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## **Teach Effectively or Guide Wisely? Discussing the Application of Wisdom Approach to Language Teaching in Thai Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to explore English language teachers' perceptions and their classroom practices toward the application of teaching the 'common good' by incorporating a moral and ethical side of education to English Language Teaching (ELT). The data were collected by using a mixed-method approach consisting survey questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and class observations. Thirty teachers who taught English language at an international university located in Thailand participated in this study. The results revealed that the English language teachers do have a positive perception of the significance and value of cultivating students to achieve the common good in order to help them grow as virtuous citizens. However, their practices in classroom did not match the general perceptions as their behaviors were more focused towards linguistic effectiveness rather than wise guidance. It is recommended that language teachers raise awareness of the holistic aspect of education by valuing the social role of language in ELT.

**Keywords:** English Language Teaching (ELT), Wisdom Approach, teachers' role, the common good, social role

### **Introduction**

The main goal of English Language Teaching (ELT) is to prepare learners to become efficient and competent users of the global language. In line with this viewpoint, communicative competence, independent learning and learner-centeredness have been dominating the mainstream of ELT studies. However, it is also true that learners not only study and acquire knowledge of the subject taught but they usually go beyond that and gain much more from the process of learning. Language learners are also motivated by moral values and social identities associated with language as language is a social product that reflects all aspects of society (Sternberg, Jarvin, & Grigorenko, 2009; Brumfit, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

Studies have revealed that teachers' values and beliefs on education largely govern how they teach and guide students affecting their pedagogical practices (Cotton, 2006). By bringing in the notion of 'Wisdom Approach' in language teaching, we seek to address the gap between teachers' understanding of the wider social goal to guide students towards cultivating selves as better citizens and the actual pedagogies they practice in class. Wei's (2006) viewpoint of 'Wisdom Approach' is that language teachers should guide students toward the achieving the common good when teaching; since language is a social product affecting society while at the same time being affected by the members of society, language teachers should recognize their role as educators to enrich the language they teach by incorporating 'goodness' into their lessons.

With the belief that ELT should incorporate ethical and moral values in planning teaching materials and conducting classroom activities in order to improve learners' experience and provide richer learning environment, we designed this study to explore English language teachers' attitudes and their classroom practices toward cultivating moral values leading to the practice of the common good. The following research questions guided the study: what value does the 'Wisdom Approach' hold for English language teachers and to what extent are the principles of the 'Wisdom Approach' exercised or reflected, consciously or unconsciously, in ELT classroom practices?

### **Review of literature**

The nature of ELT has been conceptualized into four main categories since last century. According to Richards & Renandya (2001), the first conceptualized category of ELT is the science-research orientation, which includes operationalizing learning principles, following a tested model, practicing audiolingualism, and implementing task-based language teaching. The second trend is the theory-based approaches, which support systematic and moral thinking rather than focusing on empirical investigations; these include communicative language teaching and the silent way practices. Next is the value-based approaches that concentrate on the values one hold about teachers, learners, classrooms, and the role of education in society. School-based curriculum development, learner-centered curriculum, and reflective teaching are the main parts of this notion. The last category in conceptualizing ELT is to view it as an art or craft, something which counts upon the teacher's personal skills applied according to the demands of specific situations.

Language as a social product, has been somewhat marginalized in all the above-mentioned orientations. During the process of learning, learners not only study and acquire knowledge of the subject taught but they usually go beyond that and gain much more. Sternberg's (2001, 1998) 'The Balance Theory of Wisdom' focuses on using 'Tacit Knowledge' (TK) and pursuing 'the common good' which lead learners to acquire 'wisdom'; this highlights the social role of language teachers as holistic educators and enable language educators to become more aware of their responsibilities, not only in terms of transmitting language knowledge, but also in guiding students to shape their minds and thoughts to become sophisticated citizens.

