"I Think Classes Should be Observed to Help Teachers Overcome their Faults": A Critical Perspective towards Institutionalization in Language Teachers Observation

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ABSTRACT

Despite the long introduction of alternatives to teacher supervision, like action research and mentoring, classroom observation is still a part and parcel of many English as foreign language teaching programs. The present study aims at providing accounts of how such classroom observations are perceived by a group of seven Iranian language teachers and the supervisory manager of a local language institute; which model of observation is enacted there; and to what extent the teachers and the manager are aware of alternative approaches. The frequency of words like "faults", "mistakes", and "weak points" in the teachers' and the manager's interviews revealed how teachers see themselves in need of being supervised by others who can correct their "faults" and "deficiencies". Given that, they perceived the role of supervisor as "necessary" and "effective" in their "development". Their preference for not deviating from the norms might be suggestive of a shadow of institutionalization dominating the atmosphere. On a critical ground, the participants were internally and externally encouraged to comply with—and consequently legitimize—a top-down system of evaluation and judgment which does not open much space for practicing personal knowledge and creativity or take initiatives.

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1. Introduction

As language practitioners, it is likely that most of have experienced teacher supervision, either as supervisors or as teachers being supervised. The practice of supervision has long been at work in many different fields, including business, management, industry, psychology, psychotherapy, and education. Regardless of the field, the common purpose of supervision is to control workers and subordinates, assure quality of production and promote uniformity or consistency across employees (Bailey, 2006 & 2009). Probably highly influenced by the movements in the industrial worlds, teaching programs are also being looked upon through the lens of industry. Similar intentions seem to be present when supervision is implanted in teaching programs. Teaching has become a commercial enterprise, teachers are assumed to be "supervisable" individuals and supervisors—who often act as mediators between teachers and managers—are needed to make sure that teachers are doing what they are supposed to do and customers (here students, parents, administrators, policy maker, etc.) are receiving what they pay for (Bailey, 2006 & 2009; Burns 1999; 2005 & 2009; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993).

Classroom observation as a sub-branch of teacher supervision has long been part and parcel of many language programs. The purpose behind these mainly unannounced, surprise observations is to have a firsthand record of teachers' performances while conducting normal lessons. The collected records of evaluations play a direct role in future decisions about teachers' tenure, promotions or demotions, besides
providing a tool for ensuring teachers' adherence to institute's program policies (Bailey, 2006 & 2009; Burns, 2009; Ostovar Namaghi, 2013).

Such an approach to teacher supervision is based on the assumptions that without being watched, teachers would stop trying to improve and teachers who are watched demonstrate better performances than unwatched ones (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993). Arguably, such traditional approach to classroom observation in which teachers are seen as silent recipients of the dictates of experts (Kinchelo, 2003) seems to be notorious for its counterproductive consequences such as arousing senses of hostility, suspicion and despair among teachers especially novice ones (Crookes, 2003; Ostovar Namaghi, 2013; Wragg, 1994).

Gebhard (1984), as a classic writer, outlines six different models of supervision named as: directive, alternative, collaborative, non-directive, creative, and self-explorative. A glance over such models can show that "supervisors' responsibilities have moved from being largely judgmental and evaluative to being more developmental in focus" (Bailey, 2006, p. 6).

**Directive supervision** is probably the most classic approach to teacher supervision and also the one which has received the most criticisms. Evaluating teacher’s "mastery of defined behaviors" is one of the aims of this model of supervision. This long-lived view of supervision is "based upon the notion that the supervisor needs to correct deficiencies in teaching and has a primary purpose of surfacing these flaws and correcting them" (Goldsberry, 1988, p.2). Gebhard (1984) identifies three problems with directive supervision: First, there is the problem of defining “good” or “effective” teaching by each single supervisor. Second, there is the problem of negative “humanistic consequences” that may arise as it can make teachers see themselves as inferior to the supervisor, which in turn is assumed to lower their self-esteem. And third, there is the problem of who is ultimately responsible for what goes on in the classroom. Wragg (1994) states that classroom observation, if badly handled, can become "counterproductive", at it’s arouses senses of "hostility, resistance, and suspicion" (p.3).

