

Effect of Metadiscourse on Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Metadiscourse, known as discourse about ongoing discourse, has been the subject of discourse research from a wide range of perspectives. In academic contexts, knowledge of metadiscourse as a prominent feature of all types of academic discourse provides second language readers with information about writer's attitudes towards the text and the readers. Over the past decade there has been a growing interest in conducting studies investigating different aspects of metadiscourse in relation to language learning. The present study hopes to contribute to the study of metadiscourse by investigating its effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension (with three levels of reading proficiency: low, medium, and high) when faced two text types –academic and general. To this end, data were collected through two instruments, namely a TOEFL reading comprehension sample test and a reading comprehension test which consisted of two text types was developed for the purpose of this study. Two versions of this reading comprehension test were developed: one with metadiscourse enriched texts and the other with metadiscourse removed ones. The results of data analysis showed that students in all three levels of reading proficiency performed better on metadiscourse enriched test booklet than their counterpart groups who took the metadiscourse removed text booklet. In comparing students' performance on metadiscourse removed text types, it was revealed that they did more poorly on academic metadiscourse removed test booklet than on general one. The findings of this study suggest that making students aware of metadiscoursal features of different text types enhances students' reading comprehension.

Keywords: metadiscourse; reading comprehension; academic text; general texts; EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Current theories of reading in first and second language, view reading neither as a passive, bottom-up nor top-down process, but rather as an active process in which lower and higher-level processing skills work together interactively. It is believed that reading comprehension is the result of the interaction between the reader and the text through the interaction of these two processes (Grabe 2009). Over the past decades researchers in the area of reading and writing have turned their attentions to features in texts that are mainly used to establish another kind of interaction that takes place between the writer and the reader. These features which are collectively called metadiscourse is generally defined as “discourse about discourse” (Hyland 1998, p. 431) and is believed to facilitate the process of meaning construction for readers. Vande Kople (1997, p. 2) defines metadiscourse as “discourse that people use not to expand referential material but to help their readers connect, organize, interpret, evaluate, and develop attitudes toward that material”.

Considerate writers present information to their intended readers in a way that is easy for readers to follow the flow of the discourse and depict their attitudes towards the content of the discourse and reader by using metadiscourse. Readers at the same time use these metadiscoursal cues to read and understand the text by engaging in a dialogue which takes place between the reader and the writer. For readers, especially EFL/ESL readers to be successful in this dialogic interaction, they should be equipped with strategies that assist them while reading English texts. One of the strategic behaviors that successful reading requires is to be aware of metadiscoursal features in a text. In general, “metadiscourse embodies the idea that communication is more than just the exchange of information, goods or services, but also involves the personalities, attitudes and assumptions of those who are communicating” (Hyland 2005, p. 3). Metadiscourse helps writers to organize the text in a way that increases the cohesion of a text by making the relationships between different parts of the text explicit (Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995). It helps writers to address their audiences and engage them in a developing dialogue. Metadiscourse makes readers more attentive to the text and increase their recall. It also helps them to become critical readers (Crismore 1989).

Based on Halliday’s (1973) theory of language as serving three macro functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual, discourse analysts believe that metadiscourse consists of either textual or interpersonal which stands in contrast to the ideational or propositional material in the text. However, there is a difference between researchers who consider metadiscourse as covering term for both the interpersonal and textual functions and those who see metadiscourse as having just a textual function; the former is known as broad approach and the latter is known as narrow approach. Hyland (2005) argues against the division of metadiscourse into interpersonal and textual and suggests that all metadiscourse is interpersonal as it takes account of the reader’s knowledge, textual experiences and processing needs. In his model metadiscourse is seen as two dimensions of interaction: the interactive and interactional. The interactive dimension concerns the writer’s awareness of an audience, thus he presents the text in a way that meets their needs and organizes it so that they recover the writer’s preferred interpretations. Interactive resources include: transition markers, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidential, and code glosses. The interactional dimension concerns the ways writers comment on their message and engage readers by allowing them to respond to the text. Metadiscourse here is evaluative and engaging, and it assists the writer works to jointly construct the text with the readers. Interactional resources include: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self mention, and engagement markers (Hyland 2005). To identify metadiscourse resources this study adopted Hyland’s (2005) model of metadiscourse.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretically the view of learning underpinning this study is congruent with constructivist view of learning in which the learner is ultimately in charge of his or her learning “that it results from both a cognitive processing and organizing of information within an individual, and a social aspect, where the learner interacts and dialogues with the problem, the context and the players to discover meaning and value” (Gilbert 2010, p. 2).

