Strengthening Formal Word Utilization in Amharic Language Classroom Instruction: The Case of Third Year Trainees of Debre Markos Teachers' Education College, Amhara Region, Ethiopia

Simegn Anagaw[1] and Solomon Melesse[2]*

[1]MED in Amharic Language Teaching, MA in Journalism, Amharic Language instructor at Debre Markos Teacher Training College, Amhara Region, Ethiopia.
[2]PhD, Professor in Curriculum and Instruction, the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies, College of Education, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia, P.O. Box 79.

*Corresponding Author e-mail: btlhmslmn1997@gmail.com; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0565-4321

Abstract

This study was aimed at identifying prospective teachers' word utilization and improve their formal word selection and utilization in the Amharic language instructional process. This research was carried out in the Amharic Language Department of Debre Markos Teachers' College. In doing this research, the researchers recorded the names of all the participants and coded them while they were learning about vocabulary in chapter two of the course entitled 'Basic Mother Tongue'. The purpose of vocabulary and language learning is to help learners not to use informal vocabulary for social communication and properly utilize formal words and phrases, and as the informants are the will be language teachers, it is to help them become role models for their respective students at primary schools. The researchers tried to solve the observed problems using the regular class provision by simply focusing on the prospective teacher who made reflections in each session. After providing these strategies for the 16 sessions, all the prospective teachers showed significant improvement except one prospective teacher. As per our plan, for one of the prospective teachers who failed to show changes using the two strategies was made to hear a video of renowned Amharic Language professional's speech. In spite of all these attempts, the prospective teacher did not show significant changes in formal word utilization while making reflections. As a result, the researchers made a plan to work with the remaining prospective teacher.

Keywords: Selection, Utilization, Formal words, Classroom Instruction, Amharic Language

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

This action research was carried out to minimize informal word utilization by prospective teachers in the Amharic language department of Debre Markos Teachers' College. In doing this research, the researchers recorded the names of all the participants and coded them while they were learning about vocabulary in chapter two on the course entitled 'Basic Mother Tongue'. The purpose of vocabulary and language learning is to help learners not to use informal vocabulary for social communication and properly utilize formal words and phrases, and as would be language teachers, it is to help them become role models for their respective prospective teachers at primary schools.

In relation to the point discussed in the above paragraph, Baye (2002) explained that the meaning of a word is the result of a systematic combination of speech sounds and that it is the sound of the base of the word. This means that sounds require ordering according to a system or a rule accepted by the speaker, and that it is meaningful if the speaker arranges it according to the accepted rule. That is, meaning making is possible only if the sound is arranged as per the shared rule.

Prospective teachers learn most words by accident. However, vocabulary knowledge is of great importance in achieving prospective teachers reading and writing goals. Some scholars (e.g., Solomon & Chanyalew, 2018; Tonjes, 1991; Reid, 2000; Qian, 2002) explained the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

Word competency has a significant impact on reading comprehension, reading enjoyment and learning success. This indicates that there is a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. In the current situation, it is clearly observed that prospective teachers face many obstacles when they try to read and understand a text with many strange words (Solomon, 2014; Loki & Carson, 1994). If prospective teachers have limited vocabulary, as to these scholars assertion, they will not be able to communicate properly with the four language skills. The reason for this is that proper listening, speaking, reading and writing are strongly related to deep vocabulary knowledge. The lack of those language skills leads prospective teachers to have self-confidence problems and show a negative attitude towards language (Solomon & Chanyalew, 2020; Solomon, 2014; Nation, 2001; Wong, 2005)

According to Nation (2000), vocabulary knowledge is essential for communicative competence. Vocabulary knowledge means knowledge of spelling of words, pronunciation of words, meaning of words, and appropriateness of words. In addition, vocabulary skills go beyond knowing a large number of words and also include the ability to use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies.

Scholfield (1997) explained the role of words in language learning in the past and explained the fact that although language includes words, we usually communicate through sentences. Due to the previous attitudes of preferring sentence to words caused vocabulary learning and study receiving little attention. As a result, vocabulary learning is not given the proper attention while prospective teachers are learning. Thus, the appropriateness of vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning skills are not included in language education nowadays.

