Applied Linguistics Research Concerns at King Khalid University: A Review Study

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Abstract

This review study is intended to examine the Applied Linguistics research outputof the faculty members at King Khalid University during the last four years (2011 through 2014). Thirty studies were reviewed and found to fall into seven research areas, namely Technology and language learning, Non-linguistic factors influencing EFL learning, ELT methodology, Vocabulary acquisition, Language learning strategies, Language and culture, and Error analysis. The findings revealed more focus by researchers on technology and language learning issues and comparatively little focus on other important aspects of EFL teaching and learning such as testing, learners' difficulties in speaking, listening, reading and writing, material selection and suitability, translation difficulties, etc. The study has also suggested a model for the utilization of research findings in informing professional practice of EFLteaching. Research gap that requires more attention has also been identified with a view to setting a research agenda that is likely to assist KKUto assume a research producer position rather than a mere research consumer in the field of foreign language pedagogy and instruction.

Keywords: Review Articles, Technology and Language Learning, Non-linguistic Factors, Implementation Model, Research Gap

1.Introduction

Review studies aim at organizing literature, evaluating literature, identifying patterns and trends in literature, synthesizing literature and identifying research gaps and recommending new research areas. Moreover, review articles can play a vital role in the evaluation of institutional research outputs measuring both quantity and quality. Price (1965) suggested, after publishing thirty or forty research articles in any field there is a need for a review.

The present study attempts to focus on Applied Linguistics research performance by the College of Languages and Translation faculty members at King Khalid University (hence forth KKU), Saudi Arabia during the last four years (2011 through 2014) with special focus on the type of research with practical recommendations that can lead to better English teaching and learning. The focus on this particular aspect of research is an attempt to bridge the existing gap between knowledge and practice, research findings and implementation. It is a step towards achieving the college vision, mission and goals which were approved and announced three years back. According to the college website (http://flt.kku.edu.sa/en/content/11) the college vision stated that "The Faculty of Languages and Translation aspires to a pioneering role in promoting excellence in the fields of knowledge and *research* …". The college mission statement is "to provide the community with well-qualified specialists in the fields of languages, translation and *research*….". Goal 3 of the college is " to promote *research* in languages and translation." The College Research Center's vision is "attaining *excellence* across the Arab World in scientific research in the field of linguistic studies". Althoughthe Language Sudies Research Center's goals are 15 in number (http://flt.kku.edu.sa/en/content/124) , none of them is devoted to bridging the gap between research production and practical utilization of applied research.

Since 2011 there has been dramatic increase of research output at KKU in general and the College of Languages and Translation in particular. The main reason behind this research production progress is most probably the research funding schemes recently adopted by the university. In a research by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2012) in a leading Saudi university, it was found that university teachers' "assessments of their institutional research culture signaled a perceived gap between the research productivity expected of them and the support they received from their university". It is obvious that KKU has decided to bridge this gap.

In 2011 and 2012, the university approved a budget of nearly USD 230,000 for funding the research projects submitted by the College of Languages and Translation faculty members. Moreover, the university has been generous in funding faculty members attending national and international conferences and presenting research. One of the goals of the present study is to propose a model for closing the gap between research findings and practice with a view to ensuring the cost-effectiveness of the university efforts.

It has been noted by Franceschini and Maisano (2010) that "Evaluating the scientific production of research groups, departments and even universities and research organizations, is not a new issue. For many years, different rankings have been periodically published by many institutions." King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST, 2013) published the third "bibliometric report analyzing the developing publication output of selected research institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the last decade broken down by broad subject areas). In this report, none of KKU publications within Arts and Humanities subjects is published in journals abstracted in Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge for a full decade (2003-2012). It is significant, however, to note that critics of ISI (The Institute for Scientific Information) argue that it is biased towards publications in the English language and cannot distinguish between positive and negative citations. Therefore, we cannot deny the fact that considerable research has been published during this period in Arts and Humanities including Applied Linguistics research which is documented outside Thomson Reuters' Web of Knowledge. The present research is a contribution to highlighting some of these research efforts published recently. It reviews the literature of the Applied Linguistics research in terms of coverage and scope and then suggests a model for bridging the gap between findings and implementation. It also attempts to highlight the areas of research considered vital to successful language teaching and learning in an EFL context like the one of Saudi Arabia but not included in the surveyed literature.

