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العدد الثالث

والأربعون

ما وراء السبورة: دراسة حالة حول استكشاف أساليب التدريس الملائمة ثقافياً لمتعلمي اللغة
الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق

م. م. علي عبد العظيم صالح

ماجستير طرائق تدريس اللغة الانكليزية

المديرية العامة لتربية واسط/ الكلية التربوية المفتوحة/ مركز واسط الدراسي

Aadeem@uowasit.edu.iq

المستخلص:

يُعد تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق تحديًا متعدد الأوجه، لا يُعزى في المقام الأول إلى قدرات الطلاب، بل إلى التنوع الواسع في المحتوى والأساليب التربوية المستخدمة، والتي غالبًا ما تبدو غريبة على الطلاب في أبعاد تتجاوز مجرد اكتساب اللغة. وتسعى دراسة الحالة هذه إلى معالجة هذا النقص من خلال تقديم وصف شامل. تبحث هذه الدراسة على وجه التحديد في إمكانية إعادة تصميم التدريس في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق من خلال التركيز على ثلاثة أبعاد ثقافية حاسمة بالنسبة للطلاب العراقيين: المبادئ الإسلامية والدينية، والتقاليد الواسعة النطاق لرواية القصص الشفوية والأداء اللفظي، والتوجه الاجتماعي الجماعي الذي يميز العلاقات الشخصية في العراق. ستستخدم المقالة أطر عمل راسخة، وبشكل أساسي أفكاراً مستمدة من نظرية غاي (التدريس المستجيب ثقافياً) ونظرية فيغوتسكي (النظرية الاجتماعية الثقافية) ونظرية الترابط التي طرحها كومينز، لربط هذه الحقائق الاجتماعية بممارسات تعليمية محددة. لم تستعن بأي مشاركين في هذه الدراسة؛ فهي دراسة حالة نظرية. وتشمل الاستراتيجيات التي تم تحديدها دورات قائمة على السرد تستند إلى التقاليد الشفوية العراقية، وأنشطة تعاونية تجسد



اتجاهات التعلم الجماعي، والدمج المتعمد للقيم الأخلاقية الإسلامية باعتبارها محتوى هاماً لممارسة اللغة الإنجليزية. وتقدم دراسة الحالة هذه الحجة المنطقية التالية: إن بدء تدريب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق، انطلاقاً من السياقات الثقافية والاجتماعية الحالية للطلاب، يعزز بشكل كبير من احتمالات النجاح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التدريس المتكيف ثقافياً، تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق، التربية المستجيبة ثقافياً، التقاليد الشفوية، النزعة الجماعية، القيم الإسلامية، استراتيجيات الفصل الدراسي لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تعليم اللغة والتكنولوجيا.

Beyond the Blackboard: A case study about

Exploring Culturally Adaptive Teaching Methods for Iraqi EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

مجلة العلوم الأساسية

للعلوم التربوية والنفسية وطرائق التدريس للعلوم الأساسية

The teaching of English as a foreign language in Iraq presents a multifaceted challenge, not primarily due to the students' capabilities, but rather to the broad spectrum of content and pedagogical methods employed, which often appear foreign to the students in dimensions that extend beyond mere language acquisition. This case study seeks to address that deficiency by providing a full description. This study specifically examines the potential redesign of EFL classroom instruction in Iraq by focusing on three cultural dimensions crucial to Iraqi students: Islamic and religious principles, the extensive tradition of oral storytelling and verbal performances, and the



collectivist social orientation that characterises Iraqi interpersonal relationships. The article will employ established frameworks, primarily ideas from Gay's theory (Culturally Responsive Teaching), Vygotsky's theory (sociocultural theory), and Cummins' (interdependence hypothesis), to correlate these social realities with specific instructional practices. No participants were involved; it is a theoretical case study. The identified tactics include narrative-based courses rooted in the Iraqi oral tradition, collaborative activities that embody communal learning tendencies, and the deliberate integration of Islamic ethical concerns as significant content for practising the English language. This case study presents the following rationale: initiating EFL training in Iraq, beginning from the students' current cultural and social contexts, significantly enhances the likelihood of success.

