# AREAS OF RESEARCH IN TEFL / TESL

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S tudents in the field of TEFL / TESL may be considered the most fortunate of all because they are sutdying in a field with numerous interesting areas each with uncountable and fascinating ideas waiting for exploration and investigation. Unfortunately, most students are unaware of such a rich research environment. The purpose of this paper is to provide students with possibilities of research in the field of TEFL / TESL.

Most scholars would agree that TEFL / TESL is not a one dimensional field. The acronyms stand for Teaching English as a Foreign or Second language. The first impression one may receive is that the field involves teaching a language, in this case English. Although this impression, is too narrow a representation of the field, it involves many areas for research.

First, the term teaching which is the center of activities in the field of education, includes an ocean of ideas, thoughts, and mysteries to be explored. Second, the term language, referring to the most complex phenomenon

human beings possess, includes an unbelievably large number of questions to be answered. Third, there exists a learner between the teaching and learning processes. Therefore, all parameters influencing the social, psychological, religious, and political environment of the learner are legitimate factors to be investigated. And fourth, when a language is taught, it is hopefully learned by a learner. The concept of learning along with factors related to the learning process enriches the field with more questions to be investigated. Thus, the field of TEFL which includes education dealing with teaching, linguistics dealing with language, sociology dealing with social enviroment of the learner, and psychology dealing with process of learning, provides an amazingly rich environment with many scientific areas of research.

Although the set of four scientific disciplines mentioned above provides the students with a vast area of research possibilities, it is a narrow and an incomprehensive representation of the field of TEFL. TEFL enjoys much more possibilities for research in practice.

In order to put the term in an appropriate perspective, one should consider the area of applied linguistics because TEFL / TESL alone does not manifest the whole body of disciplines contributing to the field. Applied linguistics, on the other hand, represents the broad and varied areas related to the profession of language teaching. Of course, a historical review of applied linguistics is not necessary here. For the purpose of this paper a definition of the term will suffice because it will provide enough information on the areas of research to be discussed.

Probably the most comprehensive definition of the term "applied linguistics" is given by Kaplan (1980) who states. "...applied linguistics is the point at which all the branches of linguistics come together. Furthermore, I want to suggest that applied linguistics is also the point at which all the branches of linguistics intersect with other disciplines (p. 58)´´. In order to visualize the domain of applied linguistics, Kaplan offers the following diagram:

To provide students with the possibilities of research areas, some of the domains in the diagram will be discussed.,

## RESEARCH IN LINGUISTICS

The first main area of research in TEFL centers around language itself. Linguistics as a scientific study of language attempts to describe the system of language. To describe the system of a given language, linguistic analysis is performed. Any linguistic analysis presupposes a linguistic theory. Depending on the linguistic theory different descriptions are provided, though the substance of the investigation, i.e., language, remains the same. In other words, the subject of the study is language; the purpose of the study is to describe the system of language; but the theory behind the study and the description lead to different outcomes. Positions taken by theoreticians, applied by scholars, and consumed by learners provide a proper position for the researchers to appear and delve into the problems.

For instance, the theory which provides a clearer, a more comprehensive and a more easily understanable description of the system of the language along with its operation is considered a crucial topic to be investigated. The variety of questions to be asked will be multiplied when positions to be taken in the study of language are applied to the copmonents and skills of language. Phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, as components of language are not only vast areas for research by themselves, but also would include vaster areas of research with the application of different theories. The order in which phonemes, syntactic structures, and semantic features are acquired in a natural language environment or learned in an artificial classroom situation would be a source of many research questions.

The contribution, the significance and the role of components in learning language skills would be another area for students to delve into. Furthermore, all the possibilities for research mentioned above can be applied to first language acquisition and second or foreign language learning situations. The similarities, differences, and universalities existing among different languages acquired or learned would produce ample opportunities for researchers.

Moving one step further, all these research possibilities can be applied to child as well as adult language acquisition and learning situations. And, finally comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences between the

systems and subsystems of two languages, i.e., contrastive analysis and error analysis, are just a few areas of research for those who are interested in investigating the complexities and intricacies of language itself.