2. Research Questions

This review article attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the scope and coverage of Applied Linguistics research output by KKU College of Languages and Translation faculty in the last four years?
2. What is the potential of getting the findings of these research efforts into practice?
3. What significant areas of research are not given due attention?

3. Research Data

The corpus used for this study comprises thirty articles in the field of Applied Linguistics published by KKU faculty members of Languages and Translation College in national and international journals from 2011 through 2014. Publications during this period are more than thirty which cover Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Literature, Sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Yet, the present research adopted the subject-oriented and method-oriented approaches (mixed-mode review). Therefore, the sampling is confined to Applied Linguistics publications with special reference to quasi-experimental studies. The researcher used Google search engine, Google Scholar, and the Saudi Digital Library (SDL) to download the articles under investigation. Most of these articles are published in open access journals.

4. Analysis

A general definition of a review study is that it is a critical, constructive analysis of the literature in a specific field through summary, classification, analysis, and comparison. The audience of review articles is normally experts in specific research areas and sometimes decision-makers. This section will classify the compiled literature into areas to identify what it covers. It will also suggest a model for putting the findings reached in these studies into practice. Finally, this section will try to identify the important areas which have not been carefully investigated by KKU Languages and Translation researchers and which can contribute to tackling difficulties EFL learners' and teachers usually encounter and which hamper their progress.

4.1 Data Classification

The compiled literature on Applied Linguistics research of KKU Languages and Translation faculty members during the last four years was classified into seven areas, namely Technology and Language Learning (50%), Non-linguistic Factors Influencing Language Learning (23.3%), English Language Teaching (13.3%), Second LanguageVocabulary Acquisition (3.3%), Language Learning Strategies (3.3%), Error Analysis (3.3%), EFL Learning and Culture (3.3%).

4.1.1 Technology and Language Learning

E-learning at KKU was introduced in 2008 in its supportive and blended modes. Blackboard has been the learning management system used since then. This new development urged some researchers to measure the effect of this intervention on English language teaching and Learning and the perceptions of both students and instructors regarding this new experiment. The literature under investigation shows that this kind of research represents the lion's share of KKU languages and Translation research output compared to other areas. Out of the thirty articles reviewed in this study, 15 (50%) belong to the category of "Technology and Language Learning". Eleven of the fifteen studies are quasi-experimental and deal with the effect of various technological interventions on the development of certain aspects of language learning among EFL students, three are attitudinal, and the last one by Nurul Islam (2011) is very general, deals with technology and EFL learners' autonomy. It is theoretically broad and not based on any data from the field. The eleven quasi-experimental studies are the most interesting ones since they bear testimony to the positive effectiveness of technological intervention on language development and learners' attitude. Zaid's study (2011) discovered that KKU EFL students were found to write longer and richer drafts in the conditions of online concept-mapping and online reading before writing, yet poorer, shorter drafts after teacher-led talk in the traditional, no treatment group. Technological intervention had significant effects on improving the students' writing quality; however they increased the students' writing apprehension.

In another study by Faqeeh (2011) where weblogs were used to teach Writing IV course to an experimental group of students the author found that students have had positive attitudes towards Weblog use. These findings suggest that Weblogs canprovide learning motivation and opportunities for authorshipand readership, as well as the development of writing skills in college writing syllabi. In other words, the study indicated that the students perceived Weblog as a tool for the development of their English, in terms of their writing proficiency and attitudes towards writing. The effect of online teaching of reading and writing skills by integration was explored in two studies in the surveyed literature:Zaid (2011) and Almelhi (2014). Zaid (ibid) argues that "the model is effective in ameliorating reading and writing of college students, especially when integrated with collaborative learning." It also improved students' attitudes towards English. Almelhi's study (ibid) "showed significant improvements on post-testing on the argumentative reading/writing tests compared to pretesting and control group to the good of the experimental group." He also emphasized the ambition that "Teachers should develop language skill courses in a fashion that gears integration of both reading and writing "integrated pedagogy approach. Teachers should be trained in this approach." The courses taught by this approach to the experimental group were Well Read and Effective Academic Writing (Writing 3 and Reading 3). The influence of Youtube mash-ups via Blackboard LMS on listening skills of KKU EFL learners was investigated in a study by Almelhi (2013). The results indicated that Youtube mash-ups were effective in enhancing the participants' performance on listening and viewing comprehension as well as on their attitudes towards e-learning. Technology and vocabulary development were tackled in Faqeeh (2014) and Almelhi (forthcoming). Faqeeh (2014) studied the effects of using the online dictionary for etymological analysis on vocabulary development in EFL college students and found that "The study bore out findings in favor of the new technique of vocabulary learning, i.e., etymological analysis powered by the online dictionary in improving vocabulary learning and inducing to positive attitudes towards vocabulary instruction." Almelhi's findings (2014) show that the instructional method that integrates e-glosses in computer-based instruction effected significant improvement in experimental participants' reading comprehension.