Cognitive constructivists believe that reading comprehension goes beyond words and sentences and occurs on discourse level. They argue that it is the readers rather than texts that carry the meaning and texts only provide cues for readers. From this view point the reader has an active role in making meaning as he/she interacts with the text and constructs his/her representation of the information by organizing, selecting, and connecting the content while applying both text-driven and knowledge-driven processes.

Social constructivism sees reading and writing as social practices. In this view as Thompson (2001) states a text can be seen as a record of dialogue between writer and reader in which “the writer has to conduct his interaction by enacting the roles of both participants” (Widdowson 1984, p. 59 cited in Thompson 2001). In this dialogic interaction between writer and reader through the text, the reader listens and tries to make sense of what the writer is saying, which Vygotsky has labelled as intermental dialogue. When readers construct their own representation of the author’s message intramental dialogue happens.

This study is consistent with constructivist view of reading in that it is regarded not as a passive decoding process but rather as an interactive process in which the reader is an active participant in the dialogue with the writer and contributes to achievement of the text’s goal. Based on this view of reading, metadiscourse as a facilitative means of the interaction between writer and reader emphasises on reading comprehension at discourse level that is the macrostructure of a text. The study of metadiscourse which is based on a social and communicative engagement between the writer and the reader is in line with both social and cognitive constructivist views of reading as constructing meaning from the text through intermental and intramental dialogues.

ENGLISH IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF IRAN

The present educational system of Iran consists of four levels: primary school, junior high school, high school, and pre-university. English as an obligatory subject is taught from the first year of junior high school onward. At this level students study English for three hours a week. Then, they proceed to high school for another three years and study English for two hours a week. After high school, students study for one year in pre-university level in which English is taught four hours a week (Razmjoo & Riazi 2006). However, after studying English for 6 or 7 years students are not able to communicate in the language. One of the reasons for this is the application of traditional method of teaching English in school (Jenaabadi 2011). Most of the class time in English classes is devoted to explaining grammatical points. However, despite the special attention given to grammar students consider it as the most problematic and difficult component (Moiinvaziri 2014). Translating the passages and new words into Persian or vice versa are also emphasized. Almost no reading strategy instruction is carried out in the class. In addition, teaching and learning of the language is highly exam oriented, especially it is affected by university entrance exam (Konkoor). Students particularly at pre-university level are mainly taught test taking strategies that help them in Konkoor. As a result of this situation when they finish high school and enter university they face many problems reading academic text in English (Rahemi 2010). They may have an adequate background of English grammar and vocabulary, but they can’t communicate in the language using this knowledge (Shekarchi 2013)

FACILITATING ROLE OF METADISOURSE IN COMPREHENDING ENGLISH TEXTS FOR EFL LEARNERS

Iranian tertiary EFL students face many challenges comprehending their academic texts. They tend to spend more time and energy struggling with individual words. Consequently, despite all the efforts students make, they usually have problems in getting the overall meaning of the text. Reading comprehension is not a simple process that could be achieved merely by adopting and practising strategies like word by word decoding, but rather it is a complex process of making meaning through multiple interactions between the reader, the text, and the writer. Nambiar (2007) notes that students need to abandon the tendency to view texts as bits of information and approach a text as a complete text. This implies that readers

should expand their reading strategies by adopting strategies that go beyond the micro structure of the text.

The students also seem to have a variation in their reading comprehension problem when reading different text types. For example, they seem to have less problem reading their textbooks in their reading classes than in their linguistics classes. One of the features that makes texts different is metadiscourse features. It was hypothesized that understanding of difficult and dry English texts can be improved by metadiscourse markers. Metadiscourse can assist students in getting the overall meaning of texts.

