

## Using Genre Awareness to Enhance Business Email Correspondence among EFL Students: Making Complaints

Supaporn Kawinvasin, Passamon Lertchalermtipakoon

ivykawin@hotmail.com, passamon999@gmail.com

Suppachart Pochote, Veeratip Chinorak

scootman\_oh@hotmail.com, veeratipchi@gmail.com

Faculty of Liberal Arts, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University, Samutprakarn, Thailand

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### Abstract

Global business communication relies on correspondence with English and other major languages through electronic means leading blooming of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching for English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This research is aimed to study whether moves and steps in making complaints improve students' business correspondence writing skills. In this study, the data was gathered from a class of business writing students by assigning three complaint email writing tasks that the students wrote independently: (1) a task assigning before a session of teaching, (2) a task assigning after intervening genre-based approach with examples of moves and steps, and (3) a task assigning one week after teaching to examine knowledge they acquired. The findings revealed that the students acquire more competency and accuracy in writing process, grammar and language structures, writing complaint email, and recognizing the language formality through the implementation of moves and steps teaching. Thus, understanding moves and steps is highly served as crucial pedagogical instruments helping students to perceive and acquire proper writing styles.

**Keywords:** Business Correspondence; Email Writing; Foreign Language Writing; Genre Awareness; Moves and Steps

### Introduction

A number of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Thailand are seemingly facing with a lot of difficulties when writing business English correspondence which is presumably uneasy for them to express appropriately contextual structure which would be suitable for those situations. Perhaps the students themselves are not used to applying English formally and methodically. The initial aid which would assist EFL learners to acquire the conceptual linguistic genres and

communicative purposes Swales (as cited in Hyland, 2004, pp. 195-196) has posited is to understand moves and steps. Thus, Bhatia (as cited in Hyland, 2004, p. 196) seemed to support this idea that explicit pedagogy with basic steps of genre analysis by teachers would serve as useful guidelines for students to facilitate themselves to be aware the significant ideas and purposes of their assigned tasks. It would also help them to convey the messages that they wish to communicate in order to complete those tasks effectively. To examine these ideas, the researchers created a framework which provided basic guidelines of moves and steps in writing business correspondence tasks for students. According to the previous research related to arranging meeting email and replying to meeting arrangement email, Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2018) concluded that explicit teaching of moves and steps with providing various examples of formally appropriate expressions in writing business correspondence highly enhanced students' understanding and genre awareness. The teaching also assisted on developing their systematical thinking in planning their outline, organizing their paragraphs, and improving their ability to write more proper emails which contained more acceptable business context.

In spite of the previous study, Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2018), showed that this method of study would have significant effectiveness for EFL learners, extended study on different business corresponding topics and more numbers of samples is likely needed to solidify this concept. To explore and support the effectiveness of framework in Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2018), the researchers as writing business correspondence teachers have found that students seem to have frequent difficulties in writing several tasks besides making arrangement email; that is writing a complaint email. Thus, the researchers agreed to use this topic in order to study the reliability of the framework, in according with commercial textbooks which are significantly powerful tools for moves and steps.

Accordingly, this study is aimed to further prove that the explicit teaching of moves and steps would be presumably capable to uplift EFL learners' ability to write business correspondence by adapting other tasks of business writing: making a complaint email and requesting compensations. Additionally, the researchers expect that the learners would be able to apply the understanding these moves and steps to be the instrument in helping them to fulfill the task assigned in complaining regarding ordering issues and requesting compensations. To shed light on, Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2018), this paper is aimed at answering two research questions: (1) Has

the explicit teaching of moves and steps in making complaints improved students' business correspondence writing skills? and (2) If yes, in what way has the explicit teaching of moves and steps developed the students' business correspondence writing skills?

### Research Questions

1. Has the explicit teaching of moves and steps in making complaints improved students' business correspondence writing skills?
2. If yes, in what way has the explicit teaching of moves and steps developed the students' business correspondence writing skills?