Mekheimer (2012) tried to assess aptitude and attitude development in a translation skills course by comparing two groups of students, one in a traditional face-to-face setting (control) and the other (experimental) in an online course taught via Blackboard which incorporated an online dictionary. These groups were compared in terms of their translation skills as well as their attitudes toward the course. The study revealed an improvement in translation skills and indicated increased positive attitudes towards translation in the e-learning environments of Blackboard. Content courses in advanced levels were also studied in terms of the effect of teaching them via Blackboard. The surveyed literature in this study cites two examples of advanced courses: Applied Linguistics II (Aldosari, 2013) and Modern Literary Movements (Hamdy, et al., 2014).

Aldosari (2013) observed that there existed statistically significant differences between the research groups which mean the experimental group applying wikis performed better in the designated course (Applied Linguistics 2) than the control group. He also argued that Wikis can encourage students to practice their skills in real world applications and therefore, they should be integrated in the language curriculum to encourage students to read with a purpose and evaluate texts. They expose students to a variety of readings and writings. Hamdy et al. (2014) stated that the "findings of [their] study showed the effectiveness of the Modern Literary Movements course delivered online. The course could prove effective in enhancing the participants' performance on pretesting compared to post-testing results." Two studies in the literature attempted to explore the perceptions of both faculty members and students' perceptions of e-learning in the English department, namely Aldosari (2011) and Al-Maqtri (2014). The results of both studies show similarity in the general attitude of instructors who consider e-learning through Blackboard effective. Students, on the other hand, liked the experience but also expressed their worry towards the use of e-learning due to certain difficulties they face while using technology. The findings of these studies agree with Al Zumor et al. (2013) with regard to male students' perceptions and attitudes. The tone of Al-Maqtri's research (2014) sounds very pessimistic about the introduction of Blackboard in Saudi higher education. He argues that "E-learning is found not to make the English learning any better." Such views contradictory with the above review should be seriously considered by decision-makers at KKU. Aldosari and Mekheimer (2013) emphasized the significance of taking need, technology acceptance, ease of use and usefulness of e-learning into consideration rather than being swept by the bandwagon effect of current practices in EFL computer-mediated environments worldwide.

4.1.2 Non-linguistic Factors Influencing EFL Learning

This theme represents 23.3% of the whole surveyed data. KKU EFL learners' motivation, attitude, personality and anxiety were investigated in seven publications since 2011. Al Rabai (2011) attempted to answer a question whether EFL instructors at KKU motivate their students to learn English as a foreign language. The findings he obtained state that "Participating instructors usually pay attention to utilizing *some* motivational techniques in their EFL classes like demonstrating proper teacher behavior and promoting learners' self-confidence. Findings, on the other hand, show that teachers pay little or even no attention to using other techniques like enhancing learners' autonomy." According to Almelhi (2011) motivation is said to exercise a strong influence on foreign language learning in a reading comprehension course. In a similar study, Aldosari (2014) female students are better language learners being more motivated than men are, and having more positive attitudes towards language learning than males. Mahdi (2014) investigated the influence of personality traits on the EFL students' willingness to communicate (WTC). The results of his research indicate that KKU students prefer to communicate more in interpersonal conversations and group discussions than in other contexts such as public speaking and meeting situations. The students also showed greater WTC with friends than with strangers or acquaintances. He also recommended that students' fear of public speaking and group discussions should be tackled by teachers.

