



An Experience in the Teaching of Language Learning Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This document originated from the development of my doctoral thesis. I decided to put into practice what I had learned in my research on learning strategies within the context in which I was teaching at that time. In addition to observing its impact on students, this experience allowed me to acquire first-hand knowledge teaching language learning strategies outside the limits of my experimental research. My testimony tells about my involvement and my perceptions I had in teaching English language learning strategies within a private company environment. My testimony is not a rigorous analysis of research data. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of learners.

KEYWORDS

strategies, strategy instruction, EFL, ELT

Una experiencia en la enseñanza de estrategias de aprendizaje de lenguas

RESUMEN

Este documento se originó a lo largo del desarrollo de mi Tesis de Doctorado. Decidí poner en práctica lo que había aprendido en mi investigación sobre las estrategias de aprendizaje en el contexto en el que estaba enseñando en ese momento. Esta experiencia me permitió vivir en carne propia la enseñanza de estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas fuera de los límites de la investigación experimental y su impacto en los estudiantes. Este testimonio narra mi experiencia y mi percepción acerca del proceso en la enseñanza de estrategias de aprendizaje del idioma inglés en una empresa privada y no establece un análisis riguroso de los datos de una investigación completa. Se han utilizado seudónimos para proteger la identidad de los alumnos.

PALABRAS CLAVE

estrategias, instrucción de estrategias, EFL, ELT

Uma experiência no ensino de estratégias de aprendizagem de línguas

RESUMO

Este documento originou-se durante o desenvolvimento de minha tese de doutorado. Decidi colocar em prática o que aprendi em minha pesquisa sobre as estratégias de aprendizagem no contexto em que lecionava. Essa experiência me permitiu conhecer pessoalmente o ensino de estratégias de aprendizagem de línguas fora dos limites da pesquisa experimental e seu impacto nos estudantes. Este depoimento narra minha experiência e minha percepção sobre o processo no ensino de estratégias de aprendizagem da língua inglesa em uma empresa privada e não estabelece uma análise rigorosa dos dados de uma investigação completa. Utilizaram-se pseudônimos com o fim de proteger a identidade dos estudantes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

estratégias de aprendizagem, instrução de estratégia, EFL, ELT

INTRODUCTION

Many factors influence language learning. Findings in research on learning strategies have proven that the implementation of these practices can make learning easier, faster, and more enjoyable (Oxford, 1999). Researchers have also recognized that learning strategies play an important role in language achievement. For its part, strategy instruction proves that teaching learning techniques to deficient, unsuccessful or low achieving student's helps them attain success in learning a second language. Different methodologies in strategy instruction have shown that students can become strategy users (Chamot, 2005; Oxford, 1990; Pearson & Dole, 1987; Cohen, 1998) and they can improve their language learning skills.

However, when it comes to learning a foreign language as an adult, students find it more difficult to acquire new approaches to learning even if such methods have proven to be functional and beneficial. The teaching of learning strategies for language achievement might go further than the mere explanation, exemplification, and practice of the strategy.

Every adult learner has adopted learning strategies and stored them in their schematic repertoire. Students draw on such systems to help them understand, learn, recall, or practice

information that they receive. However, the approach that students use to learn English might not always be the most adequate to help them learn. Therefore, they often need to be taught new methods to learn a new language.

LEARNING STRATEGIES

Strategy research started with an attempt to identify why students learn differently if teachers used the same teaching methodology for everyone. Proficient language learners were classified and their learning methods were explored. Rubin (1987) differentiated mechanisms or strategies that helped successful language learners learn faster and better. To begin with, let us review the definition of learning strategies.

Language learning strategies are actions or behaviors that students consciously and deliberately use to understand, retain, retrieve and use information in language learning (Samperio, 2017); additionally, strategies make language learning “easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990:8). Researchers have found a correlation between the use of strategies and higher achievement (Griffiths, 2013). In addition to learning techniques, different factors contribute to language learning. Students choose methods based on unique variables and researchers have tried to define the complexity of these differences that affect ways of learning. Individual characteristics such as proficiency, ethnicity, age, cognitive functioning, gender, learning styles, motivation, personality traits, learner’s beliefs, and even career orientation may have an effect on the choice and use of language learning strategies (e.g. Green and Oxford, 1995; Cohen, 2003; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Griffiths, 2003; Lan & Oxford 2003). However, it is important to note that since learning approaches are individual, purposeful and goal oriented, students should choose and use them accordingly.