According to Scholfield (1997), the interest in teaching vocabulary in the late 20th century was largely related to the advent of interactive language teaching methods in language education. As method emphasizes meaningful interaction rather than form, it has been recognized that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental issue for successful communication. In general, vocabulary learning is a very important issue, especially in language learning. This is due to the fact that in the process of communication prospective teachers' knowledge of vocabulary plays a key role in transmitting and receiving the intended message regarding their intentions, needs, actions and thoughts in an appropriate way (Solomon & Chanyalew, 2020; Solomon & Chanyalew, 2018; Read, 2000; Nation, 2001). For this reason, it is observed that prospective teachers use borrowed words and dialects in the Amharic class. This use is not suitable for formal education.

The purpose of language education is to inform prospective teachers when to use formal and informal words, and to help them to use formal words instead of informal word usage. Therefore, if we fail to show them the preferred words during classroom instruction and pass them in silence, one may say that we instructors failed to achieve the purpose of language instruction. If there is a student who failed to know the meaning of the informal word during instruction, it is also true that the lesson has not been made inclusive.

One of the researchers has faced the above mentioned problem in her language class at Debre Markos Teachers' College. The college is located in the East Gojjam Zone of Debre Markos City, and it has been providing training in eight disciplines. Due to various national issues, the college, like other colleges, had been providing training only for third-year prospective teachers in the 2022 academic year. In the academic year, one of the researchers had been providing training to the two section prospective teachers who were receiving training in the regular program in the field of Amharic language education. These classes had a total of 64 prospective teachers, thirty-two trainees in each class. As an Amharic language instructor, one of the researchers had been providing training on related courses in these classes. We did our research on the first section where the problem was highly aggravated. The nature and intensity of the problem are discussed at length in the next sub-section.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The basic problems of this study are presented in three ways. The first theme is related to the researchers' motivation to study in this area. The issue that motivated the researchers to study in this area was related to the challenges one of the researchers encountered while conducting lessons in the area of Amharic language courses in Debre Markos Teachers' College. For example, as classroom teachers usually ask their respective prospective teachers whether or not they had done their homework, most prospective teachers who did not do their homework respond using informal words such as «Alserchem» in Amharic, its equivalent English meaning is 'I did not do it'. Most instructors did not comment the prospective teachers' word usage considering that there is no problem as long as the prospective teachers communicate their answer with a classroom instructor. As a result, instructors usually fail to give proper direction to their prospective teachers who have been using informal words while communicating ideas in formal settings. It is really a critical issue that one of the researchers had observed during her work experience, and from a practical point of view, the researchers found it a deep-rooted problem in the Amharic language department. According to some scholars (e.g., Solomon & Chanyalew, 2020; Solomon & Chanyalew, 2018; Scholfield, 1997), the interest in teaching vocabulary in the late 20th century was largely related to the advent of interactive language teaching methods in language education as the method emphasizes meaningful interaction rather than form. Therefore, from this time on, it has been known that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental issue for successful communication. If communication is to be successful, therefore, scholars in the area suggest that the arbitrary use of language is inappropriate. But, prospective teachers are

exposed to the situation of using words arbitrarily in the process of teaching and learning at Debre Markos Teachers' College. One of the researchers has noticed prospective teachers using borrowed words and dialects in the Amharic classes.

Another issue that motivated the researchers to study this research is related to the main objective of Amharic language education. That is, the main purpose of Amharic language education is to develop the four language skills and even to improve them. In linguistics, the class also pays attention to the use and choice of words. Vocabulary selection means letting prospective teachers know when to use formal words and when to use informal words, as well as enabling them to move away from informal usages and use formal words. Therefore, if we do not show them the preferred words for the context of the classroom, and pass them in silence, it can be said that we failed to achieve the purpose of language instruction. However, if there is a prospective teacher who does not know the meaning of the informal word, it means that the lesson fails to include that learner or the communication with that learner will not be successful. It is also thought that the purpose of the language has not been met. It is intended that the purpose of language learning is to enable the language student to benefit from the language.

