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AN ASYNCHRONOUS VIRTUAL SPACE FOR CONTACT-BASED ORAL WORK WITH CHINESE STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH

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Abstract

This case study sets out to investigate the impact of the introduction of a computer-assisted language learning tool into an English-as-a-foreign-language course for Chinese students on a one-year university diploma programme at Université Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand, France. VoiceForum, an asynchronous platform for oral interaction, is currently being used in class with these students as a complement to face-to-face activities. In the study, student questionnaire data is used to describe the students' previous English-as-a-foreign-language background. We present why VoiceForum was introduced in response to student reticence and lack of confidence to participate in speaking activities, despite data showing student awareness of the importance of these for target language improvement. Using teacher questionnaire data, we describe the challenges teachers met in organising face-to-face speaking activities for this class and the necessary role of the teacher during these as a facilitator inciting peer interaction.

After explaining the main functionality of VoiceForum's virtual web space for oral interaction, in response to two research questions concerning student motivation and the teacher's role, we describe and exemplify how the platform has helped both teachers and students with the challenges faced. Firstly, by increasing students' confidence concerning oral production because students do not perceive that they are communicating in front of everybody and, thus, are less concerned about projecting a good impression of themselves. We also discuss here the importance attributed by students to being able to review and prepare their productions. Secondly, we describe how VoiceForum provides the primary mediation between the students, encouraging peer-to-peer interaction without teacher intervention and how, on using this platform, students feel more receptive to teacher feedback.

1. Introduction

The case study developed here describes how a class of Chinese students has presented teachers of the Hypermedia Language Centre at the Faculty of Languages and Business, *Université Blaise Pascal*, France, with particular challenges. After describing the students previous English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) background, we present these challenges which include a lack of student confidence in speaking and interacting with peers and discuss how using *VoiceForum* [1], an asynchronous in-house computer-assisted language learning platform, during contact-hour sessions, has helped both teachers and students in managing them.

2. Case study context and research questions

Our study focuses on 12 Chinese students learning EFL as part of a one-year diploma course for international students as preparation for a Bachelor's programme in the faculty. The three male and nine female students mainly at CEFR [2] B1 level concerning speaking skills, have an average age of 20.

The students attend two two-hour EFL sessions each week. These classes use multimedia computer suites where the peripheral placement of the workstations facilitates rapid transitions between face-to-face and computer-based activities. They are taught by two experienced, native-speaker teachers who have responded to an observation by subject teachers of the Bachelor's programme, in which certain modules are taught in English, that the Chinese students were at a disadvantage. One session (S1) focuses on the communication skills needed for presentations. The second (S2) gives students practice in the types of interaction they might meet in small-group discussions at university. The S2

syllabus is organised thematically. Outside of class, the students produce weekly learning logs focusing on vocabulary and expressions in written texts which, in turn, form the thematic basis for both S2 classes and the formative and summative presentations given in S1.

Liu [3], summarising research literature concerning Asian students, underlines the cultural differences that give rise to reticence to speak in class and a conservative approach to linguistic risk-taking through fear of making mistakes and losing face. These differences are seen as challenges to the learner-centred, communicative approach adopted by staff at the language centre.

VoiceForum has been designed to create a learner-centred focus and addresses affective and pedagogical issues associated with speaking in public. Despite using asynchronous technology, more often associated with distance learning, this platform for oral interaction was introduced in class time with the Chinese students to complement face-to-face activities.

Our case study investigates whether *VoiceForum*, effective with French students [4], is the right tool to help resolve the more acute issues observed with the Chinese class. Our research questions are 1. Do the Chinese students perceive the platform as more likely to motivate their oral participation and help them progress than with face-to-face only activities? 2. What are the specific implications for the role of the teacher in *VoiceForum* work?

The study is informed by a student questionnaire (SQ) alongside a teacher questionnaire (TQ) and observation of the students' oral production on *VoiceForum*. Each student's and teacher's questionnaire was attributed a code, e.g. SQ1/TQ1. Informed consent was received from all participants.

3. EFL learning context

3.1 Data concerning students' EFL background

Previously, the students had studied for two years at Chinese higher education institutions. Whilst ten undergraduates had EFL courses, two had had no EFL courses since high school. On average, the students had 10 years and 11 months of EFL study, in classes in which they estimated the average number of students at 37.