Another line of research examines the teaching of learning strategies for less tactical learners as well as the effect and impact on their language learning. Much research conducted to date has reported that instruction in learning strategies aids students to increase their language learning ability and confidence (e.g., Ross & Rost, 1991; Thompson & Rubin, 1993). The purpose of strategy instruction is to teach students how to approach new knowledge and how to process information (Chamot & O’Malley, 1986; Chamot, 2004; Oxford, 1990; Pearson & Dole, 1987; Cohen, 1998). Nonetheless, learning strategies instruction barely considers a student’s individual differences. Additionally, the number of variables that influence the choice and the use of strategies makes it difficult for students to adopt new learning methods.

THE TEACHING CONTEXT

Tijuana, in México, is a border city with the United States, where many international companies have established manufacturing centers producing a large variety of items.

Numerous companies provide their employees with language lessons in an attempt to improve communications with corporate staff and their employees.

My testimonial takes place in an American company located in Tijuana, whose employees are required to learn conversational, and written English. The company offers and encourages its workers to take English lessons and classes are free of charge.

The Beginner's Level language class was comprised of twenty-five students: one male and 24 females whose ages varied from 18 to 55 years old. Since classes were open to any interested employee in the company, their occupations varied from line assemblers and welders to accountants and human resources staff. It is important to mention here that the English placement test showed that most employees had no knowledge of English.

Students were not able to attend classes during the week due to their work requirements. Therefore, the Beginner's Level of the course was taught in five-hour sessions on Saturday. Classes were conducted in English and if necessary, questions or explanations were provided in Spanish at the end of the class.

For the Second Level (students with some English comprehension), knowledge of English differed significantly. Consequently, it was recommended to the administrators of the company to divide the class into two groups: those who scored higher on the English assessment exam and those with lower evaluations so that no one would be left out. The intention was to accommodate learners who would benefit from this division. The low achieving students would be able to retake the same introductory class so that they could reinforce the information they had previously learned. Unfortunately, according to my ongoing assessment, learning was not taking place for those students with lower scores. In contrast, the group with higher grades was showing progress and would continue the regular course. The low-assessment group was composed of 11 students and class time was reduced to three hours for each group every Saturday.

I focused on the group with the lower grades because I realized learning was not taking place (at this point, you might say how terrible this class must have been if they are not learning)! In my defense, I did what every responsible teacher could have done! During the Second Level, more students dropped out and only five people remained in classes: Adela, Angela, Susana, Luz, and Rosario. Two more students eventually left classes for personal reasons. However, Adela, Angela, and Susana were given the opportunity to continue learning English. In my summative and formative evaluation process, I perceived that Adela, Susana, and Angela were not attaining the goals and objectives of my program yet, they continued taking the class because their motivation remained high. When I realized that these students were not making the desired progress in class, I decided to take a different teaching approach because it would be "easier" to instruct them and monitor their progress.

THE LEARNERS' BACKGROUND: ANGELA, ADELA, AND SUSANA

Angela was a 49-year-old divorced mother who was born in Veracruz, Mexico, a southern state of the country. She had been in Tijuana for 20 years, and she had worked for the company

for 4 years. Angela did not finish elementary school and she read and wrote in Spanish with some problems in spelling. She wanted to learn English because she hoped to improve her working conditions and be an example to her child. Angela considered herself to be a slow learner. She frequently stated, “I am a donkey” (donkey is the English word for Burro which in the Mexican context, is a word given to learners with a low learning capacity). Angela was a humorous woman who was always laughing at her own mistakes and at others’. She was spontaneous in her answers and she made everyone laugh in class. Angela liked to copy everything she saw on the projection or the board, but at times, she did not understand what she wrote down. She regularly asked questions in Spanish, and she rarely risked using English. Angela regularly attended classes and was seldom absent.