To make wise judgements in life, one needs to utilize his/her explicit knowledge and syndicate it with implicit knowledge. According to Sternberg (2001), TK is procedural; it is the process of 'knowing how' rather than 'knowing what'. TK contributes to the attainment of goals people value and it is acquired through learning experiences; this is how wisdom is acquired. Another important feature of TK is to pursue the common good. The common good, in humanistic ethics means fulfilling the interest of many individuals altogether (Cuban & Shipps, 2000). When balancing individual interest and interests of others, values play an important role in making decisions. People have different values and beliefs that mediate their utilization of TK when balancing interests. Although values may vary somewhat across space and time, as well as among individuals within given cultural contexts, there seem to exist common universal values, such as

respect for human life, honesty, sincerity, and fairness. Wisdom is comprised of both knowledge and action; wisdom unites knowledge by understanding what ‘the common good’ mean and therefore by taking action to fulfill that ‘goodness’ (Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2009; Sternberg, Jarvin, & Grigorenko 2009).

Teachers play crucial role in the process of teaching students to achieve the common good. As Sternberg (2001) argues, language can be used in various ways and teachers should be responsible to guide learners to use the language learned/acquired for goodness. Teachers should be the ones who inspire and promote critical thinking and questioning whilst ruminating the common good and practicing this behavior (Irwin-DeVitis & DeVitis, 1998). Students learn more than the specific subject taught by the teacher, they remember and many times mimic what they have seen teachers do in class; this continues to impact them when they start working. Therefore, teachers should not only deliver knowledge but also should be responsible for acting as students’ role model.

Quite a few teaching models simply stop at the stage of enabling students to formulate their own ideas. But what are their own ideas? Are they good or bad? Are they reasonable or extreme? As Yulina (1998) claims that there may be some risks that the classroom discussion could evolve into chaotic chatter if everyone is given right to express an opinion, no matter how absurd it may be. Thus, knowing this risk, language teachers might avoid to guide students into deeper discussion on formulating thoughtful ideas and argumentation. However, students should be encouraged to think about how and what they have learned can and will positively influence not only theirs but others’ lives. They, therefore, need to learn not just the language, but also should learn how to apply the acquired language to pursue the common good.

Promoting sensible thinking that leads to thoughtful outcome does not replace the main role of learning the target language. The main goal is that learners will be able to apply what they learned with more practical wisdom for achieving the common good. Since thoughtful outcomes for goodness of people and society can be reflected through spoken and written languages, it is vital to place emphasis on language teaching classrooms and teachers.

Group work is known as and normally practiced to offer opportunities to speak, to provide an embracing affective climate, and to promote responsibility and autonomy in order to better the outcome working with others (Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines, & Galton, 2003; Brown & Lee, 1994; Toseland & Rivas, 1984). When it comes to the ‘Wisdom Approach’, however, the focus is different. Group work is used to create responsibilities for students to learn how to think from others’ points of view, how to evaluate each other’s thinking outcomes, and how to achieve a balance and a the common good rather than using other people’s expertise to come up with the best outcome.

In the assessing phase, students would be engaged in discussions, project works, and understand how these lessons could be applied to their own lives and the lives of others. Moreover, the content of teaching materials should not only focus on the topics of the daily life of people who speak the target language as mother tongue. Topics concerning common values are advocated and welcomed, so that students can utilize the target language to understand and think about issues and solutions that may give them opportunity to reason from different angles. The idea is that learners should not be to force-fed a set of values, but should be encouraged to develop their own values and actively reflect on them (Sternberg, 2001).

## **Research methodology**

This study employed a mixed method approach to understand English language teachers' opinions and practices from different viewpoints. Three sets of data were collected in order to address the research questions: questionnaire, interviews, and classroom observations.

### **Research participants and instruments**

The subjects for this study were 30 language lecturers who taught English at an international university located in Thailand. The nationality of the participants varied and the majority of them (73.33%) had taught English for more than 15 years.

The questions in the questionnaire were divided into two sections. The first part reflected teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward ELT by looking into critical thinking, problem-solving, group work, evaluation and examination, and cultural knowledge; this was to focus on 'thoughtful outcome' or 'thinking proficiency' which the researchers believed were the major features of the 'Wisdom Approach'. The second part aimed to find out teaching practices in ELT classroom. A pilot test was conducted with three teachers and based on the feedback; the questionnaire was modified accordingly.