## RESEARCH IN TEACHING

The second major area of research in TEFL / TESL is the area of teaching. Language with all complexities, skills, components, and various subcomponents should be taught. Teaching involves many factors each with many possibilities for research. In any teaching situation, factors such as curriculum development, syllabus design, teacher training, materials development, methodology, and testing the achievement of the learner are involved. To introduce research possibilities related to these factors, each will be briefly explained.

The word curriculum is difined as a systematic group of courses or sequence of subjects required for graduation or certification in a major field of study (Travers, 1975). By this defination, there would be curricula for elemetary schools, Juniur High School, Rahnemai or the so-called Guidance Schools, High schools, and various levels of university education leading to AA, BA, BS, MA, MS, and Ph.D. degrees. In addition, the definition covers the nature and quality of all the courses of subject areas offered at these educational levels. In order to provide a brief description of research possibilities in curriculum development, one major field of study, in this case the English language, will be taken as an example. The readers can expand the recommendations to the other subject matter areas becuase the suggestions may prove equally valid for other major field of study as well.

The first area of research in curriculum development involves the time at which the English language instruction should be offered. Whether the starting time should be at the primary school, junior high school, senior high school, or university level cannot be decided upon without rigorous research. Of course, it is easy to prescribe that English instruction should begin, for example, at the junior high school level. But to justify the decision, sound and valid pieces of information are needed. That is, language policy makers should

conduct research in order to make valid and defensible decisions on the issue. In short, the level at which language education will be most appropriate and can be conducted most effectively should be determined through research not subjective decisions.

Furthermore, the length and intensity of instruction should be determined through research. Simply stating that an $X$ number of hours are sufficient for $X$ level of education for teaching English is quite subjective and scientifically unacceptable. No matter what numbers are assigned to $X$'s, it will not satisfy the research oriented educational systems. Careful research is needed to investigate the outcome of different degrees of intensity of instruction and different lengths of time in order to find out the most appropriate length and efficient intensity for teaching English at different levels of education.

The problem of intensity and length of insturction becomes more serious at the tertiary level of educationi,.e., university. For instance, regarding the English language ability, the level of expectation from an English major student in comparison to a non-English major one, should be clearly stated. That is, the number of English courses which would enable the students to achieve what they are supposed to achieve can not be determined subjectively. It requires research. The problem is, of course, more serious with English majors. The number of courses needed for a degree (BA, MA, or Ph.D. degree in the English language) to be confirmed upon a student cannot be determined meaningfully unless careful research is carred out.

Of course, it is not difficult to take an already established curriculum and assign it to a particular program. The validity of such a selection, however, will always be under question because a curriculum should be developed by taking all kinds of psychological, social, political, and educational factors into consideration. It is acceptable, of course, to take a curriculum as a model. Its adaptation, application, and implementation, however, must be executed through the findings of research. Along with research in curriculum development, it is necessary to determine the content of the courses as well as the sequence in which they should be offered in an educational system. This, also, seems simple to state than to practice. What to be taught and at what

sequence is the subject of intensive research. Why should the course X be a pre-requisite to the course Y is not a question to be answered subjectively. It is not easy to find a scientific answer to such questions of why a particular course should follow or precede another course. The efficiency of the pre-requisite courses must be investigated through careful research. This would lead to more research to determine the content of the material for the courses offered in a particular sequence because the efficacy of the pre-requisite courses in preparing students for the following courses is of crucial importance.

When the content of the courses is determined, the question of presenting the materials in a reasonable order becomes significant. This leads the scholars to the techniques of syllabus design. The concept of syllabus design deserves more attention in centralized educational systems where all students in all educational institutes are required to take the same courses with the same contents. That is, all students should reach a similar level of competency in a given course. Just to verify the fact that the students do or do not reach the expected level of competency in a course or a set of courses is a topic for extensive research. It entails research in other areas including teacher-training, methods of teaching, and evaluating the outcome of teaching.

Teacher-training is an extremely important issue in language education. Academic, personal, and educational qualifications of the teachers can not be determined without research. Of course, it is easy to delineate teacher characteristics following a particular theory or model. However, in addition to verifying the validity of the theory or the model itself, the verification of the correspondence between the theory and practice opens new areas for exploration.

Teachers are trained to function within an educational system. A major responsibility of the teachers is to apply the principles of language teaching or language learning for which they are trained. One of these principles is the method of teaching. The efficacy of a given method can not be determined without experimentation.