### Literature Review

Bhatia asserted that realizing moves is the core factor for enhancing students to understand rationale structures in English for specific purposes (ESP) classrooms and in others writing purposes (Bhatia, 1993, p.32). Applying the genre awareness-based activities in EFL explicit teaching could highly potentially enhance EFL learners writing skills and uplift their understandings in proper uses of their non-native languages. Zand-Vakili (2012) studied the contrastive move analysis by comprising Swales' theoretical framework and explicit systematic pedagogy. The study emphasized that a genre comprises a class of "communicative events" that could be divided by their "communicative purposes". The purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale defines the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. Variety of "structure, style, content, and intended audience" of specific writings is also one of elements classified by discourse analysis (Swales, 1990). Thus, the way to develop professional writing patterns can possibly be derived from understanding these discourse analysis factors through examples.

Genre-based approaches and uses of moves and steps were applied and adapted in various fields of studies as significantly effective tools for numerous researchers in Thailand to implement in their studies, examine their concepts, and enhance the performance in language teaching and acquisition of their samples and other EFL learners. Lieungnapar and Todd (2011) stated that genre analysis was commonly used as the approach to analyze discourse, specifically the studies were particularly focused on moves. Promsin (2006) studied the pattern of English engineering abstracts

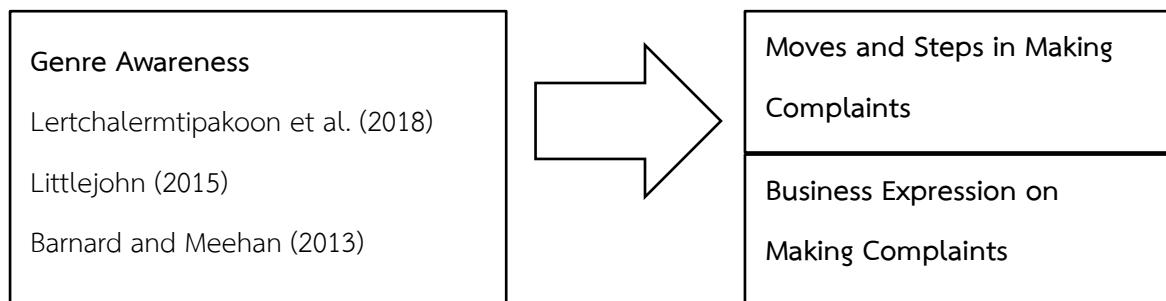
written by both Thai and international students and their components and the compatibility with pattern of introduction moves or known as Creating a Research Space (CARS) models of Swales (1990) and the abstract moves structure of Bhatia (1993). Pasavoravate (2011) diagnosed by applying the concept to find out the differences in moves in organizing and writing of thesis and dissertation abstracts written by students in Thailand and students in England which illustrated the two of discourse differences in writing between two communities. Amnuai and Wannaruk (2012) investigated the usefulness of the rhetorical move structure in article discussions relating to English applied linguistic research and found that providing and understanding this idea would be able to facilitate none-native EFL learners to understand the different publication contexts as well as being effective instructional strategies for Second Language (L2) teachers. Kanoksilapatham (2007) analyzed a corpus of biochemistry research articles by using Swales' genre analysis (2004) and discovered that providing guidelines for writing research articles would be beneficial for scientists in general to effectively disseminate scientific discoveries. Panseeta and Todd (2014) investigated the generic structure of five moves on how hotels replied to their guests' negative reviews in English.

Based on relevant research reviews, most studies in genre analysis and awareness focus on the explorations of moves and structures both in research abstracts and research articles. Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2018) investigated the moves and steps towards the student writing tasks on 'making an arrangement and replying to an arrangement for a meeting'. To deeply anatomize and support the effectiveness and reliability of explicit genre-based teaching, a framework of the previous research on genre awareness that both examines the moves and steps on 'making complaints' was employed in this research while the students were provided with investigating the effectiveness of the intervention at the same time.