In previous EFL courses, students describe an infrequent focus on speaking skills. Instead, reading and listening skills were focused upon (see Figure 1). This quote, from the student questionnaires, is a typical description of the students' previous EFL classes:

“The teacher played the record of the text and we read it without making any sounds. Then the teacher explained every grammar point and vocabularies in the text. And then we were required to finish text questions after the text.” (SQ6)

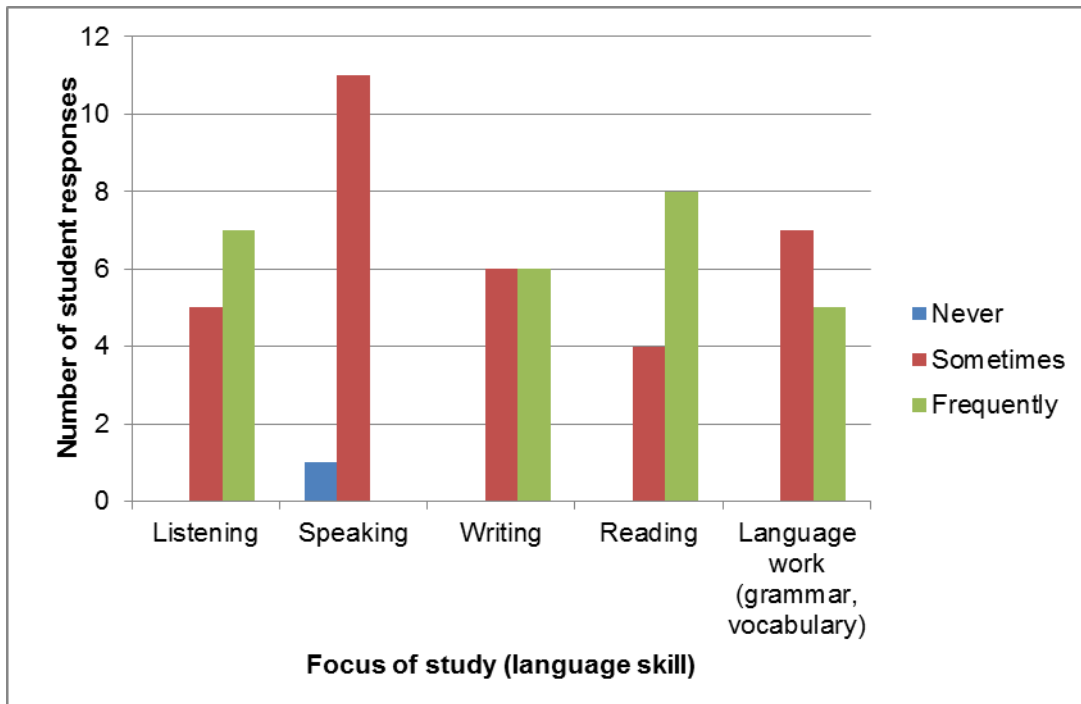


Fig.1. Frequency of focus on specific language skills during students' previous EFL courses

Student questionnaires inform, on average, 8.75% of time in previous EFL classes was spent focusing on speaking activities compared to 40% on reading and 23% on writing. When classes involved speaking skills, the most frequent activity was oral presentations. Describing these classes, several students acknowledge the difficulty in organising speaking activities for large classes:

“The professor [...] asked the questions. No one responded [...] because there is maybe 50 students in classroom. It is hard for him to take care of everyone.” (SQ8)

3.2 Data concerning face-to-face speaking activities

A specialisation of the language centre is teaching spoken interaction. Although the Chinese students believe speaking skills are important to improve their English (see Figure 2) and, in particular, that group debates and discussions would improve their speaking skills (see Figure 3), teachers report reticence to participate in speaking activities.