The third motivating factor in this study is related to third-year Amharic language prospective teachers that one of the researcher teach usually make mistakes in the use of words during reflection. Even though, she tried to correct them telling that it was a mistake (prescriptive method), they did not show improvement or could not get out of their habitual informal word usage, which triggered the researchers to study on this issue. Furthermore, informal words are not only spoken by one or two prospective teachers, but by many or almost all of the prospective teachers in the class, which further initiated the researchers to do action oriented research in the area.

The study also considered the fact that language prospective teachers do not adjust the vocabulary used by their families at home with the vocabularies used in the classroom and outside the classroom. It is considered as a problem due to the fact that the aim of Amharic language education could not be achieved. Accordingly, the study was designed to give answer to the following research questions:

- Is the problem of using informal words in the classroom caused by failure to knowing the words that should be used in formal education?
- How can we minimize prospective teachers' use of informal words during Amharic language education?

1.3 Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to identify prospective teachers' word utilization and improve their formal word selection and utilization in the Amharic language instructional process. The specific objectives are:

- Checking whether or not the problem of using formal words in the classroom is caused by failure to know the words that should be used in regular education

- Minimizing prospective teachers' informal word selection and utilization in the Amharic language instructional process.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Since this study focused on vocabulary usage problems in the classroom, it is considered that teaching has a higher contribution to learning to avoid such kinds of problems. On this background, the researchers felt that the current research will have the following significances to policy makers, and practitioners alike:

- It helps prospective teachers to realize that the informal words they use either knowingly or unknowingly in learning and teaching Amharic are not appropriate for communication in formal educational settings.
- Properly managing the present can help us to properly manage the future. That is, if we control the context of the words used by prospective teachers during their training, it is thought that it will help them to pay attention to the use and choice of words in the regular education when they become primary school teachers in the future. It will contribute to the improvement of learning and teaching of the Amharic language and the realization of the major goals of Amharic language. The results of this study will help instructors to pay attention to regular words in the classroom teaching-learning process, especially as language is the key to education offered in the mother tongues.

1.5 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Below, an attempt is made to show the link among the constructs, that is, communication is influenced by the kind of word/s selected for communication purpose. Proper word selection depends upon the context where communication is held. In formal settings such as schools, media service, government offices, we are required to use formal words at the cost of the informal ones. This is detailed in Figure 1.
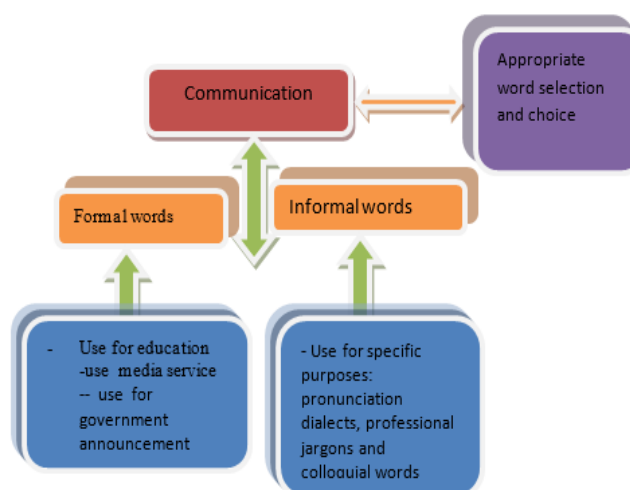

Figure 1: Diagrammatical Representation of the Conceptual Framework of the Study.

As it is disclosed in Figure 1, proper communication in educational settings, media services, government settings and announcements requires appropriate word selection and utilization. To this end, Amharic language instructors are

expected to assist prospective teachers to be well exposed with both formal and informal words. Instructors are further urged to assist prospective teachers when to use formal and informal words in their walk of life.

2. Methodology
2.1 Research Design
The research method used in this study is action oriented research. This method is in line with the nature of our research problem. The study is designed to identify the formal word utilization status of prospective teachers and thereby enhancing their formal word utilization status in Amharic Language classroom discourse during the instructional process.

2.2 The Study Site and Population
This action research involves third-year prospective teachers who were studying in the field of Amharic language education at Debre Markos Teachers' Education College in the 2022 academic year. The college is found in East Gojjam Administrative Zone, one of the zones found in Amhara Region, Ethiopia. The prospective teachers in this college were assigned in two sections with a total number of 64 prospective teachers.