**Alternative supervision** is based on the view that teachers, especially beginner ones, need to be directed but “without prescribing what they should do”. What distinguishes this approach from the previous one is that here the supervisor avoids making judgments about the teacher’s performance or imposing personal opinions but instead suggests a variety of alternatives to what the teacher has done in the classroom. This approach is assumed to transfer the responsibility of decision making from supervisor to the teacher.

As the name suggests, within a **collaborative** model the supervisor and the teacher(s) collaborate with each other in making decisions and addressing a problem in the teacher’s classroom teaching. “They pose a hypothesis, experiment, and implement strategies which appear to be a reasonable solution to the problem under consideration” (Gebhard, 1984, p. 506). Very similar to the idea of collaborative supervision is the idea of **Clinical Supervision**. Glickman (2002, pp.10-14) explains five steps involved in clinical supervision: Pre-conference with teachers: at this stage, the supervisor talks with the teacher about the reason for, the purpose, the focus, and the time of observation. Observation of classroom instruction: the pre-conference is followed by one or several observations by the observer. Analyzing and interpreting the observation and determining conference approach: the analysis and interpretation of the recorded observations and notes are done by the observer himself/herself before sharing the results with the teacher. Post-conference with teacher: the supervisor and the teacher meet each other again to discuss the analysis of the observation and "to produce a plan for instructional improvement" (p.12). Critique of previous four steps: this critique involves reviewing the four previous steps to see whether the taken steps have been satisfactory or else need revision. Furthermore, “the feedback from the teacher gives the supervisor a chance to decide on what practices to continue, revise, or change when working with the teacher in the future” (p.14). In **non-directive** supervision, instead of directing teacher, as was done in directive approach, the supervisor attempts to have teachers come up with "their own solutions" through frequently repeating back the teacher's own ideas. Listening to teachers and allowing them to vocalize their thoughts are assumed to help teachers become more aware of what they perform in their classes. This can also help teachers to gain experience in making decisions on their own and take responsibility for their teaching behaviors. **Creative supervision** does not limit itself to any single model of supervision. Gebhard (1984, p.508) offers some ways the creative model can be used, such as "a combination of models or a combination of supervisory behaviors from different models" or "shifting of supervisory responsibilities from the supervisor to other sources" such as teacher centers. The self-help-explorative supervision is “an extension of creative supervision” which provides opportunities for teachers to observe themselves, talk about the ways they approach teaching and explore alternative procedures. Through self-exploration each teacher begins to discover new things in his/her teaching they used to be ignorant in the past. Because of the crucially important role of feedbacks—as provided by teacher supervisors—a good number of research about language teacher supervision has focused on the post-observation discourse (Bailey, 2006; Wajnryb, 1994; Wallace & Woogler, 1991). Among others, Wajnryb sees how the act of post-conferencing is followed by "transmission of bad new" (1994, p. 88).
She suggests that mitigation which is a "linguistic means by which a speaker deliberately hedges what he/she is saying by taking into account the reactions of the hearer" (1995, p. 71) needs to be employed by the supervisors. Wallace and Woogler (1991) warn such discourse is likely to become a monologue in which "the supervisor 'sorts out' the trainee's problems, the latter dutifully taking notes" (p.321). Not surprisingly, this asymmetry of power can be face-threatening. Similarly, Ostovar Namaghi (2013) studied Iranian language teachers’ perception of different teacher evaluation criteria—as employed in Iranian private English teaching sector—including direct observation of teaching performance, students’ GPA in teacher-made tests, close-circuit camera observation, rate of student return and teachers’ self-evaluation. With regard to observation of teaching performance, he reports how language teachers preferred the formative function of evaluation, done for the sake of teacher development, to summative function, aimed at judging language teachers’ knowledge and skills and measuring whether the teachers follow specific techniques or activities.

