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Teacher competencies in supporting reading in English as a foreign language

ABSTRACT
Based on a small-scale survey and discussion with teacher-learners in a postgraduate teacher education program in Poland, this paper aims to investigate their understanding of 'learning to read in L2 English' and the current state of their competencies in teaching reading. Descriptors taken from the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages, EPOSTL, are used are used as criteria to analyze the qualitative data. It is found that while there appears to be awareness and indication of application of some competencies, the participants seem confused as to how to support younger elementary L2 learners in developing basic reading skills and may lack understanding of theories to underpin their practice.
Keywords: teacher competencies, supporting reading, postgraduate teacher education.

1. Introduction

This article describes a pilot case study designed to investigate the competencies of teachers of English as a foreign language in supporting reading among primary aged learners (7–15 years). Research findings from large scale research conducted in Poland indicate that a substantial proportion of learners at the end of key stage 3 (year 9 at the time of the studies, age 15–16) are under-achieving in reading comprehension skills when compared to curricular targets of A2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (65% in the European Survey of Language Competences, (Dyszkiewicz et al., 2013, p. 30); 58% in BUNJO (Study of Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in Lower Secondary School), (Dyszkiewicz, Marczak, Paczuska, Pitura & Kutyłowska, 2015, p. 29).

Changes to the national core curriculum for primary school (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej (MEN), 2017) and a new national examination in English at the end of year 8, beginning in spring 2019, have extended the range of sub-skills of reading to include the ability to recognize relationships between different parts

of a text, (an ability found most challenging for the participants in the BUNJO study) and to distinguish fact from opinion. In addition, the new examination also requires test-takers to use mediation skills to work between languages, with information given in texts in the foreign language summarized in the first language, or vice versa.

A second challenge facing teachers has been brought about by the new core curriculum and changes to the school system. Previously the target language level in primary school was for learners to attain level A1 (CEFR) at the end of class 6. The changes made in the school year 2017/2018 mean that suddenly the level A1 should be achieved by learners at the end of class 3. Learners in class 4 primary are consequently now faced with a considerably more demanding programme. In short, the demands made on learners of English in primary classes have undergone sudden change with little prior warning. This has been accompanied by new syllabi and course books, with the result that teachers and learners of English in primary school face particular challenges.

2. Teacher competencies in teaching reading

In this context we define teacher competencies as "abilities, skills, knowledge and attitudes required to achieve professional goals proficiently" (Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications, 2003, p.9). When considering the particular competencies for teaching reading in a foreign language we turned to the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages, EPOSTL, (Newby et al., 2007) as participants would be students in a language teacher education programme. Secondly, EPOSTL descriptors relate directly to the Common European Framework of Reference for Modern Languages (CEFR) (European Centre for Modern Languages, n.d., EPOSTL presentation, slides 43–44) to which the Polish national core curriculum is also closely aligned (MEN, 2017, pp. 10–12). Consequently, it was felt that the EPOSTL descriptors of teacher competencies in reading were pertinent to the context and could be used to operationalize the construct.

EPOSTL includes the following descriptors for teacher competencies in teaching reading:

> I can select texts appropriate to the needs, interests and language level of the learners.
> I can provide a range of pre-reading activities to help learners to orientate themselves to a text.
> I can encourage learners to use their knowledge of a topic and their expectations about a text when reading.
> I can apply appropriate ways of reading a text in class (e.g., aloud, silently, in groups etc.).
> I can set different activities in order to practise and develop different reading strategies according to the purpose of reading (skimming, scanning etc.).
> I can help learners to develop different strategies to cope with difficult or unknown vocabulary in a text.

I can evaluate and select a variety of post-reading tasks to provide a bridge between reading and other skills.
I can recommend books appropriate to the needs, interests and language level of the learners.
I can help learners to develop critical reading skills (reflection, interpretation, analysis etc.). (Newby et al., 2007, p. 26)

EPOSTL is not simply a checklist, but is intended to encourage reflection on the theories, principles, beliefs and values which underlie the descriptors (Newby et al., 2007, p. 87). With this in mind, in the next section we consider the theoretical background to teaching reading in a foreign language, with particular consideration for the early stages of introducing reading to younger learners in primary school.