Angela always carried a bag with her books and notebooks as well as a very simple dictionary, which provided her with the translation of some of the most common words used in English. Although she carried a book to make notes, she usually made notes on different pieces of paper. She explained that she copied on paper scraps in order to transcribe them later in her notebook. This strategy eventually disappeared, and her notes remained on those pieces of papers. Whenever she took her notebook out of her bag, various papers and copies spilled out along with her notebook. She usually tried to do the homework, but often did not, stating that she did not have the time. In addition, Angela did not complete her homework if she felt she did not understand the exercise. Her work was well done when and if she decided to do it. However, I observed that someone helped her to do her homework because the vocabulary and grammar used in the examples were more complex than the words and sentences she managed in class. At times, she did not understand what she had written.

Adela was a 52-year-old widow from Oaxaca, Mexico. Oaxaca is also located in the south of Mexico. She had two grown-up children who had already finished their university studies. Adela finished elementary school, but she did not continue with secondary school. She appreciated the class and Adela, like Angela, obtained the lowest score on the placement test which suggested a minimal knowledge of English. Although Adela worked the night shift from 4:00 in the afternoon to 1:15 in the morning, she was never absent from class. At times, she stated that it was difficult for her to concentrate because she was so tired. Physically, she appeared fatigued. In addition, Adela rarely participated in class because of her shy personality. She was, however, a hardworking student.

Adela was reluctant to speak English in class and when she had questions, she seldom asked in class even though Spanish was allowed. She never tried to use English and seemed unwilling to speak. She only spoke in English (slowly and quietly) when there were question and answer activities, drills, or when I asked her to respond. She structured her answers or questions very slowly as if she had been thinking about the answers that she was going to provide. Adela usually did her homework although it was incomplete at times, and she frequently had questions about grammar that appeared to be her favorite part of the class. Adela obtained the highest scores on grammar exams, but it was difficult for her to use the grammar she knew in speaking tasks. Although she had a good knowledge of vocabulary, it was not enough for her to produce language on her own. Thus, she preferred to speak Spanish in class.

Susana was a 44-year-old widow from Guerrero, another state in the south of Mexico. Unlike Angela and Adela, Susana finished secondary school and received at least 3 years of language instruction. Susana was in the group of students who obtained higher grades but due to a personal problem, she dropped out of class. When the company launched a second call for English students, she joined classes again.

Susana explained that she had lived in San Diego, California for a few months where she worked in a restaurant as kitchen staff. Although she had been in possible contact with the English language, she worked in a Spanish-speaking environment where English was not necessary. Susana appeared to have a greater English vocabulary and better pronunciation than Angela and Adela but with time, lessons became more complicated for her. Susana was also shy and even if she knew the answer, she preferred not to answer the questions. There were moments, however, where she did try to use English. She lost her notebooks three times during the courses and consequently, Susana did not have notes of prior classes, exercises, or study examples to review. Like Angela, she also made notes on loose-leaf pages and that made it difficult for her to stay on track whenever she needed to study previous information.

Susana constantly arrived late to class, skipped homework, and classes. Nonetheless, she always encouraged her classmates to continue with the English program because she knew that the company would cancel its classes for non-attendance. She admitted that it was a great opportunity to have English lessons even though she did not seem to pay much attention in class or take advantage of the instructions.

THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

In most of the prior lessons I taught, I had provided students with learning strategies but I never explicitly explained the process to them. For instance, I clarified the value of organizing their notebooks, writing down their own examples, and writing their own notes in Spanish. I also talked to them about the importance of investing time to learn, exposing themselves to English, and managing study time by reviewing materials repeatedly during the week (since classes were every Saturday). Going forward, I decided to explain learning strategies clearly to my students and suggested that they implement these practices.

After teaching for 6 months, I decided to take a new approach and I began by explaining the importance of being organized with their notes. I asked my students to buy a new notebook and start by categorizing their notebooks into separate vocabulary and grammar sections. In the vocabulary section, I suggested that they record all the new words they learned from reading, listening, speaking, and every time I shared new words with them. In the grammar section, I asked my students to write down their own explanation of the grammar they viewed and produced including the examples I provided to them. No one brought a new notebook for the following class. My students gave various excuses for not completing the assignment, but I continued to encourage them to get the notebook as soon as possible.

Teaching responsibility to my learners was the hardest challenge I faced. The lack of accountability on their part would be hazardous to keeping my job! Without students, I would have no employment. As a consequence, I then decided to be more relaxed in requiring certain assignments.