1.1. Alternatives to supervision

As well as the models described above, there are examples of efforts aimed at replacing an atmosphere of supervision with that of assistance. Action research and mentoring are amongst these supportive approaches. Action research is concerned with a close link between research and teaching as well as the supervisor (or researcher) and the teacher, with the aim of gathering deeper awareness of the educational environment or improving the effectiveness of teaching practices (Burns, 2009; Dorneo, 2007; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Having identified a problem, the teacher(s) and supervisor go through a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting to approach and solve the problem. Supervisors help the teachers in planning the action to be taken, monitoring the process, interpreting and analyzing the collected data (Bailey, 2006; Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Glickman, 2002). Gebhard (1999) gives an example of an EFL high school teacher in Japan who got involved in an action research. Having videotaped her classes, the teacher noticed "considerable amount" of Japanese used by her students in her English classes. She then decided to promote the use of English in her classes by asking students questions which were outside their textbook. As the sessions were all videotaped, she was able to transcribe, study, and analyze the interactions and behaviors. Eventually, she discovered that "when she asked questions in English that were not in the text, most students, as she predicted, avoided eye contact with her and did not volunteer to answer" (ibid, p.68). The research cycle started and continued once more when the teacher decided to continue to explore other ways to make English part of the classroom life by getting students to communicate their ideas and feelings in English. This action research well confirms the ongoing, "cyclical" nature of action research in which emergent answers raise new questions (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

Mentoring has also been a buzzword in educational reform since the early 1980s and refers to the relationship between a teacher (especially novice ones or those who are new to teaching) and support provider who is called a mentor (Malderez, 2009; Scherer, 1999). What distinguishes the job of a mentor from that of a supervisor is that mentor is responsible for providing descriptive feedback rather than value judgments about what they observe in teachers' classrooms; mentor does not "evaluate" teacher's works, so "novices can express concerns and admit weaknesses that they might not wish to share with a supervisor" (Bailey, 2006, p.13). In other words, mentors can be of help when teachers run into a problem or need advice. Malderez and Bodoczky (1999, p.4) describe five roles that mentors might take: models—the type of mentors who inspire teachers and demonstrate effective teaching; acculturators—mentors who help novice teachers learn about the new context in which they are working; sponsors—mentors who introduce their mentees to the "right person"; supporters—mentors who are of help when mentees run into problems, educators—mentors who listen as novice teachers articulate their ideas in pursuing their own professional development. However, "most mentors will be involved to a greater or lesser degree in all five roles" (ibid).

In recent years, more and more arguments can be heard that teachers' over-reliance on ready-made materials and pre-set mandated or recommended techniques, skills or behaviors can deprive them from initiating pedagogical changes or innovative exploratory teaching (Tomlinson, 2008 & 2011; van Lier, 1996, 2007 & 2010). Based on the growing need for teacher research, classroom-centered action research, professional development and growth, language teachers are recommended to benefit from their vast inner as well as outer socio-cultural sources of inspiration, attempt to generate their own instructional materials, seek innovative pedagogical approaches, and investigate the contexts in which their designed practice is embedded. In other words, there seems to be more recognition of this fairly neglected fact that to understand language teaching and learning we need to have a clearer sense of who teachers; are; what social and personal lived experiences, values, assumptions, and worlds they bring to the classrooms with themselves; how they make sense of their daily life in their classrooms; and how they probably get to question taken-for-granted practices and transform them in their actions (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). Despite the long introduction of alternatives to teacher supervision, like action research and mentoring, classroom observation is still a part and parcel of many English as foreign language teaching

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programs, including Iranian private and no-private sectors. The present study aims at providing accounts of how such classroom observations are perceived by a group of seven Iranian language teachers and the supervisory manager of a local language institute; which model of observation is enacted there; and to what extent the teachers and the supervisory manager are aware of alternative approaches. The results of this small-scale, data-driven and context-sensitive study can make contribution to teacher supervision field by encouraging both Iranian and foreign language teachers and supervisors to show more sensitivity to how supervision is conducted and make more informed decisions concerning the evaluation of language-teaching performance.