3. Theoretical background

Current theories on second/foreign language (L2) reading build on theories from research done on first language (L1) reading (Grabe, 2014). While earlier work considered L2 reading in isolation, recent studies (e.g., Koda, 2005; 2007; Koda & Miller, 2018) indicate how L2 reading ability combines L1 reading skills with proficiency in the L2. Thus, first we will give a very brief overview of the reading construct as seen in L1 research.

Successful reading comprehension involves a complex interaction between different skills, often referred to as lower level and higher level processes (e.g., Pearson & Cervetti, 2013), where the lower level focuses on the word and the higher level on the text. The basic model begins with word recognition, a process of decoding, which means finding the relationship between the written form and its representation in the mental lexicon, although how this takes place is the subject of some controversy. While some believe that phonological awareness of how a written form is pronounced is needed (e.g., Ehri, 2006), others propose a dual-route model, where words are 'sounded' only if they are not known or they are 'opaque' (Pearson & Cervetti, 2014, p. 509).

Pearson & Cervetti (2015), in a review of the history of theories of reading comprehension, suggest that current views favour the Construction-Integration model (Kintsch, 1998). This cognitive approach recognizes the importance of interaction between the reader and the text and, while acknowledging the context as part of the model, reduces the scope of its influence from the schema theories proposed in the 1990's. The reader's aim is to try to create a coherent mental representation from the text (Pearson & Cervetti, 2015, p.10) moving from 'surface form' to 'textbase' and finally to a 'situation model' (Kintsch, 1988, 1998). So the reader builds a model of text comprehension, working from meaning units (propositions) to create a semantic network map of main idea comprehension (Kintsch & Welch, 1991), using background knowledge, inferencing, strategic

processing (cognitive strategies, e.g., using contextual cues in text to infer meaning; metacognitive strategies, "those used for planning, monitoring or reviewing how the interaction with the…text will take place" (Taylor, Stevens, & Asher, 2006, p. 216) and attitudes to text information.

Reading in a second or foreign language could be perceived as following a similar pattern, as the L2 reader already has experience of reading in the L1. Cummins (1979), in the Interdependence Hypothesis, poses a "common underlying proficiency" of reading, suggesting skills from the L1 can be transferred to the L2 provided that the L1 skills are well-developed. Sparks and Ganschow (1991) in the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis proposed that the level of ability in the L2 is linked to L1 competences. Sparks, Patton, Ganschowe, Humbach & Javorsky (2008) found that L1 word decoding skills were a reliable predictor of the ability to decode in the L2, and L1 reading comprehension skills were a good predictor of L2 reading comprehension ability. Koda (2005, 2007) suggests that metalinguistic awareness in L1 assists the learner with the L2. In short, there is now considerable evidence for a strong relationship between reading skills in the first and foreign languages (see Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2011 for a meta-analysis). Recent research is considering the role of working memory in reading comprehension (e.g., Harrington & Sawyer, 1992; Alptekin & Ercetin, 2009) and the additional role played by prior or back ground knowledge in this process (Shin, Dronjic, & Park, 2019).

Despite these commonalities, there are key differences when we consider elementary L2 readers and compare them with L1 readers. At early stages of L2 reading learners have limited linguistic resources, and in particular limited lexical knowledge (Grabe, 2014). Unlike L1 readers, the L2 elementary reader may be 'meeting' in print words they do not previously know. While some of their experience of reading in L1 may help them, they can be adversely affected by differences between L1 and L2 phonological processing (Koda, 2005) which may negatively impact on comprehension.

It has been shown that reading fluency can be improved by helping learners build grapheme-phoneme relationships (Ehri, 2006; Cain & Oakhill, 2012; Rayner, Pollatsek, Ashby, & Clifton, 2012) and by giving specific instruction in strategies for developing an understanding of a text (Pressley, 2006; Grabe & Stoller, 2013). In L1 settings developing fluency in reading is tackled by a variety of approaches. These include reading aloud with guidance; reading aloud along with a recording of the text; repeated reading aloud of short, simplified texts; extensive reading programmes; and timed reading (where the student reads aloud a familiar text suitable for their level and is timed. The learner then re-reads the text which is timed again and the times are compared. This process may be iterative). Reading aloud by the teacher has also been found helpful (National Reading Panel, 2000). There are also comprehensive approaches such as Reading Recovery, based on the

work of Clay (2005a, 2005b) which has been extensively researched and found to have a significant and lasting impact on developing reading skills (see e.g., Hurry & Fridkin, 2018).