Keywords: culturally adaptive teaching, Iraqi EFL, culturally responsive pedagogy, oral tradition, collectivism, Islamic values, EFL classroom strategies, language teaching and technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is something peculiar about the way English is often taught in Iraqi classrooms. Textbook dialogues set in London flats, reading passages about autumn leaves and school fetes, grammar exercises built around names like Tom and Sarah — materials like these are not merely unfamiliar to Iraqi students; they belong to a different world. And yet, rather than prompting serious rethinking of what cultural assumptions underlie EFL instruction, this mismatch has too often been treated as background noise, an unfortunate feature of using internationally produced course books that teachers and learners simply have to live with (Awaad et al., 2025).

This paper takes a different view. It argues that the cultural distance between mainstream EFL pedagogy and Iraqi learners' lived experience is not incidental — it is pedagogically consequential. In this paper, we present a different perspective. It claims that the difference in culture between mainstream EFL pedagogy and the lived experience of the Iraqi EFL learners is not accidental but pedagogically consequential. Studies of second



language learning have determined that, to a reasonable extent, motivation, identity, and the perceived relevance of classroom material are effectively relevant to the extent to which language learning is successful (Dornyei, 2009; Norton, 2013).

Students lose their religious beliefs, personal stories, and sense of belonging when asked to confirm their identity at the classroom door. Some students still maintain their traditions and community ties. Many of them feel they are part of something superior to themselves. This idea is public but not universal. Some families continue to observe faith-based practices at school. Students who come from religious backgrounds may feel more included in class settings. A few teachers notice these differences during daily routines (Dupper et al, 2015).

The paper presents a descriptive case study of the Iraqi EFL classroom as a culturally specific learning situation, and based on this description, it derives a set of teaching strategies that may be more applicable to it. The method is non-empirical and unconventional since it does not have participants, surveys, or pre- and post-tests (Willand, 2023). Instead, this approach is an attempt to think carefully, drawing on existing scholarship, about what culturally responsive EFL instruction could actually look like in Iraq.

Despite the expanding literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, a notable deficiency persists in the EFL scholarship pertaining to Iraq: there is an absence of a systematic analysis of how the three predominant cultural dimensions of Iraqi learners—Islamic values, oral tradition, and collectivism—can be converted into practical, classroom-ready instructional strategies. Current research either discusses cultural responsiveness broadly or concentrates on Arab EFL environments, without the specificity required by the Iraqi educational setting. This paper addresses the research question: How can culturally adaptive teaching strategies based on Islamic values, oral tradition, and collectivist learning orientations be developed to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of EFL instruction in Iraqi secondary schools and universities?



Three cultural dimensions structure the analysis. The first is the role of Islamic values and religious sensibility in Iraqi students' understanding of language, knowledge, and ethical life. The second one is the custom of verbal communication, oral expression, storytelling, poetry, and rhetorical performances, which has influenced the Iraqi communicative culture over the centuries. The third is collectivism: the group identity and group duty that permeates the social life of Iraqis and is bound to enter the classroom. The intended audience for this paper is broad: EFL teachers working in Iraqi secondary schools and universities, curriculum developers trying to make materials more locally relevant, and educational policymakers who shape the frameworks within which teaching happens. The paper also speaks, it is hoped, to language teaching researchers interested in the question of what culturally responsive pedagogy looks like when it moves from abstract principle to concrete practice (Ladson-Billings, 2023).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Problem of Cultural Fit in EFL Teaching

The notion that language teaching can never be culturally neutral is an idea that has been floating around applied linguistics over the decades since Kramsch (1993) caused a stir with his writing on context and culture. What has been more difficult to determine is how to address this issue. Pennycook (1994) and Canagarajah (1999) were critical of what they perceived to be linguistic imperialism, the blind exportation of Western EFL models into situations where they were not appropriate, but criticism does not result in the creation of lesson plans. The Culturally Responsive Teaching framework by Gay (2000, 2010) was more pragmatically oriented in the very beginning. The main argument of Gay is that teaching should employ what students already possess—their cultural knowledge, their community structures, and their means of cognising the world, etc.—not as a challenge. When applied to EFL, the notion suggests the reconsideration of not only the types of texts that are studied during the class but also the organisation of the tasks and the relationships between teachers and students, as well as the idea of the meaningful language-learning experience. The paradigm has its broad usage



in the North American studies in multicultural education; its usage in EFL teaching and learning in the Arab world and Iraq in particular, is understudied.