Although most classes were taught in English, the first strategy lesson was in Spanish. I felt that I needed to take desperate measures to help them learn. In the first session of my “new approach,” I emphasized the important aspects, value, and purpose of learning new strategies and behaviors. Implementing these practices would lead to successful language learning. I tried to make my students become aware of the importance of the learning process itself. I went on to explain the significance of being responsible, persisting, organizing, and taking advantage of opportunities to practice English. I also pointed out that their current learning methods were not helping them progress in class.

During the first session, I gave my students many of my own examples that helped me learn English and Italian. I explained the importance of having a proactive attitude and suggested they adopt the same habit. I described how they should invest time, organization, and schedule studying in order to create a learning environment. Students shared and explained to me what their own study habits had been. This exercise raised their awareness about how they were trying to learn. They appeared interested in the learning strategies and examples that I gave them, but it also seemed that they had perceived my explanation as a scolding.

I asked each student how they were studying at home. All students responded by saying that they did not spend time studying at home. I then asked them how they prepared for exams, and they stated that they reviewed their notes. My students told me that, if they had time, they usually tried to study one day before an exam. Reviewing class material before a test was the only studying they acknowledged to learn English. They also indicated that they did not watch TV, listen to the radio, or read in English to advance their learning experience. Time in class was the only way they were exposed to English. I decided to focus on their methods of learning rather than my teaching. As a result of my student’s limited time spent trying to learn English on their own, I changed my everyday teaching to Strategy Instruction.

There are many strategy instruction models which I could have used (e.g.; Cohen, 1998; Grenfell & Harris, 1999); nevertheless, most models were similar in the steps they outlined. Thus, I included five sections: Explanation Stage, Model Stage, Practice Stage, Evaluation Stage, and Transfer to New Situations Stage.

For the Explanation Stage, I described the strategy, emphasized the importance of this particular phase, and clarified how the process helps in learning. I gave examples of my own experience for the Model Stage and told my students how it worked and in what way it helped me learn a foreign language. For the Practice Stage, I used planned activities adapted and implemented from the material for the current class. My students discussed their learning experience in the Evaluation Stage using the prescribed strategy and shared how helpful it was on the class activities presented. Lastly, for the Transfer Stage, my students and I discussed the possible uses for this learning method and the possible ways in which such a strategy could be used for different class assignments. Although each strategy I taught served different goals, I

encouraged the use of all approaches to embrace a new study plan. We adopted the Explanation, Model, Practice, Evaluation, and Transfer strategies to better learn English in class.

I started my new teaching phase by implementing the eight Cognitive, Study, and Cooperative strategies that I had included in my research (Samperio, 2017). Strategy sessions were primarily taught in English so that my students could view them as an opportunity to practice their listening skills. These planning sessions offered further practical opportunities for implementation and reinforcement. I adapted these activities to the topic I was teaching in class. For example, when students were learning the use of the adjectives, I emphasized the importance of explaining what they were seeing *in their own words*. When I was teaching verbs in past tense, I included the strategy of *mind and conceptual maps*. Learning strategies were given a name so that students could identify them. The approaches that I used were as follows:

- *Explain in your own words*. This strategy was used to help learners describe common vocabulary based on their current knowledge, especially when they could not find the correct words to express what they wanted to say. I used this tactic to encourage students to learn new vocabulary when they wanted to learn a new word.
- *Mind and conceptual maps* strategy was used to help students organize vocabulary in a logical way in order to master new words or remember concepts. I introduced this approach when I taught new terms and expressions in English.
- *Make questions before and after reading* strategy was used to help students understand vocabulary when they read or listened to English. Learners were encouraged to do this exercise even when using their native language while reading English text. I implemented this strategy when my students read a paragraph.
- *Ask questions to verify I understand* strategy was used to help students monitor how much they understood what they read or listened to. I encouraged my students to write down questions in Spanish if it was too difficult for them to write in English.
- *Gathering with friends* strategy was used to help learners monitor what they learned in order to exchange, corroborate, and obtain information from their classmates. We used this approach before exams.
- *Selective highlighting* strategy was used along with writing down questions in order to help students organize what they had read. We applied this practice by selecting what word or topic was important in a sentence or paragraph.
- *Summarizing* strategy was used to help learners take larger selections of text and reduce them to their essentials such as identifying meaning, key ideas, or main points of a written text that was worth noting and remembering. We used this strategy in reading and listening to sentences and paragraphs.
- *Put into practice what you learn* strategy was used to help students make learning more meaningful and interesting in order to apply new information. I encouraged students to use English outside the classroom, especially with their co-workers.