In order to explore the multiple truths in social situations and prompt different perspectives, interview is regarded as an effective instrument. Interviews also provided opportunities for researchers and participants to interact face to face allowing both parties to better understand the subject matter being researched (Wellington, 2015). It also added rich stories to complement questionnaires (Sudman & Bradburn, 1982). Semi-structured interview was designed to collect in-depth information about the participants' beliefs and attitudes towards the goal of language teaching; the role of teacher, issues in the thought process when teaching and learning a new language, and evaluation of students' thoughtful outcomes were investigated. Six teachers participated in the interview; three were from Western countries and the other three from Asian countries. In the following analysis, W and A were used to refer to Western and Asian teachers respectively.

Observation enabled researchers to thoroughly witness and record behaviors, actions, and interactions displayed by participants. It also permitted researchers to acquire a detailed description of social settings or events within the socio-cultural context (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2013) and allowed researchers to see "things that might otherwise be unconsciously missed, to discover things that participants might not freely talk about in interview situations" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 306). Classroom observations were crucial in this study since the main objective was to examine participants' behaviors practiced in their lectures which largely includes activities and tasks embedded into their teaching approaches. Four teachers (two Western teachers and two Asian teachers) who participated in the interviews agreed to the class observations. These teachers all used literary texts (authentic novels and poems) as teaching materials. Each observation took about an hour to an hour and a half.

### **Data analysis method**

Quantitative data analysis was carried out by descriptive statistics to illustrate a 'picture' of the collected data while qualitative data were evaluated based on content analysis. Content analysis was used in order to analyze data collected using different methods by identifying themes and related patterns and their frequency (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007). Once the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed, they were integrated to enrich the findings. The researchers made the connection between the data sets by utilizing one set of data—the quantitative data—to guide the subsequent qualitative data.

## Findings

Teachers' perceptions and practices based on questionnaire and interviews

The findings from the questionnaire and interviews demonstrated that the majority of the participants of this study recognized that they knew the importance of guiding students towards practicing the common good.

Almost two thirds of participants agreed that critical thinking (63.3%, 19 out of 30) and problem-solving (60.0%, 18 out of 30) were strongly related to students' thinking proficiency. However, there was a vast difference in their opinions concerning group work and evaluation; half of the teachers believed that the main function of group work in English language classroom should be to assist students to improve their English not their thought process (50.0%, 15 out of 30). Nearly three fourths of teachers (73.3%, 22 out of 30) agreed that evaluation and examination were to test students' English language knowledge, not their thinking proficiency. Concerning the cultural aspect of ELT, the teachers believed both the culture of the target language and learners' cultural contexts were equally important.

Participants' attitudes towards the goal of teaching and learning in ELT were also examined. The majority of the participants agreed that learning to pragmatically utilize the language by speaking, writing, listening and reading in English (78%) was the core purpose in English language teaching and learning. Thus, the finding illustrates that language teachers put much time and effort into cultivating these four hands-on skills rather than putting emphasis on moral issues or other matters that lead to social virtue and/or deeper knowledge.

The participants' perceptions on qualities of 'good' teachers were also investigated. 'Good' language skills and knowledge was the most important feature (70%) language teachers should have according to the participants, followed by being responsible for students (57%) and rich teaching experience (43%). Whether the teacher should be the good role model for students' social life or not was the least important feature for good teachers (27%).

For the participants, the most important reason of evaluation in class was to assess students' language proficiency (50%) rather than understanding students' thought process or strategies (37%). The result also clearly showed that the participants focused more on the practicalities of the language itself rather than guiding students to gain deeper knowledge utilizing the language taught and learned.

After analyzing the data from the questionnaire, interviews with six participants were conducted. Based on the findings from the questionnaire, the interviews aimed to examine English language teachers' attitudes and practices comprehensively by inviting them to share their experience and stories they could not elaborate on the questionnaire.

When asked what language teaching means to them, all six participants pointed out that it was much more than teaching grammar and vocabulary. The all agreed that language teaching should also include literature, culture, communication, and social behavior. However, different opinions were given when they were asked to elaborate on the role of critical thinking in ELT. Their responses are summarized as follows in Table 1.

Table 1 Opinions on Critical Thinking

W1	It is to be able to evaluate, think, and reflect on what you've learned...so, think hard as to how to use English effectively.
W2	Critical thinking in language education means students can critically compose and construct meanings in target language.