In second or foreign language settings extensive reading programmes have also been found beneficial for development of reading skills (see Beglar & Hunt, 2014). Additionally, a meta-analysis by Briggs and Walter (2016) found that extensive reading had a positive effect for motivation and attitudes in young learners. Chodkiewicz (2016) investigated the relationship between secondary school learners' interest and the type of text they read.

Reading fluency development is also of research interest. Taguchi, Gorsuch, Lems, & Rosszell (2016) compared the outcomes for elementary learners from two forms of scaffolding: repeated reading and reading along with a recording. Chang and Millett (2013) found a positive effect for timed repeated reading in a study of college level students in Taiwan.

Other research studies strategy use in various forms. Teng (2019) for example, in a small scale study in Hong Kong, found ESL young learners' reading was improved through raising awareness of metacognitive reading strategies. Taki (2019) compared use of online reading strategies in L1 and L2.

In order to be successful, in addition to specific focus on aspects of reading, the L2 learner also needs to develop their linguistic skills, as language proficiency has been found to correlate with achievement in reading comprehension in the early stages of language learning (Mihaljevič Djigunovič, 2010; Nikolov & Csapo, 2010).

Thus, by implication, the L2 reading teacher needs to have knowledge of the processes of reading, especially at early stages, and a good awareness of the differences between L1 and L2 processing. Those teaching elementary L2 readers need a repertoire of techniques and related activities to support the building of grapheme-phoneme expertise in learners. In addition, analytic/diagnostic skills are needed to enable the teacher to identify difficulties learners are having with reading. This implies that the teacher needs to have an understanding of both cognitive and metacognitive strategic processing and a range of approaches to modeling and supporting strategy use. This we see as comprising the knowledge and skill set which underlies the competencies underlying the EPOSTL descriptors.

4. Research design and procedure

This section describes a pilot study conducted in a university in Poland with the aims of

- identifying how developing and future teachers perceive reading in English and the development of L2 reading.

It also aimed

- to identify competencies in teaching reading the (future) teachers appear to have, and

- to discover if there were competencies which seemed in need of development.

This was a pilot study with a view to developing a questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions which could be used with a larger population of teachers, both practising and teachers-to-be.

4.1. Participants

The study was conducted with 10 second (final) year students on a two-year post-graduate MA English programme, with a specialization in language teacher methodology, which ends in a state-recognized teaching qualification. It was a convenience sample, of women (there were no males in the group) ranging in age from the early twenties to the early thirties, with the majority (6) in the first category. They represent a range of teaching experience, with one having no experience at all, six having between 1 and 3 years, one with between 4 and 6 years and two with 10–12 years' experience. Participants gave their consent to take part in the research.

4.2. Research instruments

Data was collected by means of a printed questionnaire and a group discussion. The questionnaire comprised two sections, the first with closed questions to obtain background information on the participant and the second with open questions on a number of topic areas, each then broken down with a number of sub-questions. The topic areas included the following:

1. What do you think a pupil in primary class 4 (age 10–11) needs to do to be able to read in English? (7 sub-questions)
2. How do learners get better at reading? How does this skill develop?
3. In the course book you are using with your pupils there are texts to read. How would you typically approach a reading text in class? (5 sub-questions)
4. What kind of problems do your pupils have with reading in English?

Before implementation, the questionnaire was shown to two practising teachers, who were asked to read it and indicate any parts they felt unclear or to suggest improvements. The questions for the group discussion were drafted in writing beforehand, based on the areas addressed in the questionnaire. However, if other points emerged in the talk further questions were added spontaneously during the discussion.

4.3. Group discussion

After completing the questionnaire six of the teachers took part in a semi-structured discussion of their responses and follow-up questions. The researcher took field notes and then wrote an account immediately afterwards.