Knowledge of metadiscourse as an important rhetorical feature of discourse helps readers improve their reading comprehension by organizing the content as they read (Crismore 1989). Researchers believe that metacognitive awareness of metadiscourse improves both reading and writing in many ways, especially it offers three major advantages to students: First, it helps them know the cognitive demands that texts make on readers and the ways writers can ease the processing of information. Second, metadiscourse provides them with the devices to express a stance towards their statements. Third, it allows them to negotiate this stance and engage in a dialogue with readers (Hyland 2005).

Although the significance of metadiscourse has been recognized in language classes, still in many writing and reading classes around the world including Iran a lot of energy is invested in learning and applying the rules while ignoring the role of metadiscourse. Grammatical knowledge though necessary it is only part of learning to read and write. Knowledge of metadiscourse and strategies for using it will enable readers to better understand the author's text plan. They will know whether they are reading the introduction, the body or conclusion of a text. They will also know when the author shifts to a different topic, and the author's comments or attitude towards what he is stating (Crismore 1989).

METADISOURSE IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

The importance of metadiscourse in academic contexts has been proved (Mauranen 1993, Bunton 1999, Hyland 1999, Marandi 2003, Zarei & Mansoori 2007, Parvaresh & Nemati 2008, Toumi 2009, Hyland 2010, Crismore & Abdollahzadeh 2011 among others). However, limited work has been done on the role of metadiscourse in ESL/EFL reading comprehension.

Yang (2008) conducted a study investigating the effect of metadiscourse instruction on senior high school EFL students' reading comprehension. Based on the results he concluded that the experimental group had significant improvement in their reading strategies and reading comprehension after the instruction of metadiscourse. His study also showed that students in the experimental group gained more benefit from the instruction of textual metadiscourse than the interpersonal metadiscourse. However, it was the high proficiency group who benefited more from the instruction of both textual and interpersonal metadiscourse. But, in Parvaresh and Nemati's (2008) contrastive study it was the low proficiency group who benefited more from the presence of metadiscourse markers.

Hashemi, Khodabakhshzadeh, and Shirvan (2011) conducted a study to investigate the effect of metadiscourse markers on students' reading comprehension. Participants of their study were 120 EFL students taking IELTS training courses at Kishair English Institute, Mashhad, Iran. Based on their scores on a language proficiency test, 120 students were divided into two groups of advance and intermediate students. Each group was then randomly divided into two subgroups (30 students in each group). Two versions (with and without metadiscourse passages) of the same reading comprehension test were administered to both groups. In each group, students took two versions of the test: one of the subgroup (30) the reading test with metadiscourse and the other one (30) took the version without metadiscourse. The result of their data analysis showed that there was no significant difference between the

performances of the two subgroups of the intermediate group. It means that the inclusion and exclusion of metadiscourses had no significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension. When they compared the subgroups scores of the advance group they found a significant difference between the mean scores of two groups. It means that metadiscourses have a significant positive effect on advanced learners' reading comprehension.

The scarcity of research conducted on the effect of metadiscourse on reading comprehension of EFL learners in the Iranian context on the one hand and the intriguing results and issues of previously conducted research in this regard on the other hand require that much work be done on the role that the metadiscourse features can have in EFL reading comprehension. With this in mind the main aim of this research was to examine the effect of metadiscourse on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL university students when faced with two text types and to find out how it would affect students' reading comprehension with different reading abilities. To this aim the present study was an attempt to find answers for the following questions:

1. Is there any difference between the performance of EFL readers on two versions (metadiscourse enriched and metadiscourse removed) of a reading comprehension test?
2. Is there any difference between the performances of students on the two versions (metadiscourse enriched and metadiscourse removed) of a reading comprehension test regarding their reading proficiency (low, medium, and high)?