W3	Critical thinking is to think on their own and make decisions...in my class, every week I give students riddles and students are expected to figure out what they mean by brainstorming and using expressions we already learned before. I see this as critical thinking activity.
A1	(No specific answer given)
A2	Students should think carefully...the more you think, the more language will go through your head which will help you to efficiently practice it.
A3	I heard about critical thinking and I have known it for a long time, but I take it for granted. After I came here (the current university), I realized that I should teach my students how to think systematically even in language classes.

As indicated in Table 1, participant A3 was not aware of the role and significance of critical thinking in ELT. A2's view of critical thinking was more language-focused. In W1, W2 and A2's opinion, critical thinking could help students to master the target language. Though A2 knew critical thinking skills could help the students, due to limited time and circumstances it was not realistic to implement the approach. W3 mention that she tried to guide students to think critically by giving out assignments and in-class activities though she did admit that she did not have enough time to let the students fully engage in thinking critically.

Table 2 Language Teacher's Responsibilities

W1	I believe that students should take responsibilities for their own learning. If they cannot do so, if they are not guided to do so, my duty is to show them how to take responsibilities for their own learning.
W2	My responsibility as an English language teacher is to teach my students the real purpose of learning this particular language.
W3	Apart from language, I am also concerned about their ideas, their lives... I think teachers have responsibilities to teach them social skills.
A1	Teachers should guide students the right way. This is the most important thing. Yes, language teachers too, of course.
A2	When teaching language, you can also teach them about life, about history, and how to be nice to the environment.
A3	If I teach a higher level, I do not focus too much on the language itself, but on how to use the language, the functions, how to express opinions. But for the beginner level, I just focus on the language. I think these are the basic responsibilities for language teachers.

The interview questions intended to explore the extent to which teachers were concerned with students' thought process and values when teaching English. Teachers were presented the following case:

*You assigned a piece of writing to your students and one of the students' wrote as follows: When traveling by ship, I (the student) met a hurricane at midnight. I discovered it coming first, but I decided not to tell the others, because if everyone*

*knew the fact, I would not be able to get the raft and escape from the danger.  
Finally, I got one of the rafts and ran away.  
How would you as a language teacher evaluate or give feedback?*

Participants gave various responses but the answers had one thing in common (Table 3). Although all the teachers showed concerns, they felt that it was not their responsibility to judge the student's thoughts as right or wrong. W3 was the only one who expressed her responsibilities as a Christian, not as a teacher, to 'impart good moral values'. Interestingly, all three Asian teachers mentioned that teaching the common good was the responsibility of parents not language teachers'.

Table 3 Thought Processes and Moral Outcomes

W1	What I can do is to open a discussion about this, to discuss this issue and probably this student would realize other responsibilities... but not teaching them like this is right, this is wrong...but probably I will ask a question such as 'do you think this is quite right to do this'? Just a question!...I am not a judge, it is not my right at all!
W2	It depends...what your focus is. Sometimes it is grammar, sometimes it is fluency, sometimes it is critical thinking...depending on the teaching objectives, my answer will be different.
W3	I will ask my student whether this is for real or fiction. If it is for real, I probably would guide him to a better way of doing things. I am a Christian, if I can impart good moral values, I will do that.
A1	I just feel sorry... I have never met such students... If I have to give comments, then I will make sure it won't upset the student... but I don't think teachers should take responsibilities for how they think and make a decision, it is their parents' job.
A2	I am a language teacher; I am not teaching them to be a good person... But if you have time, if you want to, you can talk to them about it.
A3	If I tell the student that the idea is selfish, it seems that I am telling them too much. It is actually not my role; it is their parents' role... unless they are open to us. I don't think they will change their mind anyway even though I tell them.