2. Methodology

2.1. Site

The central place of surprise observation in one of the language institutes in west of Tehran, Iran made me conduct a kind of study to see how the act of classroom observation is being perceived by a number of seven language teachers and the supervisory manager of the students. With an approximate enrolment of 1000 students in each semester and thirty teachers, the institute has long been one of the well-known language schools in this town, along with several other branches in other big cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz, etc. Despite being a co-educational school a large body of teachers consists of females. Teacher recruitment normally happens every semester with a special peak on summers. Those who apply for a teaching job are called for an interview and a general English proficiency test. It is also compulsory for the less experienced teachers to enroll on a Teacher Training Course conducted by a senior teacher. Based on the institute's policies, nearly all teachers—regardless of their expertise—have to be observed at least once in each semester. The supervisory manager uses a Teacher Observation Checklist containing statements about the teacher's preparation, presentation, method of teaching, personal characteristics, and interaction with students. At the end, numerical values in front of each statement are counted and kept secretly in the teacher's profile. The observation sessions are often—but not always—followed by a post-observation session in which the supervisor comments on teachers' performances. For example, the teachers are reminded that based on the rules of institute, their approach to teaching grammar is 'mistaken', they need to work more on their pronunciations, or they need to try to be more "active" in the class. Like many similar contexts, classroom observations are treated seriously since they have been seen to play a crucial role in future decisions about teachers' tenure, promotions or demotions, and pay raise, besides providing a tool for ensuring the institute teachers' adherence to pre-set program policies.

2.2. Participants

This study purposively focused on a purposive sample of participants who were willing to share their views with me as “understanding requires an openness to experience, a willingness to engage in a dialogue with one that challenges our understandings” (Schwandt, 1999, p. 458). The participants of the study were selected from among the willing teachers whose classes had recently been observed by the supervisor, so that the memories of being observed were still fresh in their minds. They were all female. Five of these teachers (Mahsa, Zahra, Fatemeh, Maryam, and Azar) had got their Bachelor's degree in either English Literature or Translation and two of them (Saba & Sarah) were Master's degree students of TEFL at the time they were interviewed. They all had an average of at least five years of English language teaching at different language schools and ranged from 25 to 38 of years. The supervisory manager of the school was the next participant. He was a man of 32 holding a Master's degree in English language and Literature. For the last ten years he had taken different positions at different language schools including teaching and supervising and throughout the last four years he had been the supervisory manager of the school of the study. All these participants took part in an individual, semi-structured interview, lasting for approximately one hour. Among other issues, the participants were asked about how they feel about the presence of an observer in their class, what they thought the purpose(s) of such observations were; how effective they saw the role of observers; and what changes they wish to see to institute's current approach to classroom observations. Having the words of both the teachers and the manager gave me an opportunity to make a comparison between these two groups of people who were institutionally representative of two different statuses. Though not sufficient for yielding decisive claims, the combination of these two perspectives could help to gain a broader and probably more secure understanding of the issue of teacher supervision in this context. In keeping with the ethics of qualitative research, confidentiality was established by informing the participants that their real names would not be revealed in the final report. At the final stage of the research, pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. Reading and rereading of the raw data (interview transcripts) and the provided responses by the teachers and the supervisory manager, juxtaposing the ideas, highlighting and codifying the collective voices led to the emergence of the following categories with regard to raised issues. Attempts were made to
ensure the validity of the claims by repeatedly returning to the original transcripts and quoting their exact words.

2.2.1. Under the eyes of the observer

Panic, dislike, embarrassment, stress were amongst the common words used by the teachers in describing their feelings about the presence of an observer. For example, Mahsa, one of the teachers, describes how she “got into a panic” the moment the observer dropped into her class and how her students had found her unusual. This panic was “fortunately” a passing feeling. The situation seems to be better for Maryam as she “didn’t feel bad” despite not “liking” the presence of the observer. The situation got even softer for Fatemeh as she personally had no special feeling and this made her “handle the class more easily”. She even found her students more “active” that session; as they “were trying to show their abilities” more. However, she seems worried about the “negative evaluations” which would be made by her students as a result of these observations. These observations, she believes, can downplay or degrade the status of teachers as “students may think that their teacher is not efficient enough or is an unexperienced [sic] teacher who has just started teaching”.