### **Conceptual Framework**

To shed light on the objectives of the previous research and to solidify the result, the previous conceptual framework of Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2018) was combined with the concepts of Littlejohn (2015), and Barnard and Meehan (2013) as shown in Figure 1 Conceptual Framework below.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework



Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2018) revealed in the finding that the explicit teaching of moves and steps enhanced students' business correspondence writing skills. From the previous research studies, Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2018) examined the moves and steps in business correspondence writing: making arrangement and replying to the arrangement with 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year business administration students of Huachiew Chalermprakiet University. The researchers provided the concepts of moves and steps as writing features for students as well as providing examples of appropriated formal expressions, useful vocabulary and grammatical structure uses to fulfill the assigned business writing tasks. With these genre-based approaches, the researchers found that the students' post-test scores increased significantly. Hence, the researchers then adopted the previous framework to explore and illustrate the effectiveness of this genre-based approach in other business writing tasks.

### Research Methodology

The research tools were comprised of three achievement tests created from the processing of explicit teaching moves and steps and a questionnaire to study students' opinion levels towards moves and steps concepts both pre-test and post-tests.

### Data and Data Collection 1: Pre-test

The data is composed of an assigned task for 34 business major students. The task was to write a 'making complaint' email. The students were required to finish the task within 30 minutes that included 15 minutes for reading through the task and organizing their ideas and afterwards, completing the actual email within other 15 minutes. The outputs were gathered and there was a 15-minute break.

### Intervention

After a session of free writing, it was followed by an explicit teaching with generic structures

and examples of how to write a ‘making complaint’ email. After that the teachers taught the following ‘moves and steps’:

#### Moves and Steps of writing an email to complain

| Move   | Steps   | Details   |
|--------|---|---|
| Move 1 | Step 1<br>Email Heading   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students are able to fill in email heading (To, From, CC, Subject).</li> </ul>   |
|        | Step 2<br>Salutation  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students are able to recognize the way to open with the appropriate salutation relating with degree of formality. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dear Title and Family name,</li> <li>• Dear Sir / Madam / Sir or Madam,</li> <li>• Dear Company name / Position,</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   |
| Move 2 | Step 3<br>Opening statement:<br>Mentioning the topic concerning the problem and complaint | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students are able to mention the topic they want to discuss with the addressee by using the appropriate expressions in the first paragraph. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am writing in reference to (topic).</li> <li>- I am writing in reference to <u>order # 2020</u>.</li> <li>• I am writing about the problem with (topic).</li> <li>- I am writing about the problem with <u>the recent shipment</u>.</li> <li>• I am writing to complain about (topic).</li> <li>- I am writing to complain about <u>the delay in your delivery</u>.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Students learn the difference in tones of language in different expression uses.</p>              |
|        | Step 4<br>Stating the problem   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students are able to state their problem with addressee. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unfortunately, (problem)</li> <li>- Unfortunately, <u>the goods you sent were damaged</u> (problem).</li> <li>• I / We regret to say / inform / let you know that (problem).</li> <li>- We regret to inform you that <u>you have sent us the wrong order</u>.</li> <li>• I / We are sorry to say / inform / let you know that (problem).</li> <li>- We are sorry to let you know that <u>your services were unsatisfactory</u>.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Students learn to use past simple or present perfect tenses to address the problem that they have already experienced.</p> |