The participants were also asked whether students' thought process could be one of the criteria of assessment. All the teachers had very definite responses against the idea as indicated in Table 4. Although all these teachers proposed that they would help to raise students' awareness of the quality of their thought process and outcomes leading to moral value and the common good, they clearly believed that these factors should not be regarded as one of the criteria of grading. This finding was consistent with the results from the analysis of the questionnaire data. For the teachers, the most important criteria for grading were 'language proficiency', the relevance of the answer to the question, and the evidence of supporting ideas to develop one's argument. The teachers did not show much concern about evaluating or responding to the outcomes of students' rational development or value systems. One of the reasons, according to the participants, was that it was not language teachers' job to evaluate students' value systems and how they practice the common good. Some teachers also believe that everyone has his or her own right to come out

with different opinions, whether it was wrong or right; hence they felt that language teachers had no right or responsibilities to interfere with students' individual or private thoughts or value.

Table 4 Evaluating Thought Processes and Outcomes

1	When it comes to evaluating students' performance... I always look at how much they improved in practicing the language. So, it's not so much about their thought process.
2	Is it even valid to evaluate someone's 'thought process' in teaching English language? If I have to evaluate students on their thoughts it will not be on their ideas, but the support for their ideas.
3	I focus on format, content, and grammar... For content, they have to answer the question, and ...how well they express themselves... not so much on how they think.
1	I don't think so... it cannot be evaluated. Some students may not have good ethics, but this has nothing to do with language teaching and learning.
2	If his ideas are selfish, but his language is easy to read, and answer the question, then he can get a good grade, even he writes something that goes against the good.
3	I don't think students' way of thinking will affect my grading. We all have our objectives as language teachers and we need to stick to it to get the curriculum going.

The second part of the questionnaire as well as the class observations were used to explore teachers' practice in classroom. The questions focused on five major activities: critical thinking, group work, problem-solving activities, teachers' response to students' different views, and evaluation of students' performance. Based on these factors, the questionnaire intended to understand if these were geared towards improving language proficiency (LP) or thinking proficiency (TP).

Table 5 Teachers' Practice in ELT based on the Questionnaire

Questions	Mean (0-4)
Teachers' encouragement concerning different views (LP)	3.57
Critical thinking (LP)	3.33
Problem-solving (LP)	3.30
Group work (LP)	3.23
Evaluation and exam (LP)	3.17
Teachers' encouragement concerning different views (TP)	3.20
Critical thinking (TP)	3.17
Problem-solving (TP)	3.00
Group work (TP)	2.83
Evaluation and exam (TP)	2.83
Average frequency score for all LP items	3.24
Average frequency score for all TP items	3.03



Table 5 shows that teachers' practice in ELT classroom was more LP- oriented (3.24) than TP-oriented (3.03). By comparing the frequency of the LP and TP version of each activity, it is interesting to note that teachers rated the LP version of 'critical thinking', 'group work', and 'problem solving activities' as higher than all the T P counterparts. In other words, these activities implemented in the class focused more on the improvement of 'language proficiency' according to the teachers' teaching practice which were in line with the findings from the interviews though it can be seen that they did somehow guide students to 'think'.

#### Teachers' practices in ELT based on classroom observations

As shown in interview data, W1 believed that students should be responsible for their own learning (Table 2). What she did in the classroom indeed matched her belief. W1 tried effectively to guide students to think and analyze the plot of the narrative text prescribed for the course instead of telling the students directly what the story was about. W1 also gave students positive comments as much as possible. This seemed to motivate students to take part actively in the class and to form personal and individual opinions freely. Although the teacher encouraged students to think freely, all the activities were restricted to the text itself and not to the students' actual life experiences. Also, the teacher did not advise or give the students any feedback beyond the linguistic aspects. The teacher encouraged students to think in order to comprehend the plot, characters, and the story, but not necessarily to help them work towards the common good, the lesson, that the story attempted to tell. It was interesting to note that at one point during the lecture, W1 talked about 'white lies' and being honest but she did not examine the importance of being honest. This suggests that W1's intention in talking about 'white lies' was just to explain its meaning and to make sure that students understand it, but not to explain the importance of honesty. In other words, W1's lecture was focused on 'language proficiency'.