I also described many other strategies that I did not include in this list. For example, my students were urged to keep a vocabulary journal, make index cards to learn new words, create sentences or questions with new vocabulary, read aloud for pronunciation, look for opportunities to practice outside the classroom such as watching TV, listening to the radio, reading magazines, guessing meaning from the context of an article, scanning pages, or skimming text among many other examples. In addition, I encouraged students to always think about why they were doing what they were doing so that they could discover new approaches to reach goals and to assess their methods for learning. Raising student's awareness of learning techniques implies providing students with systematic practice, reinforcement, and self-monitoring while learning a second language.

OUTCOME

The ultimate goal for strategy instruction is to raise a student's awareness and to provide them with plans and tactics that they can use later on to improve their knowledge in a more efficient way. Barriers may be encountered, however, in teaching students about how to acquire and adopt new learning methods.

Even though my data was neither gathered or analyzed in a formal or rigorous way, teaching new learning methods to three students in a personalized way allowed me to observe each person's distinct personality and study methods of education as I implemented learning strategies.

LANGUAGE BACKGROUND

Adela and Angela did not have any experience in language learning grammar, spelling, or punctuation in their native Spanish language. However, Susana had had three years of language learning experience education in secondary school (around 30 years ago). The linguistic backgrounds of these three students varied considerably. Susana also had the advantage of picking up some vocabulary expressions and words in English while she was living in San Diego. For her, it was easier to retain information because she had probably seen the words before as we worked with Basic English language instruction. As a result, my use of selected strategies was easier for Susana to implement and understand in class.

For Adela and Angela, on the other hand, every English word or expression introduced in class was completely unfamiliar to them. It was more difficult for these two women to use the words and phrases in the context of a given subject matter. For example, for Angela and Adela, it was difficult to use the *Explain in your own words* strategy because they lacked the grammar and vocabulary to explain concepts in English. For Susana, it was a little easier. Although I carried out my teaching approach satisfactorily in the strategy session, I never observed that my students used the techniques on their own in class. Their intention of describing something using English

was only utilized when the activity required it. The three women would generally use Spanish to express what they wanted and their educational backgrounds played a big part in implementing any new approach that I taught them.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Older students, with developed cognitive systems, are able to integrate a new language with their established learning experience. Educational backgrounds correlate with a student's repertoire of learning techniques that include behaviors developed from their previous learning experiences. A successful completion of a primary, secondary, or preparatory school education changes the level of acquired learning skills and dictates problem-solving abilities and studying techniques. Through their learning experience, students create study habits and educational strategies to gain knowledge. However, when such habits are not reinforced (such as in this report), a learner's range of techniques is limited to a few learning skills. For example, when my students read the information they copied from the projection, did exercises and activities in class, and did homework (though, at times, incomplete) they did not develop a proactive behavior that would lead them to use the strategies I had taught them outside of a classroom setting. In class, when I explained how to use various methods and described how it would help them learn, my students seldom followed my instructions and did not implement learning strategies. I was able to observe their lack of applying and practicing learning techniques by reviewing their homework and listening to their explanations about how they lacked the time to study outside of class.

UNWILLINGNESS TO INVEST TIME

For each study session, I would teach a learning technique, and we would practice it during class time. I would then assign homework that included applying the new strategy. This was my attempt to encourage students to implement a new learning routine but unfortunately, my learners did not complete homework because of the lack of time in their busy lives. I concluded that my students were not willing to invest time and effort into learning English.

To successfully learn a second language, three elements are needed to converge at a given point: motivation to learn, learning strategies, and time to invest in learning (Samperio, 2013). It is naive to think that class time only would equip learners with all of the tools that are needed to learn a new language, and my students lacked the appropriate time required to read, write, and speak English. Among the many and varied responsibilities they had after work, it was difficult for them to set aside time to study or do homework. I was not able to determine if my students ever put to use the learning strategies that I had taught them.