Saudis' attitude towards English which might influence English language education was discussed by Faruk (2014). He emphasized the role of economy and English language policy in shaping Saudi peoples' attitude towards English. His research concludes that If the current economic trend remains and if Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP) continue to exert their influence on Saudi citizens and the English language teaching, the increasingly positive attitude towards English will prevail in Saudi Arabia.

From a different perspective, KKU EFL students' attitude towards varieties of spoken English in a multilingual environment was investigated (Aldosari, 2011). The study findings showed that EFL listeners' perceptions are influenced by the speaker's accent. They perceive Standard South African English and Standard Indian English speakers in different manner. He argued that "The Standard Indian English speaker is more highly rated on measures of perceived accent,comprehensibility and education."

Anxiety as an important non-linguistic factor in foreign language learning by KKU students was studied by Alrabai(2014). The quasi-experimental study focused on the influence of teachers' anxiety-reducing strategies on learners' foreign language anxiety. In this research, anxiety-reducing strategies were implemented exclusively in the treatment group for approximately eight weeks. It was noticed that the intervention led to significantly decreased levels of FL anxiety for learners in the experimental group compared with increased levels of anxiety for those in the control group.

4.1.3 English Language Teaching Methodology

The four studies classified under this area deal with listening skills, speaking skills, the role of using translation in foreign language learning and teaching, and skills integration methodology.

Kana'an et. Al (2014) investigated how and to what extent the expansion of vision span could be a decisive factor in enhancing the reading speed of EFL major students in the English Department at KKU. Using a quasi-experimental design research, the study concludes that the experimental group increasedits reading speed as a result of training in expansion of the vision span using reading speed drills while the control group shows no increase in reading speed.

Hamad (2014) examined the factors that negatively affect speaking skills at Saudi girls' colleges in the southern region. Her study's main observations and recommendations state that using Arabic in class negatively affects students' proficiency, students fearspeaking English language in public, curriculum of listening and speaking does not contain enough exercises for speaking skills, instructors do not use strategies that develop students' speaking skills, more time is devoted to listening skills than to speaking skills. Contrary to the strong statement made by Hamad (2014) regarding the negative effect of using Arabic on students' proficiency, Al Refai (2013) suggested guidelines for using translation in foreign language learning and teaching. He also argued that translation "develops both language awareness and use. It answers student needs in the contemporary globalized and multicultural world. Monolingual language teaching is commercial and political, supported by only selective evidence and shaky reasoning and disregards learner and teacher needs."

The last study found under this theme evaluates an integrated EFL teaching methodology at KKU (Mekheimer and Aldosari, 2013). Following a quasi-experimental study in which Open Forum 3, Well Read 3 and Effective Academic Writing 2 were taught integratively to an experimental group of students, the findings revealed that the Integrated Skills Treatment had a significant effect on student performance in all skills. Participants in the experimental group achieved improvements in their scores compared with their peers in the control group. Such findings are extremely important for decision-makers if they plan to make changes in the English program study plan.

4.1.4 Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition

In the section of Technology and Language Learning it was mentioned that one study in the literature examined the effects of using the online dictionary for etymological analysis on EFL college students' vocabulary development. The other study reviewed here is related to EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition in translational writing (Faqeeh and Mekheimer,2011). It investigated the comparative effects of using only monolingual dictionaries as opposed to using bilingualized dictionaries during vocabulary acquisition in a Translation course. The findings showed that "bilingualized dictionaries are more effective than monolingual dictionaries. Translation teachers should advise students to use bilingualized dictionaries in translation classes."

4.1.5 Language Learning Strategies (LLSs)

Although exploring LLSs in any EFL context is very essential and can provide insights to learners' success, only one relevant study was found in the current literature. This study by Alrefaai et al.(2013) is devoted to general study habits of EFL students at KKU. The study attempted to correlate these habits with students' GPA, gender and some social factors. The findings of this research indicated that "the majority of students study in a haphazard, disorganized way, and they just cram before exams." The study also proved that "there is a highly significant correlation between society and peers encouragement and certain study habits, such as punctuality and participation, effort and preparation for exams. Students need guidance and counseling."