W2 paid attention to students' communicative ability. For example, he tried to teach students to comprehend the importance of 'audience' and 'purpose' in speaking and in writing. Apart from the role-play activities related to the novel assigned to the students, W2 also used activities that were very close to students' real life (e.g. job interviews). Students were paired to practice their communicative skills using the target language. In one episode of the lesson observed, W2 offered some examples related to the words "ring" and "a pregnant bride"; he expressed his own opinions concerning these two concepts. For instance, talking about the ring, the teacher said that the ring was a circle, which represented the perception of marriage; also, he went on to explain that usually engagement rings were made of gold, which symbolized the solidity of marriage. For the pregnant bride, the teacher said that people had different attitudes in different places. Students showed great interest in W2's opinion and personal experiences. There was also a similar episode in which W2 drew students' attention by telling a story in a different cultural setting when discussing the novel assigned. Again, this captured the students' attention. Though W2 clearly stated during the interview that he did not evaluate students thought process and mainly focused on improving students' English language skills, he unconsciously guided students to think about the moral and ethics of different cultures by sharing interesting stories.

Like W1, A1 often gave positive comments (e.g. "it is good that you can come out with your own opinions") to encourage students' personal and individual thinking. Even when the students did not give satisfactory or correct answers, the teacher encouraged students to express their own views. The noticeable difference between A1 and W1 was that A1 tended to present every answer to students whereas W1 just guided students to think within the given text.

A1 also tried to give more chances to students and make her class more student-centered; A1 stated during the interview that her role was to teach the language and guide students the ‘right way’, she placed emphasis on students’ “ideas” when teaching. However, these “ideas” again were based on the textbook stories and activities not so much focused on achieving the common good based on moral thoughts.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This study revealed that the English language teachers do have a positive perception of the significance and value of cultivating students to achieve the common good in order to help them grow as virtuous citizens. However, they also argue that language classes have different foci and objectives. Therefore, it was not their responsibility or their right to evaluate students’ thought process and values. They believed that these should be educated by parents and educators who taught ethics or other relevant subjects.

Without strong beliefs towards the significance and value of incorporating the common good into language teaching, it will be a challenging mission for educators to cultivate moral citizens since language plays much more roles than serving as a communication tool. As Sternberg (2004) notes, wisdom, not knowledge, is a factor that unites people and lead them to practice the common good. In order to motivate students, English language teachers tend to encourage individual thinking and divergent thinking, but they tend not to advance the thinking skills to the next level where students learn and practice how to unite their thoughts and utilize it towards the common good. Stanovich (2001) states that students know how to think however the problem is that they are not sure if they are actually thinking critically and/or effectively which is seen commonly in language classes. The above mentioned authors argue that teachers are responsible for cultivating students’ mind so that they can strive to contribute to the society. It is not only the subject knowledge that teachers should pass on to students, but implement methods to bring out the good from students’ thinking and behaviors. Teachers should bear in mind that what they know, believe, and value play substantial role in shaping the classroom and how students learn and reflect (Borg, 2005).

Based upon the findings from this study, it is strongly recommended that language teachers should raise awareness of the holistic aspect of education by valuing language’s social role in ELT for bringing out the betterment of students. Language teaching is part of the education and as language is a crucial part of everyday life which is a social product of human relation, teachers have responsibilities to guide learners to “use their language for good” (Sternberg, 2001, p. 227). It is therefore necessary that teachers initially realize the educational value of language teaching. As Cook (1983, p. 230) contends, “language teaching encourages the development of students’ personalities and potentials” which in turn, enriches society. Providing education to learners does not mean just teaching them knowledge, it means guiding and nurturing them towards wisdom and compassion. This educational practice motivates students to create meaning in leading a good life by practicing lifelong learning (Miller, 2005).

Further research investigating ways of developing and implementing the features of the ‘common good’ proposed in the study may help educators in terms of practice. Also, exploring types of activities that can be conducted in ELT to promote students’ ability to use language wisely and efficiently to achieve the common good can enrich the current literature.

Cunningham (2017) points out that learning should be assimilated with well thought-out direction derived from the teacher so that the learners can truly understand the value of their learning activities; lesson that place significance to the common good and add value to society.

All in all, language education should not only provide students with linguistic competencies; it also should guide and enable learners and educators to realize how to wisely sustain their knowledge and use it as a responsible member of society. Language teachers need to reflect back and apprehend that they play crucial roles in not only transmitting language knowledge, but also in guiding students to cultivate selves as wise beings by shaping their minds and thoughts in a positive and balanced way.

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The authors state that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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