its application. A focus on the functional aspects of language learning, in conjunction with cognitive development, is also urged. Furthermore, students are encouraged to foster integrative motivation, learning English for its inherent worth rather than mere examination success.

Numerous future research directions can be proposed. An examination of the influence of the communicative approach on secondary students' development of critical thinking skills is suggested. A study to enhance integrative motivation amongst secondary students is proposed. Finally, a curriculum designed to optimize the communicative approach in English language teaching is recommended.

In conclusion, this study highlights the indispensable role of the communicative approach in English language instruction at secondary school level. It acts as an essential guide for educators to leverage this approach effectively, thereby fostering an engaging, dynamic, and successful language learning milieu. The proposed future research directions aim to advance current comprehension and application of the communicative approach further, and to continue exploring its manifold benefits.

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