The history of language teaching demonstrates swinging from one method

to another within different periods of time (Kelley, 1975; Stren, 1984). Any modification in teaching method should be made through research. Just following the trends in language teaching without investigating the appropriateness of a particular method for a given educational setting would lead to a meaningless imitation of the field. Therefore, what is appropriate for a particular society can only be verified through research.

Assuming that an appropriate method of teaching is selected for a nation, the achievement of students, the facility by which the method is implemented, and the efficacy of the method need to be evaluated through language tests. There are as many methods of testing as there are methods of teaching. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to decide on a method of testing which matches the method of teaching. To consolidate the correspondence between the materials to be taught, the way the materials are taught, and the way the outcome of instruction is evaluated is not possible but through research. This indicates that the research projects conducted in these three areas should not only meet the needs of the society, but also complement and supplement one another.

Of course, the areas of research related to teaching are briefly touched upon here. Every area enjoys a rich literature of research. The purpose of this paper is not to detail the literature but to provide interested students with the enormous possibilities of research related to language education. Thus, in curriculum research, questions related to the number of courses required for a degree, their contents, the sequence in which they have to be offered, the organization of materials in each course, the training of qualified teachers, the methods of teaching, and eventually the way the outcome of education is to be evaluated are all singificant topics which require rigorous research. Only through research can one make sound and reasonable decisions on these important issues.

## RESEARCH ON FACTORS INFLUENCING TEFL

In learning a language, certain mental activities are involved. Regarding these activities, the third major area of research centers around the factors

influencing language learning. Obviously language is a dynamic phenomenon which is used by human beings for communication purposes. Furthermore, since human beings are social creatures, all social factors influence their performance. Moreover, human beings are individuals under certain psychological conditions. More specifically, factors influencing language learning can be classified into three major categories: congitive factors, personality factors, and social factors. Each of these categories provide valuable opportunities for research to be discussed below.

## COGNITIVE FACTORS

Research in cognitive domain of language learning and teaching is so extensive that it requires a separate paper, even a book in itself. However, introducing some general concepts may prove helpful and offer some guidelines.

Brown (1987), for example, presents three concepts of process, style, and strategy .He further claims that these terms are sometimes used interchangeably. He distinguishes the word "process" from "style" claiming that the former is a general mental activity while the latter is an individual mental activity. He also believes that both concepts are different from "strategy" which refers to idiosyncratic mental activities. The mere existance of these concepts, differences between them, degrees of overlap and interactions among them, and simply the way they function in relation to different language elements are all open to empirical investigation.

These concepts are involved in learning which is a mysterious phenomenon by itself. Differnet types of learning such as signal learning, stimulus response learning, verbal association learning, multiple discrimination learning, concept learning, and learning through problem solving are well-known in the field. There are other less known or even unknown kinds of learning such as discovery learning, rote learning, inductive learning, deductive learning, and meaningful learning. Again similarities, differences, degrees of overlap amont these factors and the apporpriateness of each type for certain individuals or group as well as subject matters appropriate to each method provide ample

opportunities for research in TEFL.

Another group of variables in cognitive domain is formed by the interaction of different processes when two or more languages are learned concurrently Transfer, interference, overgeneralization, and other processes and phenomena resulting from such interactions are just a few areas for research. It requires extensive investigation on similarities and differences between two or more languages, i.e., contrastive linguistics, as well as type and sources of errors, i.e., error analysis, to shed some lights on the intericacies of these processes.

The third factor in this domain is cognitive style which constitutes an area of research for those who are interested in matching method of presenting materials and the most convenient way of learning materials. Cognitive style is defined as "self-consistent and enduring individual differences in cognitive domain and functioning." According to cognitive domain some people are field dependant, i.e., who depend on the totality rather than individual parts, While some others are field independent, i.e., who are willing to proceed from particular to totality. To investigate the effect of cognitive style on learning will provide ample opportunities for TEFL students to do research.