2.2 Understanding the Iraqi EFL Context

The history of Iraq with formal education in the English language is stratified. Initial influence of the English language in Iraqi schools during the British colonial rule; later political changes under Ba'athist rule caused the increase of Arabic to the dominant role and limited the exposure to Western content; the aftermath of the 2003 period brought a revitalisation of English and a severe disruption of the education infrastructure (Al-Humaidi, 2018). In Iraqi EFL classrooms today, such classrooms are generally large, under-resourced, and taught by teachers whose own training in the English language might have been based on grammar-intensive and communicatively-sketchy programmes. The prevailing approach is more of grammar-translation than communicative language teaching.

In this institutional environment, the students are not devoid of a cultural and linguistic background. Arabic 1, not only a language of communication but also a much internalised communicative worldview, is offered by Arabic, both classical Quranic Arabic and Iraqi colloquial. The complexity of the process can be described in terms of diglossia introduced by Ferguson (1959) in the sense that Iraqi students can move between the formal standard Arabic and the vernacular in ways that can influence their metalinguistic awareness in potentially effective, and yet mostly unexplored, ways in EFL teaching. Versteegh (2014) has stated that the long pedagogical tradition of the Arabic literary culture provides resources to language teaching that Western-trained EFL practitioners rarely realise.

The influence of Islam on the daily life of Iraqi people can hardly be overestimated. The Islamic values influence prayer, moral reasoning, social interaction, calendar time, and rhetorical norms in a way that is far beyond formal religious practice. Al-Khalidi (2020) has pointed out that this is not what makes the Iraqi classrooms homogenous, but rather that it implies that



Islam offers a common cultural point of reference that EFL teaching can tap into intelligently rather than disregarding.

The collectivist aspect of the Iraqi social culture has been recorded in numerous studies in social sciences, as well as in the cross-cultural studies conducted by Hofstede (1980, 2001), and in the more fine-tuned theoretical work of Triandis (1995). Iraqi students are more likely to identify themselves as a part of a family, tribe, neighbourhood, and religious group, as opposed to being individuals. These differences have actual consequences for the classroom activities, evaluation, and peer interactions, and the consequences that many EFL approaches fail to address.

2.3 Theoretical Anchors

Three theoretical frameworks inform the upcoming analysis. The general orientation is provided by Gay (2000) in Culturally Responsive Teaching, but it emphasises cultural validation, meaningful content, and transforming instructional practices to serve diverse learners. The paper is based on the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978)—especially the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development and the significance of mediated and collaborative learning—as an argument in favour of cooperative instructional organisations. The recommendation to establish a strong basis for teaching EFL using Arabic linguistic and rhetorical materials, rather than setting them aside, is based on the interdependence hypothesis developed by Cummins (1979, 2001), which states that L1 competencies may be transferred to facilitate the acquisition of L2.



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Descriptive Case Study Design

This paper is a descriptive case study. It does not present information obtained from respondents because there were no interviews, questionnaires, or classroom observations. Rather, it provides a theoretically guided and evidence-based account of a certain educational phenomenon, namely the cultural aspects of Iraqi EFL learning and the pedagogical approaches they imply. This is the valid and established type of research (Yin, 2018; Merriam, 2009), which is suitable in situations where the purpose is to write a rich, grounded description of a complex educational case instead of testing hypotheses or quantifying results.

Its epistemological orientation is that of the interpretivist (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The case, which is the Iraqi EFL classroom, is perceived as an environment that is constructed socially and culturally, an environment that cannot be exhaustively explained by the use of decontextualised variables. Here it is about meaning, meaning what it is like to be an Iraqi learner, what cultural expectations the learners carry to the English classes, and what sort of teaching may seem not only effective but also right in the given cultural context.