2.3 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques
The class selected for the study was section number 14 where there were 32 prospective teachers taking training in Amharic language. The technique used to select this section is purposive sampling technique:

- Since one of the researchers had taught in this department for many years and had conducted major courses that focus on speaking. This background experience helped the researcher for an in-depth understanding of the problem and she felt that she had been facing a real problem in her Amharic language instruction.
- One of the reasons for the problem of language use was the shared attitude among Amharic language informants that there was no problem if communication was successful. And, the researchers confirmed that these participants are the ones who did not see that the random use of language is a problem as long as communication is successful.

From the total number of prospective teachers in that section (32), 30 of them were identified in terms of the severity of the problem as action-oriented research focuses on the typical group. Due to the researchers' supervision and primary support, two prospective teachers were free from the use of informal words while delivering their speech during instruction. Therefore, they were not part of our research though they were in that section as this did not violate the principles of conducting action research.

Why was this course chosen for the study?

1. The course was chosen due to the fact that one can learn about the use of vocabulary in a wide range. Words are the basis for communication, formal education, and reading comprehension skills.

2. During the study, the informants and one of the researchers meet only in this course. Due to the above two major reasons, the course was selected for the current study.

2.4 Instruments of Data Collection
Observation and interview were used as a major data collection tools for the study. To this end, a detail description of each of the tools is given below.

2.4.1 Observation
One of the data collection tools used in this study was formal observation. Observation was used as a data collection tool to find the source/s of the problem. After each prospective teacher's reflection, the researchers had observed the number of red cards shown by their peers, listening to the prospective teachers who presented a reflection, observing whether or not all the prospective teachers showed a card, and at last the researchers recorded the number of cards on a checklist as a means of identifying the sources of the problem and finding a solution.

2.4.2 Interview
After the root causes of the problem were identified, the participants who showed a red card to their counterparts who did reflection served as a reference whether or not they actually identified the errors via raising the red card. This major issue was identified via in-depth interview held with the informants.

2.5 Data analysis techniques
The number of prospective teachers who showed a red card in each session were recorded for two months (for 16 consecutive sessions), and then converted to percentage to find out the extent of the problem. In order to find a solution in this process, the researchers verify two issues from the participants, namely, whether or not prospective teachers commit mistakes knowingly, or unknowingly.

3. Results and Discussion
After the reflection was made by the prospective teachers, prospective teachers of the respective section were made to show a red card on those informal words uttered by the presenter. When the prospective teacher who showed a red card was asked his/her reasons and correctly pinpoint the mistakes commit the same mistake while presenting his/her reflection, it means that he/she is using the words knowingly. Failure to use formal words at schools and in the world of work will have a debilitating effect on making friendly and true communication. That is why we see communication gaps here and there all over the globe nowadays. Having this in mind, educational institutions are called upon to assist learners in selecting and using formal words while communicating instructional messages. In this regard, participants were coded by name to facilitate the problem solving process. These are presented in Table 1

As one can see from Table 1, 12 of the 30 informants were the focus of this presentation. The table shows that one participant did not commit a mistake in the first round, but he committed a mistake in his second round reflection. This informant did

not commit a mistake in his third and fourth round reflection. As one can see from Table 1, though most of the informants commit mistakes on the first two consecutive reflection opportunities, they did not commit mistakes on the third and fourth rounds, which implies that the informants become proficient in using formal words and phrases while communicating ideas during classroom discourse.

Table 2 shows that 18 participants out of the 30 commit mistakes without knowing whether the word is informal. All the 18 informants did the same mistake in both the first and second round reflections. However, only six informants did the same mistake in the third round reflection. A significant improvement was observed in the third and fourth round presentation in that only one informant made a mistake of using informal words unknowingly while making reflection in a formal setting. This was crosschecked and confirmed by using interview.