Learning a language requires being proactive in regards to investing time. The allocation of time relates directly to the amount of practice students receive in acquiring a second language.

Any foreign language is learned through the use of new words, phrases, and text. Students have a choice of whether or not, and to what extent, to expose themselves to a second language. Assuming that attending Saturday classes would do the job of learning English would obviously not have positive results. In other words, teaching English and learning strategies to company employees did not have the outcome that I had hoped for or planned on. Success depended on my student's motivation and investment in time to learn.

FIXED STUDY HABITS

Many factors contribute to students who do not choose to adopt or use learning strategies. Reese-Miller (1993), indicated that for teaching and learning studying techniques, many factors need to be considered. For example, a student's age, educational background, life experience, cognitive style, incompatibility with teaching styles, and personal beliefs about getting an education are imperative to understanding how a student acquires a language.

Student's perceptions of gaining new learning approaches to education may be considered impractical, difficult, complicated, or even useless. Reese-Miller (1993:684) stated that "attempts to impose particular learning techniques on adults who have achieved success in their educational, professional, or personal lives may be viewed as patronizing." Students simply may not want to change their current learning strategies or pace in which they are at ease with and in control of acquiring an education. Bialystok (1985), suggested that students may resist learning strategies because they perceive them as a waste of time. For strategies to work adequately, learners must find them useful, choose them consciously, and be oriented towards a goal. Otherwise, learning new study strategies may not have the desired effect. In other words, time and effort are essential to achieve an education in any new subject.

STRATEGIES SELECTED FOR THE TASK

It is equally important to consider that teaching certain learning strategies may not meet the needs of students. Every learner is unique and they each have different needs lacks and wants (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Let us remember that learning strategies are individual and goal-oriented actions that are used to store, recall, retrieve and practice what students intend to learn. If learning techniques prescribed in strategy sessions are not designed around a learner's needs, they will not be useful or necessary. As I have stated before, students often have fixed methods (strategies for learning) that are difficult for them to change. Perhaps, if the strategies that I proposed and taught had been based on each student's individual characteristics such as their learning style, beliefs, deficits, or wishes rather than implementing my own opinion on what would be useful, my class may have had a different outcome. I selected strategies based on my expertise and educational theories as a teacher, however, none proved to be adequate for Angela, Adela, and Susana.

The motivation to learn is probably the most crucial factor in acquiring a second language. It is the platform where learning takes place and it is the driving force (Dörnyei, 2005) that needs to be present throughout an entire learning process. My three students never stopped attending classes, but their motivation faded with time. Their presence in class was more of an act of responsibility towards the company they worked for rather than an intrinsic personal interest in learning English. Eventually, classes were canceled and Angela's, Adela's, and Susana's grades on exams and assignments did not show any significant improvement in learning the English language.

CONCLUSION

There is no right or wrong way to teach and implement methods for learning a language. Many factors contribute to the use of learning strategies by students as I have described above. However, it is important to note that many adult learners decide to take foreign language lessons in order to satisfy their need to feel good, useful, or to take advantage of their spare time. With my three students, I came to the conclusion that it was difficult for them to set aside the time and make the effort to learn another language, especially outside of a classroom. Their work schedules and domestic responsibilities determined their daily lives. Adding an English class proved to be too much.

My ultimate intention of strategy instruction was to provide my students with study tools that would help them acquire English. When the allocation of time to study and practice a new language is not available, the effort cannot be sustained. Not much research has been conducted on the importance of time allocation for adults to learn a second language. Setting aside a few hours of study, however, increases the possibilities of implementing learning strategies and language achievement. Exposure to a second language is fundamental to learning English or any second language. When homework is not completed, learning techniques not implemented, or other assignments finished, the results will be disappointing.

This teaching experience allowed me to observe how learning strategies taught in the classroom might have indicated promising results. My student's motivation to learn outside of the classroom, however, was another story. In conclusion, strategy instruction can be appealing for teachers to help students. It is essential to tailor instruction to student's individual characteristics and abilities so that these learning tools can have a positive and long-lasting effect on their educational lives.

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