In the interview I had with Mr. Karimi, the supervisory manager, I managed to ask him about how he used to feel towards such observations during the time he himself was a teacher. He recognized the first time he had been observed as “very stressful”. However, the picture he had in mind of the first experience of being observed was not a dreadful one as “fortunately” he was well-prepared for the class and everything went on pretty well. As a whole he describes such kinds of anxiety and stress as “natural” feelings which happen anytime we feel we are “under control” and “what we are telling, how we are moving, and everything that we are doing is scrutinized”. For him, “anxiety” of being observed is “related to experience” and needs time to be resolved. “By the passage of time, as the classes are observed many times”, he thinks “the process of being observed would be something routine and usual”. Based on these accounts, it can be seen that a feelings of “anxiety”, “stress”, and “panic” though inherent in the process of being observed, are seen to gradually fly away as observers get used to presence of observers in their classes.

2.2.2. The why of being observed

Despite different wordings used by the teachers, their understandings of the purpose(s) behind such surprise observation proved to be similar in nature. The responses showed that nearly all the teachers believed in an “improvement-oriented” nature of these observations and they believed spotting their “problems”, “faults”, and “weak points” by the supervisor could help them “improve” in their profession. This was not the end of the story yet. Mahsa, lamented that although “the observers have said repeatedly that the purpose of such an observation has been just and just as a help to the teachers to improve themselves” but this is mainly done through “focusing on teachers’ weak points rather than their capabilities”. Given that, teachers’ efforts are ignored and “their position as a good teacher is undermined for a long time”. Saba also, while complaining, suggested that as well as checking for “following the rules”, such observations/evaluations should serve other functions such as “upgrading the knowledge of teachers” and “raising their payment” if the teachers’ performances are satisfactory.

Speaking from a managing position, Mr. Karimi also mentioned that the “philosophy” or “essence” of observing classes is to make sure that teachers are doing “what they are assigned to do”. He added:

One of the problems that majority of classes suffer from is that each teacher is doing his or her own way. …When the class is over (at the end of the term) and you are giving the report cards, we have some complaints that the students make. … They complain that the classes of two teachers are completely different and these are for example the differences…

The diversity in teaching methods was what he called the malady; it could put the institute in trouble. Unifying the methods of teaching, he added, was what the institute was attempting to accomplish. The frequency of occurrence of words like faults, mistakes, and weak points by teachers might indicate how teachers saw themselves inferior to supervisors and saw themselves in need for being corrected by a person who was superior to them.

2.2.3. The observer: A help or hindrance?

Another question was about how teachers evaluated the role of observers. Seeing the role of observers as a very significant one, Fatemeh stated that the observer should be suggestive of methods to the teacher to help him/her be able to remove his/her faults. Saba also saw the presence of observers effective provided that these observations were followed by suggestions. She criticized the observers who had observed her in the past and had left the class with no more words. She wondered how one could help the teacher without negotiating with her. The idea of giving comments and opinions was also what Mahsa voiced for; however, she believed that in evaluating the class, the observer should take into consideration various factors that affected the performance of the teacher such as the situation of the class, the students’ age, and even what kind of mood the teacher had in…that day. The concerns expressed by the teachers bore great resemblance to those expressed by the manager.

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Showing his disagreement with traditional observation, he stated that for observation to be effective, the teachers should be provided with feedbacks about their current performance as well as feed-forward; this was the term coined by him that were suggestions for future actions. To him, observations should serve both the function of evaluation and support. For observation to be supportive, he added that teachers should have a meeting or talk with the observers that their drawbacks and weak points were talked about. As a whole, based on the stated ideas, it seems that both the teachers and the manager found the role of observers effective and efficient provided that these observations were followed by problem-finding and problem-solving suggestions on the part of the observers.

2.2.4. Other alternatives
The final topic addressed teachers' tendencies for changes to current approach to observation. The common concerns expressed by Fatemeh, Mahsa, Saba, and Mr. Karimi were that observations should be continual, repeated several times in each term, and they should also end up with meeting sessions with the teachers during which the teacher’s faults, mistakes, and problems were explained. Using cameras instead of real human observers were among the suggested solutions put forth by Mahsa and Mr. Karimi so that teachers were being observed all the time; something that also enabled them to document the process of observing. Saba also suggested that teachers should be informed about the results of these evaluations, preferably through employing a standard grading system. She added:

When the observer comes to the class, there should be a list on which he or she puts check markers for the teacher. This list should include grades. And he total grade should be clear. And the list should be given to the teacher after observation. I think greater considerations should be given to observations. This consideration should include giving higher-grade classes to teachers…raising their salaries…encouraging them…appreciating them at the right time…

Zahra and Sarah seem to agree on a further step to be taken. They put forth the idea of mentoring that a qualified mentor instead of an observer was assigned to answer the teachers’ questions and help them with their problems. Peer observation and sharing experiences with colleagues were suggested in order to harmonize the ways of teaching.