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE AND INSTRUMENTS

The participants for this study were 45 Iranian undergraduate students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from Islamic Azad university in Tehran. Their age range were between 19-25. All the participant had already passed Reading Level One and Two in their first and second semesters. Data for the purpose of this study were collected during the third semester in their Reading Level Three classes. Of 45 participants the performance of 32 students were included in the final analysis as the remaining students were absent from one of the test administering sessions or had left some or all of the questions unanswered. Three instruments were employed to collect data for the study:

1. TOEFL reading comprehension sample test was administered to determine the reading ability of the participants. The test consists of two passages. (each passage is followed by 10 multiple choice questions)
2. metadiscourse enriched reading comprehension test booklet, and
3. metadiscourse removed reading comprehension test booklet.

PROCEDURES

In order to examine the effect of metadiscourse namely academic and general on participants' reading comprehension performance when faced with two text types, the first step was developing reading comprehension tests based on the two text types: Academic texts were selected from the available course books in the field of TEFL for undergraduate level (BA degree) and general texts were selected from different course books used for reading classes. To this end first a larger sample of texts was reviewed from among different course books

currently being used as main course books specified for undergraduate EFL students majoring in TEFL or peripheral course books introduced by their instructors. Out of the selected texts four were selected as appropriate for the intended purpose: two academic and two general texts. The selected texts for each text type were similar regarding their length, number of paragraphs, and their readability index. Two versions of these texts were developed by the researcher, one enriched with metadiscourse and the other without metadiscourse. Metadiscourse enriched texts were the selected original texts with some metadiscourse markers embedded in suitable places. Metadiscourse removed texts were the same original selected texts with their metadiscourse markers removed. In identifying metadiscourse elements Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse was adopted.

Then based on the original selected texts reading comprehension tests were developed. Every text followed by 8 multiple choices reading comprehension questions. Consequently, two test booklets were developed each consisting of four texts (two general and two academic text types) and 32 multiple choice reading comprehension questions. One of the test booklets consisted of metadiscourse enriched texts followed by multiple choice reading comprehension questions and the other test booklet consisted of metadiscourse removed texts followed by the same multiple choice reading comprehension questions. The two test booklets were reviewed by three experts and experienced instructors involved in teaching English courses and were judged as appropriate for the intended purpose.

The three instruments were administered in two phases. In the first session TOEFL reading comprehension sample test was administered. The purpose of this test was to know about students' levels of reading proficiency. Based on students' scores on this test, students were divided into low, medium, and high levels of reading proficiency. Then, students were randomly divided into two groups (G1 and G2). Each group consisted of students with three levels of reading proficiency. In the second phase two reading comprehension test booklets were administered. G1 was given the metadiscourse enriched test booklet and G2 was given the metadiscourse removed test booklet.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data obtained from the TOEFL reading comprehension test and the two test booklets were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software program. Initially the reliability of the developed instrument that is the reading comprehension test was calculated. The estimated internal consistency reliability coefficient indicated an acceptable degree of reliability (.782) for reading comprehension test.

To find out the answer for the first question: Is there any difference between the performance of EFL readers on two versions (metadiscourse enriched and metadiscourse free) of a reading comprehension test?, the mean score of both group's performance on the two test booklets were compared. Students in the G1 who were given the metadiscourse enriched test booklet with a mean score of 19.31 performed better than students in G2 who were given the metadiscourse removed test booklet with the mean score of 16.63. This means that metadiscourse features help students to better comprehend the texts. An independent sample t-test was conducted and it was revealed that the difference was also statistically significant $t(30) = 2.28, p = .030$ at .05 level of significance as shown in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1. Independent sample t-test

test score		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Equal variances assumed	1.407	.245	2.281	30	.030
	Equal variances not assumed			2.281	25.377	.031

To examine the effect of metadiscourse on students' reading comprehension when reading two text types, groups performances on different text types were compared. The comparison of mean scores of students performance on the reading comprehension test with the general text type showed that students in G1 who were given the metadiscourse enriched test booklet with the mean of 8.94 performed better than students in group 2 who were given the metadiscourse removed test booklet with a mean score of 8.38. However, as shown in table 2, statistical sample t-test showed that the difference is not statistically significant $t(30)=.553$, $p=.585$ at .05 level of significance.