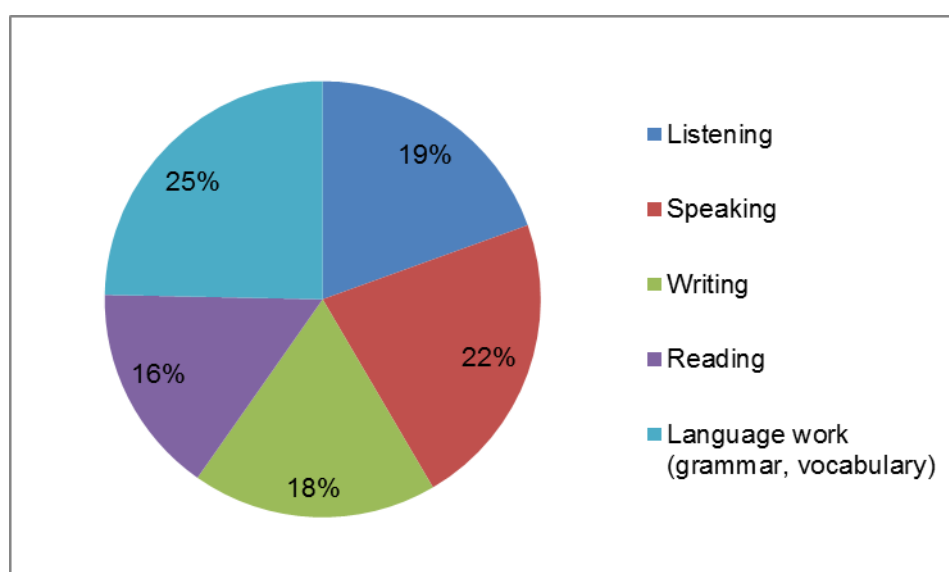


Fig.2. Skills to which students give importance for improving their English

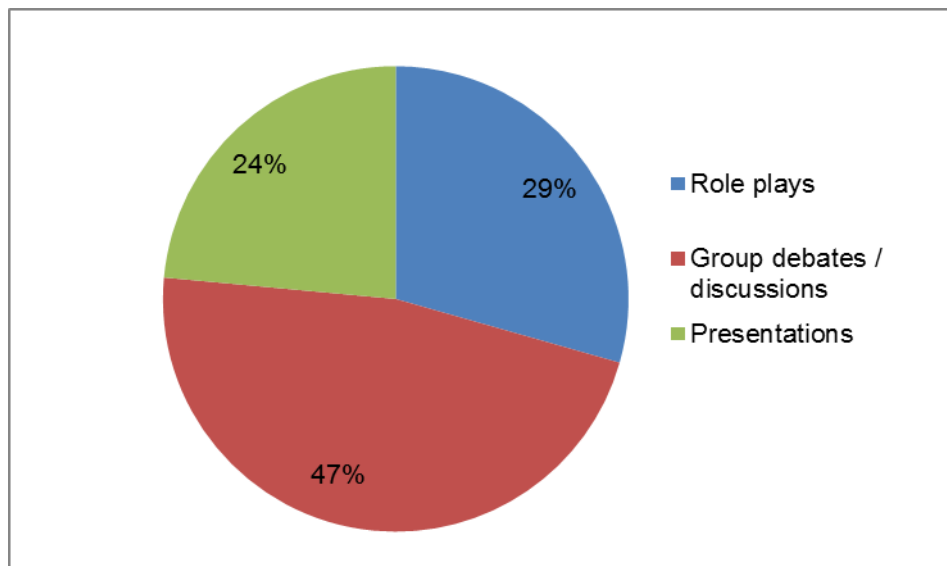


Fig.3. Speaking activities which students believe would most help them improve their English

Teacher questionnaires evoke this reticence, describing how students react by silence to questions unless singled out to respond. The teachers describe a lack of target language interaction, commenting:

“small group activities are essentially conducted in Chinese unless I am hovering over them. I have rarely observed these students attempting to practise English on a conversational level with each other, unless I am closely monitoring the activity.” (TQ1)

Teachers, therefore, describe their reliance on whole-class activities where, although students participate in English, teachers adopt the role of facilitators, organising turn-taking slots to incite peer-to-peer interaction. Cultural differences may play a role. Liu’s [3] study reports that Chinese culture values modesty, teaching people to be neither first nor last and suggests this makes students afraid of being perceived as showing off. Instead, they wait for others to initiate discussions.

The teachers’ observations are also illustrated in student data. On a scale of 0 (‘not at all confident’) to 10 (‘very confident’), students rate their confidence concerning i) speaking activities with a partner at 8.7; ii) speaking activities in small groups at 8.04; and iii) speaking in front of the class with the teacher present at 6.75. In the latter, students express several reasons for lacking confidence including the need to make a good impression, shyness, a fear of making mistakes and forgetting ideas. Although students acknowledge the kindness and patience of their teachers who “always had a cordial talk with us like a friend in class” (SQ2), they express their concern about not giving a good impression:

“I want to show a perfect behaviour and a good impression for the whole class and teacher. And if I make any mistake, I would be care how other people thinking of me or judge me.” (SQ6)

“I am afraid to say something wrong and the teachers and classmates will think that I’m not good enough. [...] I would feel shame about it.” (SQ1)

The students suggest they feel reassured and more confident when given preparation time which helps them overcome fears of “forgetting some important ideas” (SQ4) and “forget[ting] what I want to say” (SQ7):

“It is a little hard to speak frequently. Because I will concern at if my sentence is white [right], and then to speak.” (SQ12)

“I’m not afraid to speak in front of the whole class if I have prepared even if I just prepare it for several minutes.” (SQ3)

4. Software for spoken interaction

4.1 Main functionality

VoiceForum provides an asynchronous virtual web space for oral interaction. Its development responded to the dilemma confronting teachers concerning feedback in face-to-face contexts [5] whereby interrupting student interaction to correct form may be detrimental to authentic communication but giving feedback at the end of a communicative message lowers its effectiveness [6].