| Move   | Steps  | Details  |
|--------|--|--|
| Step 5 | Describing the details of the problem                        | <p>- Students are able to describe or explain the details based on their problems.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Damaged / Broken goods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The goods were scratched in several places.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Late shipment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The promised delivery date was March 15, but it arrived on April 1.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Wrong / Incorrect order <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I / We ordered model # 1024, but I / we received model # 1023.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Expressing unsatisfactory about services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There are cracks in the wall.</li> <li>- Your staff were impolite.</li> <li>- The steak was undercooked.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Students learn to use past simple or present perfect tenses to explain the details about the problems that they have already experienced.</p> |
| Step 6 | Giving evidence to support details of the problem (optional) | <p>- Students are able to give some evidences / other documents to support details of the problem and pinpoint that the problem happened due to the errors of suppliers or service providers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I / We enclose (evidence / document). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I enclose a copy of order # 2020 for your reference.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Please find enclosed (evidence / document). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Please find enclosed photographs.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● I / We are attaching (evidence / document). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We are attaching a photocopy of shipping order for your reference.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u>Remarks:</u><br/>This step was not included in data analysis part since it was optional.</p>  |
| Step 7 | Suggesting a solution  | <p>- Students are able to suggest an appropriate solution to the problems.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Please ... / Please could you ...? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Please send us the replacement as soon as possible.</li> <li>- Please could you ensure that future shipments arrive on time?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● I / We would be grateful if you could / would (action). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I would be grateful if you could send someone to inspect the building immediately.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   |

| Move      | Steps   | Details  |
|-----------|---|--|
|           | Step 8<br>Closing<br>statement:<br>Ending with<br>proper<br>expressions | <p>- Students are able to close the message by using the appropriate expressions in the last paragraph.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Thank you for ...<br/>- Thank you for your assistance in this matter.</li> <li>● I / We look forward to ...<br/>- We look forward to hearing from you.</li> </ul> |
| Move<br>3 | Step 9<br>Complimentary<br>close and<br>Signature                       | <p>- Students are able to recognize the way to end with the appropriate complimentary close and signature.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sincerely,<br/>Catherine Jones</li> <li>● Your sincerely,<br/>Catherine Jones</li> <li>● Best regards,<br/>Catherine Jones</li> </ul>                          |

In the explicit teaching session of the generic structure, the moves and steps as shown in the table above were partially adapted from the students' textbook, *Writing for the Real World* (Barnard & Meehan, 2013). The teaching session lasted for 1 hour, following by a 15-minute break.

#### Data and Data Collection 2: Post-test

There were 2 post-tests: Post-test A and Post-test B.

#### Post-test A

After the intervention, a similar task with another situation as a pre-test on 'making complaint' email was assigned on the same day to the students to write again within 30 minutes. The task was aimed to ensure that students were able to recall what they have been intervened.

#### Post-test B

Post-test B, the similar task as Post-test A with different background situations, was assigned after the intervention for one week to measure the achievement of learning through moves and steps concepts. The length of time that students used was the same as Post-test A.

### Data Analysis

After the three sessions, the collected data were analytically checked and graded by two teachers in the research team who are experienced in teaching business correspondence. To analyze the significant results of students' email writing skills before and after they have been taught, the t-test was statistically used for evaluating the results and successfulness of how to write business email through genre awareness approach, and showing commonly used examples of moves and steps from the textbook. The p-values of not more than 0.001 were used to evaluate how the results show significant difference of students' email writing skills in pre-tests and post-tests. The clear-cut comparison of the interpretations of t-score was likely indicated the crucial pedagogical results of the tests. In this study, Move 1 and Move 3 were not analyzed since they were parts of heading, salutation, complimentary close, and signature. The researchers aimed to spotlight on Move 2 that reflected the language focus of how to write a 'making complaint' email.

### Research Results and Discussion

The interpretations of t-score which were shown in the following tables are discussed to answer the two research questions below and reflect the results of the study.

1. *Has the explicit teaching of moves and steps in making complaints improved students' business correspondence writing skills?*

Students' business correspondence writing skills have been improved by implementing the explicit teaching of moves and steps as it was revealed in the finding.

The pre-test and post-test A scores in Move 2 of 'making complaint' emails were analyzed by using t-score and the findings are shown as the following tables.