3.2 Sources and Analytical Approach

The research is based on three types of available material. The first one is a peer-reviewed scholarship in applied linguistics, EFL pedagogy, cross-cultural education, and second language acquisition theory. Second, official curricular frameworks of EFL in Iraq are laid out in policy documents in the Iraqi Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Third, qualitative and ethnographic studies in relation to the learning culture in Iraq, the attitudes of the learners, and the social norms.



The method of analysis is based on the logic of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Relevant literature is reviewed, and identifiable themes of cultural relevance, through close reading, are subjected to a pedagogical strategy derived from introducing the identifiable themes to an already existing language teaching methodology. It is not a mechanical process because it entails interpretive judgement regarding the most pedagogically salient cultural patterns and the instructional methods most apt to suit these patterns.

3.3 Scope

The target group in the study is the EFL learners in the secondary schools and universities in Iraq. It claims to cover all the educational scenarios in Iraq, acknowledging that the Iraqi culture is not a monolith and that regional, ethnic, and sectarian differences in the country are real and significant. The described cultural tendencies are not to be interpreted as strict features of a homocentric group. The mentioned strategies could be contextualised by the talented teachers who know their students very well and also know their environments or backgrounds.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Working with Islamic and Religious Values

The role of Islamic values is, perhaps, the most often debated – and the most often mismanaged – aspect of teaching EFL in Muslim-majority settings. On one hand, the threat is the imposition of religious material where it is not required; on the other hand, the threat is the assumption that faith is nonexistent in the classroom, which is pedagogically unsophisticated and, for many Iraqi students, simply deafening in its silence.

A more fruitful way would be what could be termed "ethical resonance": selecting or creating reading, listening, and discussion materials that address issues that have real moral weight in the context of the Islamic tradition but are not necessarily Islamic in their formulation. These, anyway, are themes that excellent literature has always dealt with. A lesson based on an EFL



short story about a fictional character who has to overcome a moral dilemma can provide an Iraqi student with so much more to interact with as compared to a lesson about booking a hotel room or talking about what you had for breakfast. The functions of the language may be the same, but the desire to participate is not.

The second way is the principled application of Arabic as the metalinguistic resource instead of an adversary to acquiring English. The interdependence hypothesis proposed by Cummins (2001) provides theoretical support in the given case. The Quranic Arabic is one of the most sophisticated and verbally studied linguistic systems in the world; Iraqi students who have absorbed even the basic vocabulary of the Quran have encountered a sort of profound linguistic thought, which can be fruitfully applied as a reference to English vocabulary acquisition, semantic interpretation, and rhetorical consciousness. Investigating, in English, what a word such as 'sabr' (patient endurance rather than waiting) means and what its closest English equivalents are and are not able to embody is a truly fascinating exercise in language learning.

Islamic values are also related to classroom management and relational dynamics. The concept of “adab”, which entails respectful etiquette, thoughtful behaviour, and proper inclination of a student to wisdom, influences the way Iraqi students anticipate a classroom environment as well as the manner in which a teacher should act. When teachers are conscious of this and behave in this way, it is likely that their authority will be more accepted and less challenged. This is not to adopt a formal and detached approach, but rather to be consistently respectful, without any childish social display of humiliation, and the classroom a sober collective endeavour.

4.2 Building on Oral Tradition

One can simply undervalue the culture of the oral Iraqis. The mu'allaqat, or the great pre-Islamic odes, were written to be recited. Maqama (the extravagant, punning, rhetorically brilliant form of prose) of the Abbasid era was a performance genre. Verbal skill was also shown, and social status was