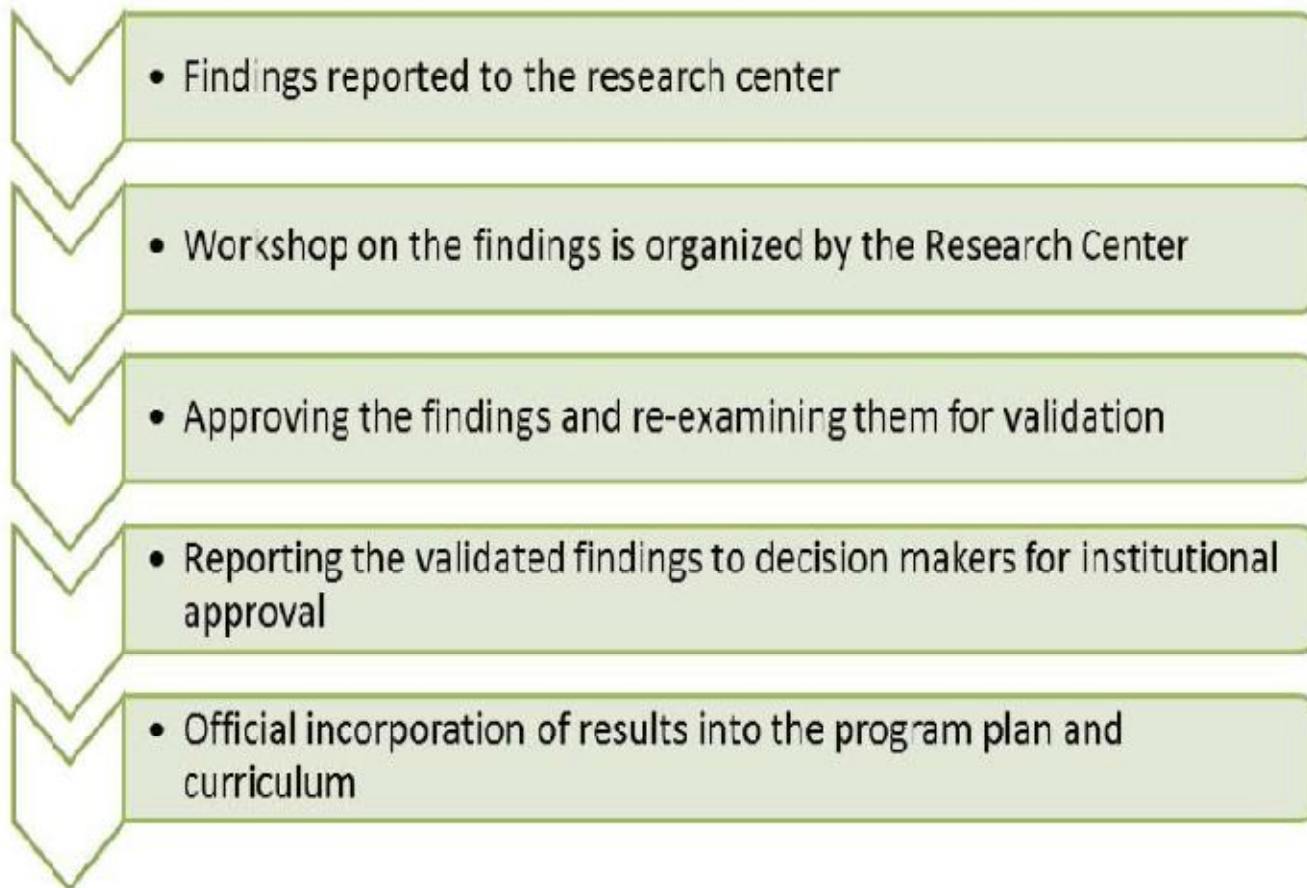**4.1.6 Foreign Language Learning and Culture**

EFL learners' knowledge of a foreign language and knowledge of the culture from which that culture originated usually emerges as an important topic for discussion in the field of foreign language teaching. Such a topic is necessary to be investigated in the Arab World where English which is originally associated with the western culture is taught to students of a totally different culture. Faqeeh (2011) was a contribution to answering the question of how to enhance cross-cultural awareness in EFL college students. The study argued that "comparative perspective for teaching English as a foreign culture has become important as a pedagogical means of raising motivation for learning the culture of English." This discussion paper "introduced cultural awareness as a significant step towards activating a sound theory of English teaching and learning pedagogy."