**Table 1:** The comparison of Move 2 scores between the pre-test and post-test A of 'making complaint' email.

| Test        | N  | $\bar{x}$ | S.D.   | t      | Sig    |
|-------------|----|-----------|--------|--------|--------|
| Pre-test    | 34 | 1.60      | 1.6822 | -9.927 | .000** |
| Post-test A | 34 | 5.84      | 2.9835 |        |        |

The statistically significant level of the comparison between pre-test scores (14 points) and post-test A scores (14 points) of ‘making complaint’ email was at the 0.001 level, according to the statistical information represented in Table 1. The post-test A scores of the students after implementing the explicit teaching of moves and steps were higher than the pre-test scores. The mean score of the pre-test was at 1.60 and the standard deviation was at 1.6822 whereas the mean score of the post-test A was at 5.84 and the standard deviation was at 2.9835.

The post-test A and post-test B scores in Move 2 of ‘making complaint’ email was analyzed using t-score and the findings are shown as the following tables.

**Table 2:** The comparison of Move 2 scores between the post-test A and post-test B of ‘making complaint’ email in the week after implementing the explicit teaching.

| Test        | N  | $\bar{x}$ | S.D.   | t      | Sig    |
|-------------|----|-----------|--------|--------|--------|
| Post-test A | 34 | 5.84      | 2.9835 | -5.541 | .000** |
| Post-test B | 34 | 9.62      | 3.2941 |        |        |

The statistic significant level of the comparison between post-test A scores (14 points) and post-test B scores (14 points) of ‘making complaint’ email was at the 0.001 level, according to the statistical information represented in Table 2. The post-test B scores of the students after implementing the explicit teaching of moves and steps were higher than the post-test A scores. The mean score of the post-test A was at 5.84 and the standard deviation was at 2.9835 whereas the mean score of the post-test B was at 9.62 and the standard deviation was at 3.2941.

2. *If yes, in what way has the explicit teaching of moves and steps developed the students’ business correspondence writing skills?*

Emphasizing on the statistical data in Move 2: steps three to eight including spelling and grammatical uses, the explicit teaching of moves and steps likely improved students’ email writing competence as they understood the useful expressions and the language uses.

**Table 3:** The comparison average scores between the pre-test, post-test A and post-test B of ‘making complaint’ email.

| Moves and Steps Criteria  | Pre-test  |        | Post-test A |        | Post-test B |        |
|---|-----------|--------|-------------|--------|-------------|--------|
|   | $\bar{x}$ | S.D.   | $\bar{x}$   | S.D.   | $\bar{x}$   | S.D.   |
| 1. Move 1: Step 1: Email Heading<br>(Score: 1.5)  | .85       | .2561  | 1.14        | .2650  | 1.50        | .0     |
| 2. Move 1: Step 2: Salutation (Score: 0.5)  | .35       | .1581  | .39         | .0996  | .49         | .0478  |
| 3. Move 2: Step 3: Opening Statement (Mentioning the topic concerning the problem and complaint) (Score: 2.0) | .48       | .5793  | 1.54        | .5094  | 1.42        | .6074  |
| 4. Move 2: Step 4: Stating the problem (Score: 3.0)   | .58       | .9392  | 1.56        | .9535  | 2.38        | .9306  |
| 5. Move 2: Step 5: Describing the details of the problem (Score: 4.0)   | .0        | .0     | .26         | .8504  | 3.30        | 1.2297 |
| 6. Move 2: Step 7: Suggesting a solution (Score: 3.0)   | .51       | .9612  | 1.39        | 1.2582 | 1.44        | 1.2444 |
| 7. Move 2: Step 8: Closing Statement: Ending with proper expressions (Score: 2.0)                             | .03       | .1194  | 1.09        | .8194  | 1.09        | .9001  |
| 8. Move 3: Step 9: Complimentary Close and Signature (Score: 1.0)   | .35       | .3752  | .68         | .3669  | .82         | .3669  |
| 9. Spelling and Grammatical Uses (Score: 3.0)   | .88       | .4965  | 1.64        | .5465  | 1.72        | .4164  |
| Total<br>(Total Scores: 20)   | 4.04      | 2.4628 | 9.66        | 3.7658 | 14.11       | 3.7894 |