Table 1. Knowingly used informal words by prospective teachers

Frequency of reflection			
1st round mistake made	2nd round mistake made	3rd round mistake made	4th round mistake made
11	02	-	-

Table 2. Informal words used unknowingly by prospective teachers

Frequency of reflection			4th round mistake made
1st round mistake made	2nd round mistake made	3rd round mistake made	
18	18	06	01

Table 3. Implementation / Action plan

Strategies /Activities	Implementers	Implementation time	Resources needed
Make a detailed explanation in focus of the chapter on Vocabulary from the course	Students & researchers	16/6/2022 20/6/2022	Course module/ Mt221
In Prescriptive method when using words that don't fit the class Giving advance support	researchers	7/6/-15/2022	Observation check list
Creating awareness for the participants to prepare psychologically for the study	Students & researchers	21-22/6/2022	Paper & pen
Prepare red and yellow cards to all the participants. Develop a checklist	researchers	23/6/ 2022	red and yellow cards
Giving cards to each participant	researchers	24/6/2022	Paper & pen
Establishing a group for discussion	researchers	25/6/2022	Paper & pen
Make them discuss on the themes of the course by preparing discussion questions according to the content,	Students & researchers	16/6/- 20/10/2022	Course module/ Mt221
After the discussion, we arrange two students from each group to do a reflection in one session	Students	17/6/2022	Observation check list
When a speaker finishes his/her reflection, prospective teachers of that session show a red card.	Students & researchers	18/6/-10/7/2022	Observation check list
Time to identify the problems	researchers	11/7/2022	Observation check list
Identifying the problem solving strategies	researchers	12/7/2022	Paper & pen
Problem solving strategies implementation	Students & researchers	13-15;7/2022	Course module/ Mt112
Perform an assessment of whether problems have been resolved	researchers	17/7/-10/8/2022	Observation check list
Unsolved problems to plan next	researchers	12/8/-14/8/2022	Paper & pen

2.5.2 **Problem solving strategies and their Implementation**
The researchers tried to execute three strategies to solve the problem. They include having formal discussion with those informants who use informal words in a formal setting knowingly and trying to provide training in vocabulary use and choice for those informants who use informal words unknowingly. If these strategies could not work for us, we just move to the third strategy, i.e., providing recorded speeches of famous people and use the technique of sharing experiences there on.

Formal discussion

As soon as the first round reflection was completed, 12 out of 30 participants were identified using the wrong words knowingly. However, it is not advisable to use informal words in a formal education setting. The problem was resolved by conducting repeated exchange of ideas related to the values of using formal words in formal settings such as meetings and teaching-learning settings.

Providing training regarding the use and choice of formal words

The 18 participants were identified using informal words unknowingly after the first round reflection. These informants were given training as soon as the first round reflection is completed. After they were identified, they received training in the area of 'Basic Mother Tongue' course, which focused on the use of formal words in education. Those who learned in the regular education were given a ten hours training support and they were brought back to education. The reason we gave training for ten hours was due to the fact that they had learned the course for one semester. One of the researchers was capable of giving the training as she had a Master's Degree in Amharic teaching method and had enough knowledge about Amharic language which had been accumulated due to her frequent and long years training provisions for college prospective teachers in this course.

Implementation

The researchers prepared red and yellow cards to all the informants. We also prepared a checklist that could help us to put a tick mark on correct and incorrect responses. Giving both red and yellow cards to each informant and also establishing a discussant group to make reflections later on through their respective representatives. That is, the participants were made to discuss on issues related to the formal course they were taking that semester.

The number of members of each group was 6. Since two prospective teachers were not part of our study, we made them sit in different groups. The total number of groups in the class were 5. In one session, 2 members from each group had the opportunity to reflect and one presenter was allotted a maximum of 8 minutes to reflect on the issue. So the 10 prospective teachers took 80 minutes per session, 20 minutes for group discussion and 15 minutes were allotted to giving summary of the lesson.

The red card was decisive for our study. We told the informants to show the red card for informal word usage, i.e., to show a red card to the presenter who made a mistake while making reflection, and to show the yellow card to the presenter who did not commit a mistake during his/her reflection.

When an informant finishes delivering a reflection, other prospective teachers of that section showed a red card to indicate the mistakes committed. And, the researchers observe at what point the cards were raised and put a tick mark in the checklist. This action of the researchers was crosschecked by interview which helped the researchers identify the informal word uttered by the presenter. Through this long process, the researchers clearly noted where the problem exists. The

findings indicated that 12 informants used informal words knowingly, which lead us to have discussions regarding the value of using formal words at schools and institutions in the world of work. The remaining, 18 prospective teachers were identified using informal words unknowingly. To these group of prospective teachers, a 10 days training was delivered on language word choice and usage. The number of prospective teachers who showed red cards is indicated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Frequency of red cards showed by prospective teachers

1st round	2nd round	3rd round	4th round	Error in %
20	20	27	28	75%

As indicated in Table 3, the researchers identified the informants' problems. Thus, a mean score error of 75% was identified. However, this rate of error was significantly reduced through a repeated attempt of reflections.