The comparison of the mean score of students performance on the reading comprehension test with academic text type showed that students in G1 who took the metadiscourse enriched test booklet with the mean score of 10.38 performed better than students in G2 who took the metadiscourse removed test booklet with the mean score of 7.25. An independent sample t-test was conducted and as shown in table 2, the difference is also statistically significant $t(30)=3.621$, $p=.01$ at .05 level of significance. This may indicate that metadiscourse resources can assist EFL readers to understand difficult and dry academic material.

TABLE 2. Independent sample t-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
general texts	Equal variances assumed	.495	.487	.553	30	.585
	Equal variances not assumed			.553	28.871	.585
academic texts	Equal variances assumed	3.151	.086	3.621	30	.01
	Equal variances not assumed			3.621	22.331	.01

The second question posed in this study was if any difference between the performances of students on the two test booklets (metadiscourse enriched and metadiscourse removed) regarding their levels of reading proficiency (low, medium, and high) existed. The comparison of mean scores of students' performances of all three levels (low, medium, and high) in both groups on the two test booklets showed that the mean scores of all three levels (high=25.00, medium=19.75, and low=15.20) in G1 who were given metadiscourse enriched test booklet were higher than their counterpart groups who were given the metadiscourse removed test booklet (high=17.80, medium=15.29, and low=13.50). That is all students in all the three levels in G1 performed better on metadiscourse enriched test booklet than their counterparts in G2 on metadiscourse removed test booklet.

TABLE 3. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: test score						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	334.440 ^a	5	66.888	4.331	.005	.454
Intercept	9071.247	1	9071.247	587.386	.000	.958
Group (1,2)	142.747	1	142.747	9.243	.005	.262
Prof. groups	202.206	2	101.103	6.547	.005	.335
Group * prof. groups	30.882	2	15.441	1.000	.382	.071
Error	401.529	26	15.443			
Total	10501.000	32				
Corrected Total	735.969	31				

a. R Squared = .454 (Adjusted R Squared = .350)

RESULTS

This study was an attempt to examine the effect of metadiscourse features on Iranian university EFL learners' reading comprehension. The researcher had hypothesized that metadiscourse features in a text may help EFL readers in comprehending English texts and that these features affect the comprehension of different text types differently. Guided by these hypotheses the present study set up to find out if there was any difference between the performance of EFL readers on two versions (metadiscourse enriched and metadiscourse removed) of a reading comprehension test. The comparison of mean scores of two groups of students' performance on the same reading comprehension test but with texts differing in the amount of metadiscourse (one enriched with metadiscourse and the other with metadiscourse removed) showed that G1 who were given the metadiscourse enriched test booklet with a mean of 19.31 performed better on the reading comprehension test than G2 with the mean of 15.63 who were given the metadiscourse removed test booklet. The statistical t-test was administered and showed that the difference is statistically significant. Then we concluded that metadiscourse features affect reading comprehension positively.

In addition, the study examined whether the students' performance on reading comprehension test of two versions (metadiscourse enriched and metadiscourse removed) differs when texts are of different types (general and academic). The comparison of mean scores of both groups' performance on two versions of reading comprehension tests with texts of general topics showed that G1 with the mean score of 8.94 performed better than G2 with the mean score of 8.32. However, the difference was not statistically significant. But when the mean scores (G1:10.38 and G2: 7.25) of groups' performance on two versions of reading comprehension test (metadiscourse enriched and metadiscourse removed) with texts of academic type were compared, the difference turned out to be statistically significant. This means that metadiscourse features affect the comprehensibility of different texts differently. This can imply that making students aware of the knowledge of metadiscourse and its use may help EFL readers in comprehending difficult and dry texts.

The second question posed in this study was to find out the effect of metadiscourse on the performance of students in both groups regarding their levels of reading proficiency. Using statistical procedures between-group two way ANOVA showed that all students in G1 with different levels of reading proficiency performed better than their counterpart in G2. It means that metadiscourse has a positive effect on EFL readers reading comprehension regardless of their reading proficiency.