3. Discussions
3.1. Controlled lives / controlled minds
The setting, participants, and events eventually came hand in hand, gave way to the emergence of present findings, and sharpened understanding of the phenomena. The resemblance of words and worlds, concepts and beliefs, and absence of radical diversity of views were evident in the collected voices. The analysis of oral and written documents announced that nearly all the participants of this study, consciously or unconsciously, had accepted the role of the observer as authority figure who was there to correct their deficiencies. Nearly all the teachers expected the observers to watch them regularly, evaluate their performance, tell them about their faults, mistakes and weak points as well as teach them how to approach the standards. This perspective paved the way for prescriptive model of supervision to gain dominance as apparently both the teachers and the supervisory manager were enculturated, socialized, or habitualized into the norms and values of the institutional setting they were working in. This prescriptive approach to teacher supervision often forced teachers to accept and follow what the supervisor thought they should do and consequently did not create much space for the teachers to become their own experts, rely upon themselves, and try or explore new ideas more freely fearing that the authorities in charge might disapprove of what they do (Gebhard, 1984; Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Kinchelo, 2003). Similarly, the participants did not wish to go much beyond the requirements of the institute or to do any extra task or strategy or teaching method that stood against the norms of the institute or made them target of criticism. In other words, a covert or overt fear seemed to govern the talks of the teacher; fear of not covering the required materials on time, fear of not preparing students for their exams, fear of introducing new things to the course which the principal might disapprove, fear of losing the time, etc. The supervisory manager also emphasized that the degree of conformity with the institute’s prescribed set of techniques was preferable to following varied or different teaching methods. The preference for not deviating from the norms might be suggestive of a shadow of institutionalization dominating the atmosphere that reduces language teaching to a neat and tidy act which can be standardized and monitored. As argued by Ivan Illich (1971) in his Deschooling Society, institutionalization makes individuals incapable of organizing their own lives around their own experiences, resources, knowledge, abilities, creativity, innovation, and initiatives. Once the lesson of dependence or alignment is learned, people lose their willingness to grow in independence. This alignment, dependence or change phobia is likely to stop the teachers behind a thick wall of do's and don'ts as well as disciplinary rules and procedures in a way that they have difficulty moving beyond them and kindle their own creativity. In addition to institutionalization, a language of compliance rather than resistance appeared outstanding in the analyzed documents.
The teachers seemed to approve of (or get conditioned to) letting others the social institution, making decisions instead of them, and being subjected to top-down pressure. This approval served to legitimize, sustain, and strengthen the idea of teacher directive supervision as effective. Even the changes they wished to see like equipping classes with close-circuit cameras for constantly watching the teachers on various occasions and making observations less non-representative or partial still had the same flavor of control, surveillance, and institutionalization. In addition to violate teachers’ and students' privacy, once more, this method was likely to pave the way for fault-finding, judging teachers' degree of conformity to what teachers were assigned to do, and creating homogeneous teaching conditions. It seems that language-teacher supervision in this context was more directed by tradition rather than newer approaches or research findings.

4. Conclusion

The act of classroom observation should be re-vision seriously, probably through incorporation of more liberating approaches like action research so as to go off the beaten track. There is no claim that action research can act as a panacea which remedies all the weaknesses in supervision; however, it seems to be able to provide spaces and opportunities for classroom teachers to contribute to shaping their teaching life through sharing their concerns with each other. It can also disentangle the act of judgmental evaluation and instead invites teachers to become judges of their own practice rather than puppets for applying other people's prescriptions. What needs to be underscored is that action research is definitely not a picnic in the park. For action research to be productive, teachers need to be sufficiently acquainted with nature of classroom research on the one hand, and they are supported by a hospitable professional culture that favors collaboration, risk-taking, and inquiry. Otherwise, teachers are highly probable to prefer to stick to their routine teachings and conformist approach.
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