also partly determined by the quality of one's speech in the tribal meeting hall, the diwan. To this day, in modern Iraq, wordplay, the mastery of language, knowing how to talk to a crowd, knowing how to tell a story that is not forgotten, and knowing how to make an argument are socially real things of value. EFL teaching does not have this problem. It is an asset. Story-based instruction, empirically supported in research on second language acquisition (Egan, 1986; Wajnryb, 2003), is a logical choice of instruction to be used with learners who already know, on a cultural level, that a well-told story is one worth listening to. Narrative-based lessons, based on Quranic (qisas al-anbiya) or Iraqi folk tales or carefully selected literary fiction, can present grammar, vocabulary, and discourse awareness in a form that Iraqi students can both identify with culturally and intellectually. The questions to understand the story at the end of the story do not have to be different; the only difference is the extent to which the students are interested in the story that they just read. This reasoning is extended to oral performance tasks. Instead of introducing a pre-written monologue as would be the case in a business presentation, which is in any case a genre that is culturally quite specific to some Western business settings, Iraqi students may be requested to read a story about their own family or community, to debate a point of view in a more or less structured format, or to retell and interpret a local historical phenomenon. These tasks require the students to take the competence that they already possess into an English-language situation, a very different psychological offer than asking students to speak English in a cultural vacuum. This tradition can be well served by technology. Students can create oral English works, which they can share, rewrite, and produce via recording apps, digital storytelling tools, audio, podcast platforms, and social media. Something worth noting here is that a student who writes a story of what happened to his grandmother during a tough time in Iraqi history in English for an audience of his classmates is doing something of true sense. And that is another incentive to register drilling irregular past tenses.



4.3 Designing for Collectivist Learners

The Western EFL approach to teaching consists of a big share of personal elements: personal vocabulary lists, personal grammar drills, personal speaking tests, and personal reflection activities. The model is not wrong per se; however, it does not align well with how many Iraqi students view themselves and relate to others. Working on something together with your friends, helping a classmate who is stumbling, and putting your efforts into a common product – all such thinking is natural to collectivist learners, but individual performance tasks are not.

A methodological answer to this problem is well documented in the form of cooperative learning arrangements (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019). Jigsaw activities foster actual interdependence in that, rather than working in parallel, the various group members master and share different segments of information. The social aspect of using language becomes explicit and real in group compositions, whereby students can write and revise a piece of work collectively. Even simple tasks like think-pair-share activities provide students with a moment of interpersonal processing, which means that most of them will not have to be as anxious about making a personal statement.

The concept of peer mentoring is one that should be developed in Iraqi EFL classrooms. The “mas'uliyya – responsibility”, the sense of duty to one’s community, which is a cultural value of the Iraqis, implies that high-achieving students, not merely employed as unpaid assistants, can acquire actual joy in helping their peers. It must be well-organised, with clear tasks, scaffolding for the mentoring dialogues, and frequent teacher check-ins to ensure the exercise is beneficial for both parties.

In the assessment sphere, the ideas of collectivism are violated most frequently. Normal individual testing may be perceived as foreign and discouraging to those learners who are inclined to learn by collaborating with peers, since each child works alone and is compared to others. This



strategy does not imply giving up on individual assessment – it also has its compelling roles of its own – but in addition to this, portfolio assignments, projects with an element of group work, and peer assessment recognise the way these students actually think best: in relation to others.

The setting of the classroom is important as well, maybe more than the teachers themselves realise. The traditional Iraqi classroom arrangement, with rows of students facing forward and the teacher speaking to the group from a distance, reinforces feelings of loneliness and promotes inactive listening. Even partial shifts in the interpersonal pattern of a lesson, achieved through transitions to circle or cluster patterns when space is available, can change the interpersonal dynamics in a way that fosters collaborative learning perceived as natural by collectivist students. Even minor linguistic manipulations in the language of the teachers, like the adoption of the 'we' and 'our class' in place of addressing people all the time, build the same impression of common business.

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1 For Classroom Teachers

The closest target audience for this paper is EFL teachers in classrooms in Iraq. The plans outlined in this report will not imply dropping the current communicative strategies and developing new ones. These are modifications and accommodations: another text selection, another task format, another conceptualisation of what a lesson is about. Teachers may begin testing the waters with one or two culturally incongruent reading passages changed to more locally resonant passages or simply transforming one task into a cooperative one. The concept of cultural audit is worth paying attention to: it is pleasant to sit down with an item from a course book and be straightforward about what aspects of it remind you of a different world as a means of making thoughtful adjustments.