Still another cognitive factor is the function of the brain. Based on the activities going on in the brain, there are two groups of people called left-hemisphere and right-hemisphere dominant. Pepole with left hemisphere dominance have certain characteristics which are thought to be different from those with right-hemisphere dominance. Whether these differences are fixed or not, whether the two hemispheres operate together, whether the differences influence other learning activities, and whether they make learners utilize different learning strategies, or processes or styles are all legitimate questions for investigation. The topics mentioned here are not exhaustive, of course, they are just a few examples of complex cognitive factors influencing learning and teaching. All these factors along with their interactions provide rich research environment for TEFL scholars. Of course, the above mentioned factors are just in cognitive domain. the factors in affective and social domain are explained below.

## AFFECTIVE FACTORS

In the field of TEFL, language is taught to a person. This person, although cognitively similar to all others, has certain individual characteristics. Some scholars even believe that cognitive theories are not comprehensive without considering affective factors. That is probably why even under quite similar cognitive conditions, no two individuals attain exactly the same ability in language. That is why among many variables influencing language teaching and language learning, affective factors are considerrd important and sometimes determining.

"Affects" refers to emotions and feelings. Emotions and feelings interact with other variables in two dimensions. One dimension involves the interactions within an individual as a unit of society, and the other dimension involves the interactions among individuals within the social structure. Regarding affect, Brown (1987) identifies five levels of affectivity: recieving, responding, valuing, organizing the values, and identifying oneself with value system. Each of these levels is open to numerous questions. What variables influence these levels, in what ways, to what extent, under what circumstances, in one society or more than one are all valuable areas for research.

Another factor in affective domain is self-esteemi,.e ., the evaluation an individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself or herself; it expressses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy. Previous research indicates that self-esteem plays an important role in language learning process. The validity and the extent of this influence is awaiting experimental confirmation.

Another factor in affective domain is inhibition, refering to defence system one builds around himself. As Stevick (1976) states, language learning involves a number of forms of alienation; alienation between the critical learner and the performing learner, between learner's own language and the target language, between the learner and the teacher, and between the learner and other fellow learners. All these situations are valuable research possibilities to consolidate the beliefs.

Anxiety is another factor in affective domain which has considerable effect on language learning. Anxiety can be experienced at different levels. The two polar ones are known as debilitative and facilitative anxiety. Ignoring various levels in between, just to determine the kind of anxiety and the critical level which could help or inhibit language learning process would constitute reasonable research projects for TEFL students.

And finally motivation is probalby one of the most important affective factors. Motivation as an inner drive, impulse, emotion or desire to achieve something, has been the topic for many research projects. However, many of its facts remain, as yet, to be investigated. Two kinds of motivation are well established by now: integrative and instrumental motivation; the former refers to the state where the learner whishes to associate himself with the culture of the target language, and the latter refers to the motivation used to acquire a language as a means for attaining instrumental goals such as furthering careers, reading technical maunals and so forth. Whether one type of motivation is more effective than the other, whether this influences individuals differently, whether they act differently in L1 and L2 situations, and whether they provied different results in different environments are all open to empirical investigations.

## SOCIAL FACTORS

Man is a social being. The relationship among men is mostly established through language use. Thus all cognitive and affective factors interact within the social context and influence the use of language. Who is talking to whom, when, why i.e., *wh* questions of communication, force language users to select an appropriate linguistic form to fulfill certain language functions. In Widdowsen's terms (1979) if linguistic manifestation of language refers to usage and communictive function of language refers to use, there are rules of use without which rules of usage are useless. Therefore, the interaction between rules of use and rules of usage would influence all aspects of language learning/acquisition processes.

One of the main social factors is attitude which refers to one's likes or

dislikes toward a particular language or the speakers of that language. Attitude is believed to have considerable effect on language learning. High positive attitude facilitates language learning while high negative attitude inhibits language acquisition. Some scholars, including Gardner and Lambert (1961), investigated the role of different degrees of attitude in language learning. They concluded that even motivation has an attitudinal underlying construct. Some others have conducted research on the relationship between attitude and success in language achievement. The overall finding indicated that attitudinal factors have a positive relationship with learning language tasks.

If it can be demonstrated that motivation has an underlying construct similar to that of attitude, then what Schumann claims would receive more impetus. According to Schumann (1975) acculturation, a combination of motivational and attitudinal factors, has a causal relationship to language acquisition.