5. Analysis

The list of EPOSTL can do statements (see above) were used as search criteria to analyze the open answers in the questionnaires. For example, the can do statement "I can provide a range of pre-reading activities to help learners to orientate themselves to a text" was condensed to the notions "provide range of pre-reading activities" plus "purpose, orientate learners to text." The use of such criteria, or codes, serves to systematize the data analysis, disciplining the interpretation to what is indeed reported, following the focus given by the respondents. In this way bias in the interpretation is limited.

First readings of the questionnaires focused on finding evidence of mention of the criteria. It was discovered during this reading process that participants explored the criteria at different levels, so two categories were created: *mention*, defined as the writer making allusion to the criteria, which was taken as suggesting the participant had awareness of it; and *description of practice*, defined as the writer providing information about application of the criteria in their teaching, which was taken as suggesting this was part the participant's repertoire of teaching skills. Initially the categories were analyzed quantitatively, counting frequency of mention and description with the aim of identifying predominant themes.

The field notes from the group discussion were analyzed in the same way, to track the EPOSTL criteria and note any additional themes.

6. Limitations of the study

This is a pilot study of a small number of participants in a convenience sample. Analysis of the data from both the open answers in the questionnaire and from the discussion was done by a single researcher and no independent verification was carried out, laying the interpretation open to charges of subjectivity. The group discussion data is based on ethnographic notes, which were taken during the discussion, but no recording was made to allow verification of their reliability. Consequently, making generalizations from the data is not advised. However, the researcher found much to reflect on as a result of the analysis and these thoughts will be offered in place of implications from the research.

7. Findings

In this section findings from the questionnaires and group discussion are presented. For reasons of space, only the four criteria most frequently mentioned in the questionnaires will be described and discussed.

7.1. Questionnaire
Pre-reading activities

All 10 teachers claim they use a variety of ways of introducing the topic of the text before the reading, such as using pictures, discussing the topic, or

guessing what the text will be about from the title. While there was some evidence of predicting the content, and encouraging learners to make use of background knowledge, this was limited.

Coping with unfamiliar vocabulary

In general, the approach taken appears to be to tackle unfamiliar words during or after reading, with only a few mentions (3) of pre-teaching of key words. Some while-reading approaches were teacher-focused responses, such as telling learners to underline new words during the reading to return to later; answering questions from learners during reading, or asking if other students can explain the unfamiliar word. Other teachers report the more collaborative approach of encouraging learners to work with a partner, or build autonomy by promoting the use of a dictionary. There was one mention of strategy training, where the teacher shows a learner how to guess from context, and scaffolds the learner in doing this through the use of guided questions. As a post-reading activity it was reported that new words are written on board, explained, and then students may be asked to make sentences using them.

Reading in class

In the teachers' responses there was a strong focus on word and text level decoding as being a dominant feature of the approach to a text in class. Some teachers reported they have learners read aloud and correct their pronunciation. In term of comprehension, there appears to be a trend to work from general questions on the text to more specific questions, all of which appear come from the course book. Some teachers mention asking students to summarize the text in own words, while others mention 'discussion' of text, but it was not clear if this means the teacher talks about it, or everyone.

Helping learners develop use of different reading strategies

Some evidence was found of awareness that learners need to use cognitive strategies, however, focus in many cases was on *knowledge* of grammar and vocabulary and the ability to guess words from context, which seems to suggest awareness may be superficial. Only limited evidence of awareness of metacognitive strategies was noted, particularly with regard to pre-reading. The only description of practice in developing use of reading strategies was the one of guessing from context given in the previous section.

Other: what causes learners problems in reading

A variety of different problems were reported. Some of these were to do with difficulties at word and text level decoding, such as mispronunciation of words caused by interference from L1 processing and related "frustration" that learners

have with lack of reading fluency. Other difficulties were to do with vocabulary, where some highlighted the learners' limited lexis, with learners wanting to check every new word, while other teachers reported the learners were "unable to guess meaning" of unfamiliar words, which in some cases was said to lead to embarrassment in the learner.

Motivation, problems with attention and focus were also reported, which in some cases was linked to the topic or level of texts in the course book. One teacher, who works with secondary school students, reported that comprehension questions which required inferencing were problematic.