5.2 For Curriculum and Materials Developers

Curriculum developers occupy a strategic position in this picture. The choices made regarding materials — including which texts are included, what cultural worlds they depict, and which task types recur across a course — shape thousands of classroom hours. EFL materials for use in Iraq should be designed with the cultural dimensions described in this paper as explicit criteria: Is there meaningful engagement with ethical and humanistic themes that resonate within Islamic moral thought? Are oral and narrative modes of language use represented alongside written ones? Do task structures support both individual and collaborative engagement? These are reasonable demands, and internationally produced course books that fail to meet them should be supplemented or replaced rather than simply used because they are familiar.

5.3 For Technology-Enhanced Learning

The use of language teaching technology has grown exponentially over the past few years, and much of it can be very helpful to culturally adaptive instruction, provided it is used in a prudent manner. The digital stories can provide the Iraqi students with an environment where they can create and publish oral narratives using the English language. The type of metalinguistic bridging described in this paper may be supported by bilingual vocabulary apps that are based on Arabic-English semantic relationships that include vocabulary related to the Quran. Cooperative and oral modes of using English are supported by collaborative writing tools, discussion forums, and podcast tools. The danger, like EFL methodology in general, is that the technology solutions will be imported without being culturally adapted and that they will imitate in electronic format the same mismatches that typify print materials. The same principle applies when it is a textbook or a tablet: the learner must be relevant to the cultural world.



5.4 For Policy

The Iraqi Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education can preemptively make culturally responsive pedagogy a mandatory requirement, not an additional feature. This might be by the curriculum standards that provide cultural localisation, teacher training that encompasses applied cross-cultural pedagogy, and publishing contracts that demand cultural adaptation as opposed to simple translation. All this effort does not have to come at the expense of the communicative quality of English language teaching; it must provide that good teaching is culturally honest teaching.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that culturally adaptive teaching approaches are not simply enhancements to EFL instruction in Iraq—they are pedagogical necessities if the potential of Iraqi learners is to be realised and their linguistic identities respected. It concludes with a thesis that this is not something that can be changed, not by a revolution in curriculum, but by the long and consistent efforts of institutionalising cultural knowledge in the design of instruction.

This study directly addresses the research topic about the design of culturally adaptable teaching strategies rooted in Islamic principles, oral tradition, and collectivist approaches to enhance EFL instruction in Iraq, yielding three definitive responses from the analysis. First, EFL materials and exercises that incorporate Islamic ethical themes and Arabic metalinguistic resources significantly enhance learner engagement and comprehension by linking new language to an existing moral and cognitive framework familiar to students. Second, narrative-based and oral performance tasks grounded in Iraq's storytelling history offer a culturally valid method of language creation that significantly reduces affective barriers and boosts motivation more efficiently than decontextualized drills or Western-style speaking tasks. Third, cooperative learning frameworks—such as jigsaw activities, group compositions, peer mentoring, and portfolio-based assessment—conform



EFL instruction to the collectivist social orientations of Iraqi learners, resulting in enhanced participation and more equitable outcomes compared to models focused solely on individual performance. Collectively, these three methodologies form a cohesive, theoretically informed, and practically flexible framework for culturally responsive English as a Foreign Language instruction in Iraq.

The three cultural aspects covered here, namely the Islamic values, oral tradition, and collectivism, do not represent fringe aspects of the identities of the Iraqi students. They form the core of learning in these learners, their relationships with others, and their awareness of knowledge. EFL teaching which recognises it and which works with these dimensions as teaching tools as opposed to barriers to the provision of universally applicable pedagogy is more apt to have engaged students, more fruitful classroom experiences, and more sustainable language learning.

The plans suggested in this paper are based on the existing theory and compatible with the greater evidence base of the language teaching research. They are also, it must be said, incomplete and provisional. Iraq is a nation that is characterised by a lot of internal diversity, and individual teachers who will be dealing with particular students in particular locations will have to replicate such ideas in their scenarios. That is as it should be. Culturally responsive teaching is not a prescription; it is a stance – the practice of asking, in advance of designing a lesson, what my students come to school with and what I can do to build on it.

Future studies – empirical, classroom, participatory – must test the strategies discussed here and amend them based on what the actual experiences of teachers and students are when they attempt to implement them in practice. This paper represents a beginning of that work, rather than its end.



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