Although causal relationship is by itself worth investigations, the role of attitude in language acquisition / learning should be carefully examined because it would lead to the clarification of the concept of social distance which is assumed to be a determining factor in language learning. Social distance is described by Schumann (1976) as:

> "In relation to the target language group, is SLL (Second Language Learning) group politically, technically or economically dominant, non-dominant, or subordinate? Is the integration pattern of the SLL group assimilation, acculturation, or preservation? What is the SLL groups degree of enclosure? Are the culture of the two groups congruent? What are the attitudes of the two groups towards each other? Is the SLL group cohesive? What is the size of the SLL group? What is the SLL group's intended length of residence in the target language area?" p. 126

These factors are claimed to distinguish bad and good language learning situations. Of course, all these claims are formulated on the basis of

semi-experimental observations. In most cases, they are theoretically stated rather than empirically verified. Therefore, students of TEFL have many possibilities in running experiments in order to verify the existence and influence of these factors on language processing.

In addition to cognitive, and social factors related to language teaching and language learning, there are some other areas in close connection to language processing tasks. Some of these areas are the relationships between language and literature, language and technology, and language and politics. Each will be explained briefly.

## RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

The relationship between language and literature is of utmost importance because language is a medium to understanding literature. Thus, research in linguistic aspects of literature will help language learners to benefit from literary material in order to improve their language ability. Many English departments offer courses in literature. Students with insufficient command of the English language are forced to read novels, short stories, and poems in English written by American or British novelists or poets. Although it is desirable to offer such courses at the university level, their offering must be based on students ability in comprehending not only linguistic elements of the materials but also literary concepts and cultural values involved in foreign literature. Scholars believe that literatuer is closely related to culture. Therefore, it is necessary for those who are interested in literature to understand the cultural values of the target community. In many courses, students spend a considerable amount of time figuring out linguistic messages, let alone literary or cultural concepts. Therefore, extensive research is needed to determine the correspondence between student ability in English and the degree of text difficulty in literary materials in order to assign appropriate materials for a particular group of students.

Among many techniques to determine text difficulty, readability is the most commonly used technique. Research in readability has a long history. Scholars can utilize different readability formulas at different levels of

education in order to investigate the appropriacy of texts for their readers. Along with using readability formulas, linguistic aspect of literary texts, including lexical difficulty and syntactic complexity should be investigated. If the texts are well above the English knowledge of the readers, the readers will not appreciate what they read. Consequently, literature courses will not be as effective as they ought to be.

Regarding linguistic aspect of the texts, two lines of research are needed. The first line should investigate the lexical difficulty of the text. The number of unknown words, their frequency level and their denotative and connotative loads should be determined before assigning a text to the students. The second line of research should involve the extent of correspondence between syntactic complexity of the text and reader's command of the language. In other words, knowing all the words in a sentence does not necessarily guarantee the comprehension of that sentence. Nor does knowing the meaning of all sentences in a text guarantee the comprehension of that text. Therefore, there should be a match between the lexical difficulty, syntactic complexity of the text and students command of English. Otherwise, student will not understand the linguistic message in the text which is a pre-requesite to understanding the literary message.

Regarding the literary message of the texts, the educators should consider the cultural load of the text as well. Culture is an indispensible part of literature. Therefore, student's level of familiarity with cultural aspects of the assigned texts should be investigated. Otherwise, students may understand the linguistic meaning of the materials they read but miss the literary message of the author. Therefore, to assign a literary text to students, one should make sure that students have enough command of both language and culture. These levels discussed by Arthur (1970) can be presented as follows:

As the diagram shows, in order to read, comprehend and appreciate literature, linguistic knowledge and cultural understanding are necessary. Even then, however, one can not guarantee literary appreciation. That is, literature is an unlimited area of language use and culture. In order to cope with the creativity of the author, the reader should reach, as closely as possible, to the

level the author had intended while producing the text.

Since in most cases foreign students are not capable of coping with the linsguistic, literary, and cultural complications used in literary texts, some scholars have advocated simplified literature to EFL students. One may argue that simplifying the text would be a reasonble remedy. Regardless of the arguments in support or rejection of the simplified literature, a researcher should look into the procedures of simplification. There are already a great number of simplified literary texts in the market. However, their validity is under question because most of them have been simplified by certain organizations for commercial purposes. There is no evidence from any reasonable research in simplfication of literary work. Even the good ones have taken a narrow range of factors into account. Therefore, rigorous research is needed to determine the criteria for selection and simplification of literary materials for EFL students.