7.2. Group discussion

The first question asked the teachers to look back on their own memories of learning to read in English and consider what was helpful in the process. Most of the memories were from reading in lessons at school, where the general agreement was that this involved reading aloud from a course book text around the class. Opinions on this were negative. "The focus was on pronunciation and the meaning was lost" was one comment. The participants reported that as the teacher asked learners in turn, it was easy to count ahead, find which part you would have to read and practice that, rather than listening to the others. The participants talked of their gradual realization that the spelling of a word and its pronunciation differed and so "it was not that simple".

As the participants are concurrently on teaching practice and observing lessons in school they were asked to talk about how they have seen reading being dealt with. Discussion arose on the question "What was the text about" as something they proposed the teacher should ask the learners. One teacher, with experience of practice in early years education abroad, commented that "students don't read to enjoy, they focus on answering questions" and that this focus on comprehension questions "makes the learner miss the experience of the text." Others concurred, drawing attention to the treatment of reading in elementary course books, where it was felt the purpose of a written text was to introduce new language structures, rather than to develop the reading skill. One person commented, " In fact they could learn new structures from a text: if you're left to yourself you see things and think 'What's that? Why is that being used?' but the student doesn't do that, because of those questions."

The discussion then moved to comprehension of a text. Commenting from the perspective of experience of one-to one tutoring of young learners of English, one teacher explained how a pupil had mastered doing comprehension tasks without understanding the text at all. Having deduced that a typical question was direct reference (i.e., contained the same words in the question as in the text), the pupil used a matching strategy, simply scanning the text for the words from the question. The other participants agreed this was common practice. In another example the

same participant reported a different learner who in answering a question gave more information than was in the text. When asked how this was possible the pupil explained she had used the pictures surrounding the text, rather than reading. "There was so much information in the pictures on the page with the text that the student didn't need to read!"

In talking about the mechanics of reading, the participants reflected that in early stages it is necessary to "know a word already, then you just look at it and guess." This ability, they felt, was developed through listening to a text and seeing it at the same time. The difficulty of reading was illustrated by an example given by a participant from a teaching practice observation. The pupils were working on past simple and were able to read sentences in the present tense. One target sentence included the word "know" which the pupils read aloud without difficulty. However, when trying to say the past form "knew", they resorted to L1 decoding, while at the same time carrying over the L2 knowledge from the present tense that "k" is silent, resulting in /nev/.

A teacher from a different ethnic context described a 4 year old boy in individual tutoring who "had a complex that he would never learn to read English because the words are pronounced differently." The teacher explained how she had been able to encourage him using a book on how to teach reading in English. She had extended the practice by finding a simplified reader with "pictures and simple sentences" on dogs, a topic of interest for her learner, who thanks to her help learnt to read English successfully. At this, one participant commented that during her observations in primary school "I've never seen anyone teaching reading, they all assume the children all know how to read in Polish so they can read in English." All of the other participants agreed.

In conclusion, it can be seen that during the discussion the teachers draw on own experiences as learners, on observation of other teachers, and on their own teaching experience.

8. Discussion
In this section the research questions are discussed in turn.

8.1 How developing and future teachers perceive reading in English and the development of L2 reading
It would appear that in both the questionnaire and the discussion there is some evidence that the participants are aware of how L2 reading develops in the early stages of learning. While the participants themselves are L2 learners, they were unable to recall how they started to read in English. As with all the processes we learn which then become automatized, we quickly forget the individual stages which were necessary to perfect through conscious and effortful practice on the way to becoming proficient. (Consider learning how to drive a car, for example).

Through the opportunity to discuss together, however, we see that illustrations given by individuals of teaching experiences with early L2 reading, help the teachers to collectively begin to build a picture of the L2 reading process. This is reinforced by information from the questionnaires on what causes learners difficulty in reading, where references are made to L1 interference. It does seem, however, that understanding of the process is somewhat hazy. While there are many instances of mentions of awareness of difficulty with the grapheme-phoneme issue (Ehri, 2006; Koda, 2005; Rayner et al., 2012), with the exception of the teacher who used worked systematically with the 4 year old with the help of a dedicated "how to teach reading" book, there are no descriptions of practice. The comment that she had never seen anyone teaching reading in English from one participant was said in a way which suggested it was a moment of epiphany for her. The participant description of using the "how to" book promoted interest and others were disappointed to find that the book was written in another language. Another indicator, perhaps, that the notion that there is a systematic approach to teaching reading in English is unfamiliar. This would seem to echo Grabe (2009) in the introduction to his book. Much research in L2 reading draws on L1 reading research (see Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2011). Here, however, we are referring to research on L1 reading in English put into practice. The participants appear to be drawing on their personal experiences from L1 reading in Polish and the idea that they could draw on L1 English reading research and practice (such as the National Reading Panel, 2000) seems unfamiliar.