According to the statistical data in Table 3, Move 2: Step 3: Opening Statement, the samples had the pre-test average scores of 0.48 out of 2.0, the post-test A average scores of 1.54 out of 2.0 and the post-test B average scores of 1.42 out of 2.0. Move 2: Step 4: Stating the problem, the samples had the pre-test average scores of 0.58 out of 3.0, the post-test A average scores of 1.56

out of 3.0 and the post-test B average scores of 2.38 out of 3.0. Move 2: Step 5: Describing the details of the problem, the samples had the pre-test average scores of 0.0 out of 4.0, the post-test A average scores of 0.26 out of 4.0 and the post-test B average scores of 3.30 out of 4.0. Move 2: Step 7: Suggesting a solution, the samples had the pre-test average scores of 0.51 out of 3.0, the post-test A average scores of 1.39 out of 3.0 and the post-test B average scores of 1.44 out of 3.0. Move 2: Step 8: Closing Statement: Ending with proper expressions, the samples had the pre-test average scores of 0.03 out of 2.0, the post-test A average scores of 1.09 out of 2.0 and the post-test B average scores of 1.09 out of 2.0. Whereas Spelling and Grammatical Uses, the samples had the pre-test average scores of 0.88 out of 3.0, the post-test A average scores of 1.64 out of 3.0 and the post-test B average scores of 1.72 out of 3.0.

In terms of results, the increasing in post-test A and post-test B scores which were shown in Table 1, 2, and 3 indicated that students gained knowledge acquisition through the genre awareness. Swales (1990) defined that understanding genre in particular communicative events could seemingly help in term of recognizing the similarity of pattern, structure, rhetorical organization, style, content, and intended audience. Malakul & Bowering (2006) suggested that teaching genres to students would be considered the key tool as they contain patterns in language use and likely help students in their learning process, in particular with English language writing. Based on Malakul & Bowering's research, they found that the students were able to conduct well-organized abstracts with better academic genre pattern of writing and more accurate grammar and vocabulary in their writing.

In addition, this study was also congruent with the study of Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2018) which applied explicit teaching through providing students with guideline and examples of moves and steps in business correspondence writing under the topic of making arrangements for the meeting. The study was also resulted in the increasing scores of students after the explicit teaching. With the solid results of Lertchalermtipakoon's study (2018) and this study, it possibly claimed that this teaching method of moves and steps would be an effective instrument to enhance students' written English language acquisition, their formality in business writing style, and genre recognition. The exemplars of pattern, structure, rhetorical organization, style and content are the prototypical of business writing genre. Moreover, these exemplars help students to be able to analyze and synthesize the knowledge to complete the given tasks more effectively after teaching.

Supporting the above findings, the researchers provided the questionnaires to the samples to evaluate the opinions on the explicit teaching. The results revealed that the understanding

towards writing process, grammar and language structures, writing complaint email, and recognizing the language formality were at the ‘Good’ level. ( $\bar{x} = 3.49$ , S.D = 0.6885)

## Conclusion

This research paper is aimed to study the moves and steps in ‘making complaint’ email and promote students’ genre awareness of studying email writing. The overall awareness in generic structures, in terms of expressions, language uses, and written grammatical structure of learners after they received the explicit teaching of moves and steps was improved respectively. The results from our study revealed that the students were able to understand the writing process, grammar and language structures, write complaint email, and recognize the language formality at the ‘Good’ level. Consequently, this research result insisted that using of moves and steps can be highly used as a tool in both teaching and studying business writing. In addition, the EFL learners acquired these technics of moves and steps to be the guideline in writing effective business correspondence. The further research is extended to implementing moves and steps on more variety of business writing tasks, for example, memorandums, and minutes of the meeting in order to enhance students' genre awareness of writing. Moreover, conducting research on preferable types of business writing tasks from real business organizations might pinpoint the proper fields of further study for more solid results. We anticipate this research paper would be beneficial in business English correspondence pedagogy.

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