DISCUSSION

Based on insight gained from studies previously conducted on the role of metadiscourse in EFL/ESL reading comprehension, this study aimed at examining the effect of metadiscourse on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. Three points may make this study different from previously conducted studies. First, in line with Hyland's view of metadiscourse this study does not see metadiscourse as having two functions for metadiscourse as interpersonal and textual, but rather it sees all metadiscourse as interpersonal. Second, the students in this study were of three levels of reading proficiency (low, medium, and high) allowing the researchers to see how the presence or absence of metadiscourse would affect each group (the intriguing issue in previous studies). Third, by developing two kinds of test booklets with different text types the study investigated the effect of metadiscourse on students' reading comprehension when they face with two types of texts (academic and general).

The results as discussed above showed that students who were given the metadiscourse enriched test booklet did better than those who were given the metadiscourse removed test booklet. This confirms the results found by previous studies. That is metadiscourse helps students to better understand and comprehend English text.

The results also indicated that students with all levels of reading proficiency performed better on metadiscourse enriched test booklet than their counterpart groups who took the metadiscourse removed test booklet. That is a lack of metadiscourse features affect text comprehensibility negatively no matter how proficient the students are. This in turn implies that students with different levels of language proficiency may benefit from the instruction of metadiscourse. Teachers are suggested to call students' attention to these crucial elements of a text and make students metacognitively aware of the metadiscourse features of texts and their functions and make this as a regular part of their reading instruction.

When students' performances on two text types (academic and general) were compared it was revealed that metadiscourse features affects comprehensibility of academic texts more than that of general ones. This can be one reason why EFL students face more difficulties comprehending English texts in their linguistics classes for example than in their general reading classes. From the metadiscourse point of view the problem may be rooted in either students' unawareness of metadiscourse knowledge or academic textbooks' scarcity of metadiscourse elements or maybe both.

The results of this study are in line with all studies that indicated the positive effect of metadiscourse on reading comprehension of EFL learners. Particularly the present study confirm the result obtained by the study conducted by Hashemian, et. al., (2012) which showed the positive effect of metadiscourse markers (especially when these markers are highlighted) on EFL learners' reading comprehension who were at two levels of language proficiency (low and high). The findings of this study however, partly contradict with the results gained by Hashemi, et. al., (2011) discussed above; in that the inclusion and exclusion of metadiscourses had no significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension.

The present study was conducted examining the effect of metadiscourse on a limited number of (32) students' reading comprehension which is considered as a limitation of the study. To generalize a result more confidently it would be better to conduct the study with a larger number of students.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was an attempt to examine the effect of metadiscoursal features on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. It was also to find out their effect on two text types-general and academic. Based on the findings of this study, the researchers arrived at the following conclusions. First, students in this study performed better on metadiscourse enriched reading comprehension test booklet than on metadiscourse removed reading comprehension test booklet especially with academic texts. Thus, the study supports the idea that metadiscourse markers have positive effect on reading comprehension. Second, it revealed that the absence or presence of metadiscourse features affects the comprehension of different text types differently. In this study students did more poorly on reading comprehension test with (metadiscourse removed) academic texts than on test with (metadiscourse removed) general texts. This indicates that different text types are different regarding their metadiscoursal features and teachers can help their students by making them metacognitively aware of metadiscoursal features and instruct them to use these features as a strategy when dealing with different text types. Third, all students with three different levels of reading proficiency (low, medium, and high) performed better on reading comprehension test with metadiscourse enriched texts than their counterparts who answered the same reading comprehension questions but with metadiscourse removed texts. This indicates that metadiscourse enriched texts affect students' performances positively regardless of their levels of reading ability. Therefore, it can be concluded that EFL learners with any level of reading proficiency will equally benefit from the instruction of these features.

Based on the results of the present study, reading teachers especially EFL teachers are encouraged to incorporate into their classes the instruction of metadiscourse features and their functions in different contexts and different text types. The results also suggest that material developers include sections for introducing and practising metadiscoursal features and their different functions in various contexts. Generally, the results of this study indicated that metadiscourse is a topic that deserves attention in EFL reading research and the results identified directions for further experimental research.

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