8.2. Competencies in teaching reading the (future) teachers appear to have and competencies which seem in need of development.
When we move to the competencies in teaching reading the (future) teachers appear to have, we can see clearly that knowledge and practice of pre-reading activities seems to be firmly in place. However, when we consider the awareness of reading strategies and apparent lack of any mention of metacognitive strategies (Taylor et al., 2006), we may wonder if the pre-reading activities simply represent techniques which have been learnt, with no deeper understanding of why or how these support reading or comprehension. This appears to be an extension of the haziness of understanding of L2 reading processes expressed above. If the teacher does not really understand how L2 reading develops or how comprehension comes about, then it is logical that they are not able to place pre-reading tasks into that process, or to fully grasp their role. The teacher appears to have learnt that certain approaches are preferred, or expected as good practice, and conforms without understanding the underlying theory.

This seems to be borne out when we consider treatment of unfamiliar vocabulary, and in particular the expectation that the elementary L2 reader will be able to guess unfamiliar words from context. Despite it now being accepted

from research that knowledge of around 98% words in a text is needed before such guessing is possible (Stahl & Nagy, 2006), this still commonly appears in methodology books, most of which do not cater for teachers of young L2 learners in primary school. The child who is at A1 or earlier stages of language development is well below the threshold needed to be able to guess any word in a text. Their working memory and other executive functions are entirely focused on the problem of decoding, first at word level and then, very slowly, at combining the deciphered words into a sentence and then seeing the text as a whole (Grabe, 2009, pp. 36–37). Guessing at this level is trying to guess what a word is from looking at the first few letters and recognizing it, rather than having to sound each letter out and build up a phonological representation. In short, the theory the teachers seem to be able to draw on is not adequate for the teaching situations many of them are engaged in, as it does not cover early L2 reading. Until the decoding process becomes automatic the young learner is going to have great difficulty comprehending the meaning of a text (Grabe, 2009 p. 23). Consequently, it is hardly surprising that some of the learners described have developed strategies to support them in this, using pictures rather than the text, or 'matching' words in the question with words from the text. These teachers are reporting insights from one-to-one teaching. Imagine the difficulty of the teacher who has not had this experience, in a group of fifteen learners. It is likely that they would, erroneously, get the impression that the students could understand the text, with potentially negative consequences as the course progresses, particularly for those learners who are having difficulty with reading.

9. Reflections arising from the analysis

As indicated earlier, because of the scope of this case study generalizations will not be made. As a teacher educator planning courses on a postgraduate programme and working in seminars with teacher-learners who need to read academic texts I see two possible ways forward to support (future) teachers in their work. First, within teaching methodology courses there is a strong need for space for and tasks which help participants integrate earlier learned theories, with personal experience and practice (see Ellis, 2018, for a suggestion of how this might be done) with a view to raising awareness and promoting lifelong learning. Methodology at the MA level needs to return to the "how to" techniques taught in the BA programme and revisit them, attempting to place them within a clearer understanding of "why" and "how" they are needed. Thus the MA course content should not be only "wider" than the BA, but above all "deeper" and more integrated, pulling together educational psychology, general education and pedagogy in addition to subject-specific content. Within this revisiting, there needs to be clear focus on early L2 reading and attention to L1 reading in English research and its application in schooling. There would also appear to be scope for critical analysis of how

reading is approached in school course books and a comparison between this and current L2 reading theories.

Secondly, within the practical language components of the MA programme and the seminar there are opportunities for modeling many and varied strategies for dealing with advanced texts, which by implication may broaden the (future) teacher's repertoire, based on the hypothesis that personal experience will strengthen understanding of the importance and use of strategies, which may encourage the teacher to develop these with their learners.

In conclusion, this exploratory study indicates that there are many avenues still to be explored in future research, particularly in supporting early L2 reading in primary school.

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