4.1.7 Error Analysis

The only study found in the articles published since 2011 was an analysis of KKU EFL students' phonetic, morphological, and syntactic errors in English (Al-Badawi, 2012). Examples of phonetic, morphological and syntactic errors were presented, yet without detailed explanation of the causes behind these deviations and without remedial suggestions.

5. *Research from theory to Practice*

Many of the above surveyed studies have practical implications with the potential for improving various aspects of EFL teaching and learning situation at KKU. As an attempt to answer the second research question, this section aims at examining the feasibility of putting these findings into practice.A model for achieving this objective is proposedbelow.

- Findings reported to the research center
- Workshop on the findings is organized by the Research Center
- Approving the findings and re-examining them for validation
- Reporting the validated findings to decision makers for institutional approval
- Official incorporation of results into the program plan and curriculum

The proposed model applies to any kind of experimental, quasi-experimental or action research in foreign language teaching and learning. The benefits likely to be gained by following this model are numerous, the most salient of which is bridging the existing gap between theory and practice, research findings and implementation. Moreover, the processes of language teaching and learning will improve and the different types of linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties encountered by EFL learners will be systematically tackled. In addition, this model can contribute to the achievement of thevisions, missions, and goals of the language institutions where excellence in research is at the center of their strategic planning. Furthermore, the immediate community, i.e., the university will be served by this kind of practice which will be reflected in the whole community service; a mission which all higher education institutions are nowadays competing to achieve if they aspire for academic accreditation.

6. *Research Gap*

The last question of this research paper is whether there are any neglected research areas which require attention by researchers due to their potential to help in identifying, investigating and solving problems of English language teaching and learning in our context. The surveyed literature can give a clue with this regard.

The more attention and care given to technology and language learning indicates that a state of unbalanced research practice is prevailing. Withthis research status quo we can say there is a jump on the bandwagon.

There are many more important research aspects that require attention of researchers at our EFL context. For instance, scanty research output in female colleges is alarming. Although one of the reviewed studies above hinted at the better achievement of girls in English program compared to boys, the interpretation of this phenomenon requires deeper research, taking into consideration the huge number of female students at KKU. Alrefaai et al. (2013) is a remarkable contribution in this direction.

In spite of the fact that Testing and assessment are used to measure language aptitude, proficiency, placement, progress, achievement, and can provide significant feedback for program evaluators, this area has received the least or no attention by researchers at all. The current testing practices need evaluation. Detailed studies on testing are necessary to assess our current measures and whether any criteria for setting assessment tools are followed. The investigation of alignment between testing and intended learningoutcomes at both module and program levels is an urgent need.

Research that evaluates the current textbooks used in skill courses and content courses is vital. The criteria of textbooks selection should be assessed based on the best practices of material selection in similar programs worldwide. Needs analysis research in this concern should be the foundation for material selection.

Finally, the difficulties our students encounter at the English language skills level should be given a priority in our research agenda. Research that identifies, investigates and provides solutions to problems in writing, speaking, reading, listening, grammar, vocabulary acquisition and use, literary appreciation and translation should be at the top of our research priorities. It is only research whichcan pinpoint the sources behind these problems be it the teaching methods and techniques, the textbooks, the instructors,the students or all of these factors. Findings of this type of research will provide a reliable guide for the improvement of EFL teaching and learning.

7. Conclusion

The three questions discussed in this study have practical implications with great potential for positive impact on English language teaching and learning development at KKU and Saudi universities in general. The research coverage and scope revealed that technology and language learning issues have attracted much of researchers' attention. Although this is an important concern, it should not divert researchers' attention from other vital research issues such as language skills enhancement techniques, assessment of learners' language proficiency and performance, literature appreciation and translation skills. Language and translation college authorities including the Language Studies Research Center can benefit from this review study by setting a research agenda based on needs analysis and priorities. This research agenda should be the guide for any future involvement in funded research.

The suggested model in this study for the practical utilization of research output can contribute significantly to bridging the existing gap between research and application, between researchers and the field. It is likely to help our institution move ahead towards becoming a producer of knowledge rather than a mere knowledge consumer.

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