Evaluation method

Since it is not possible to get out of the problem from one shot, the strategies of solving the problem has been implemented in a spiral nature, repeated monitoring and evaluation were also done in this action-oriented research process. Table 4 shows red cards and improvements seen by the prospective teachers after the training.

Table 4: Improvements made after the intervention

Number of consecutive red cards	Finally improved
14	29

After implementing the better courses of actions, the researchers evaluated how much the implementation of those strategies improved the informants' word usage. From the result, 18 informants showed an improvement and 8 of them did not show an improvement (at 100% error rate) in the first round reflective practice. From the eight informants, four of them were solved at the second round reflection, i.e., they just moved from customary speech to normal speech. The researchers further interviewed the informants whether or not the strategies had supported them to show improvement in their formal word usage. The informants noted that the strategies were very much helpful. To strengthen this point, the researchers forward the direct quotes of one of the informants as follows: "the training is very helpful to me in minimizing informal word usage " (informant 1). Still another informant noted the following: "the discussion about word selection and usage is very helpful as I was carelessly talking in classroom reflections" (informant 4)

Based on the informants answer, the researchers confirmed that giving formal discussion and training about language word choice and usage was very helpful for improvement. On the other hand, one participant showed no change. So the researchers tried to use the technique of voicing and sharing experiences by bringing recorded speeches of famous people. This informant could not pay attention to me, she raises a silly question that reads "is the story I hear now will appear in the final exam?" In general, she felt that the researcher was doing

a silly task. This made us to think about further planning that could help her receive extensive training and practice.

4. Conclusions

The main theme in this action-oriented research is that the words that convey messages are different in terms of place or context. Words used for learning and teaching are different from the words we use anywhere else though they all can communicate a certain message. However, it has been observed that the prospective teachers who have been the informants of this research were taking advantage of the discussion and training related to the lack of awareness and lack of attention of the formal words. Therefore, the study focused on 30 informants from a total of 32 prospective teachers studying in the same class where the problem was very critical.

In the process of identifying the root causes of the problem, the researchers confirmed that 12 informants were not paying attention knowingly towards using formal words and 18 of them were using informal words due to lack of awareness or ignorance. Therefore, the problem solving method is different to these two groups of informants as they had different root causes of the existing problem they manifested. For those informants who failed to pay attention knowingly, we did regular discussion about the value of using formal words in formal settings, and if it is due to lack of awareness or ignorance, we tried to solve the problem by giving training. The appropriateness of the problem solving methods used was again monitored and evaluated using red cards. In the follow-up, it was noticed that one participant did not alleviate the problem. As a result, it was planned that this participant needs extensive training and practice in a different action-oriented research phase.

Another issue was the difficulties encountered during the conduct of this study. Especially in the field of Amharic language education, there is a lack of information due to the lack of extensive research on formal conversation. We also experienced a lack of quality recording sounds. It is also true that no one has done any research on this area basically in Ethiopia. The reason seems to be that there is less attention given to the seriousness of the problem.

Ways Forward

Based on the results of the study, the following points are proposed as a solution:

- Prospective teachers usually make mistakes knowingly or unknowingly. Knowingly or unknowingly making mistakes creates obstacles in learning and teaching. Therefore, the study suggests that it is important to create awareness by preparing training and discussion forums for all prospective teachers of the class.
- Providing more training for Amharic language prospective teachers regarding the use and choice of words in the context of formal education is confirmed as a viable solution to minimize informal word utilization in formal settings. So, we suggest that other prospective teachers should be considered in providing training as language is a key tool in learning and teaching.
- We also learned about the value of collaboration between pure researchers and practitioners in doing action

oriented research like this one. We, as researchers, were complementing each other in the entire journey of this research. So, we suggest such kinds of collaboration will have significant contributions in solving practice oriented problems like what we did here.

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