There are, of course, so many other pollibilities in literature which require a separate paper. The topics mentioned here are brief and oversimplified. Nevertheless, they should provide TEFL students with satisfactory range of possible research areas in literature.

## RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE AND TECHNOLOGY

Another area of research for TEFL students is the relationship between language and Technology. technology, with swift developments, has revolutionized the world in many aspects of human life. Language education is not an exception. The impact of technology on education is thought to be similar to that of on industry. Although there might be some similarities, the two cases differ drastically because the former deals with a set of objects, but the latter with a group of human beings. Therefore, technology is developed to help maximize the efficiency of human activities not to replace them.

Of course, the countribution of technology to education is not something new. Ever since the discovery of printing and related technology, all aspects of education have benefited from the impact of technology. However, the new trend in applying technology to education has concentrated on utilization of

mechanical and electronical devices in teaching. One of the well known outcomes of utilizing such instruments in instruction was the development of machine teaching and programmed instruction. Although such developments did not fulfill any of the promises already made, they led to some fundamental developments in education.

To develop programmed materials, a cursery reexamination of the content of educational materials was needed. Content analysis has been a major concern for educators for determining the appropriacy of the materials being presented to the learners. Scholars working in this area believed that the learning patterns are systematic and the materials should be presented systematically. This assumption led to a new approach in materials development referred to as programmed instruction. Textbooks written on the basis of programmed instruction aimed at presenting materials in an orderly manner which would match individual's learning strategies and abilities. As mentioned before, programmed textbooks did not achieve the expected popularity. Therefore, a new look at the efficiency, appropriacy, and applicability of this kind of instruction seems warranted.

Another area of research regarding language and technology has been the development, application, implementation, and utilization of sophisticated mechanical instruments. Production of some equipment to help students learn different languages, play games with new words and sentences, match words with pictures, and solve single problems has opened a new research domain. Scholars have tried to find out the degree of efficiency of such pieces of equipment on the one hand, and determing their supremacy over other cheaper equipment on the other.

A third and probably the most important aspect of technology can be attributed to the development of computers. Although computerization of education has been a long unfulfilled dream, the contribution of computers to facilitating education at various levels is undeniable. Computers have given man a versatility in many areas. Content analysis including preparation of word frequency lists and sentence pattern frequency lists was greatly improved with the help of computers. The development of new dictionaries and

improvement of old ones, making new and innovative sets of materials for language teaching would not have been possible without getting help from computers. Extensive research is required to investigate the efficiency of computer–assisted instruction in the era being rapidly dominated by computer technology.

To sum up again, these topics have been suggestive. Technology has more mysteries to be uncovered than the ones mentioned here. Everyday a new technological device is presented to the world. Translating machines, computerized distionaries (talking and spelling dictionaries), language lab equipment, audio-visual aids constitute a rich area of research for TEFL students.

## RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE AND POLITICS

The last area of research to be mentioned here is the relationship between language and politics: the word politics is used here to refer to policy making. Language planning and language policy are important areas of research. Problems dealing with the national language, the language to be taught as a second or foreign language, the formal language, informal languages, coining new words, developing acceptable equivalents, are some of the responsibilities of language policy makers. In language planning the nature of different educational degrees criteria for entering particular educational levels, requirements for graduation from educational institutes, and the qualifications for educational organizations are clearly defined and determined on the basis of the needs of the society and facilities available in the country. Unfortunately, in some cases decisions for such crucial and significant national problems are made subjectively. In others, neither do clear guidelines exist nor are plannings in sight for the future. Whereas every single decision in language planning should be made after a cursery investigation of all potentially influencial factors. Otherwise, the efficacy of education, the outcome of educational efforts, and the implication and application of educational outcomes will often remain under the shadow of unsystematic programs. As mentionad at the beginning of this paper, students of TEFL /

TESL are surrounded by remarkable areas of research. Within every area, numerous research questions are awaiting. Of course, the possibilitied were not detailed here. Nore were they exhaustive by any means. Thus, TEFL administrators and students must give serious considerations to research possibilities in their field.

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