The platform uses a threaded-discussion format. A built-in audio recorder/player, accompanied by a text editor, allows message creation (see Figure 4). *VoiceForum*'s hierarchical structure enables users to address either the forum by initiating a topic or particular forum members by introducing new themes or continuing existing themes (see Figure 5). The platform's structure, showing the interrelationship between messages, facilitates intervention in the discussion and reflects, via the display of the message threading, the degree of interactivity in the virtual conversation.

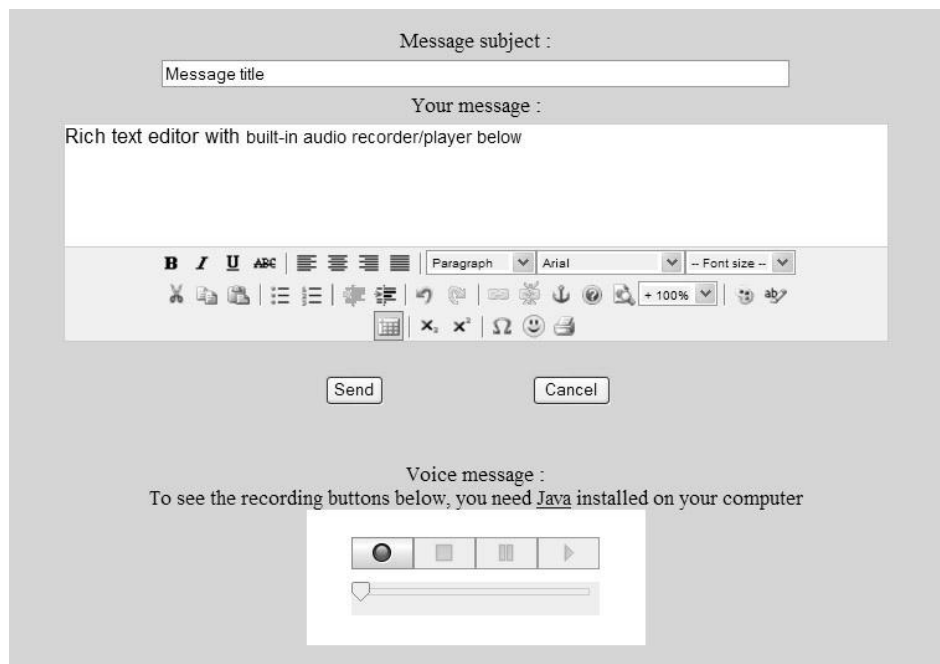


Fig.4. Message creation in *VoiceForum*





















-  [cultural difference](#) by **Emily L.** (02/12/2011 13h47)
 -  [reply](#) by **Nadia Q.** (02/12/2011 13h54)
 -  [reply](#) by **Jeremy Z.** (02/12/2011 14h01)
 -  [reply to J](#) by **Ricky C.** (02/12/2011 14h13)
 -  [reply to Emily](#) by **Sophia W.** (02/12/2011 13h58)
 -  [cultural differences](#) by **Karine S.** (02/12/2011 14h10)
-  [liz](#) by **Liz L.** (02/12/2011 13h43)
-  [Cultral difference](#) by **Cassie Z.** (02/12/2011 13h43)
 -  [reply by liz](#) by **Liz L.** (02/12/2011 13h59)
 -  [better choice](#) by **Kevin W.** (02/12/2011 14h10)
 -  [reply](#) by **Jeremy Z.** (02/12/2011 14h19)
-  [cultural differences](#) by **Cecile J.** (02/12/2011 13h43)
-  [culture differences](#) by **Karine S.** (02/12/2011 13h43)
 -  [Sinia reply to Karine](#) by **Sonia Z.** (02/12/2011 14h20)
 -  [reply](#) by **Jeremy Z.** (02/12/2011 14h26)
-  [1](#) by **Jeremy Z.** (02/12/2011 13h45)
 -  [Sonia reply to Jeremy](#) by **Sonia Z.** (02/12/2011 13h59)
 -  [cultural differences](#) by **Karine S.** (02/12/2011 14h04)
 -  [reply](#) by **Jeremy Z.** (02/12/2011 14h09)
 -  [culture differences miao~](#) by **Kevin W.** (02/12/2011 14h01)

Fig.5. *VoiceForum*'s threaded peer-to-peer interaction

VoiceForum's original feature is its separate pedagogical space for teacher-student dialogue. Using a commenting facility, teachers can offer guidance and contextualized feedback at a separate level hyperlinking a comment to a particular student message within the main forum. An icon system informs students of teacher feedback and teachers of student responses to this (see Figure 6).

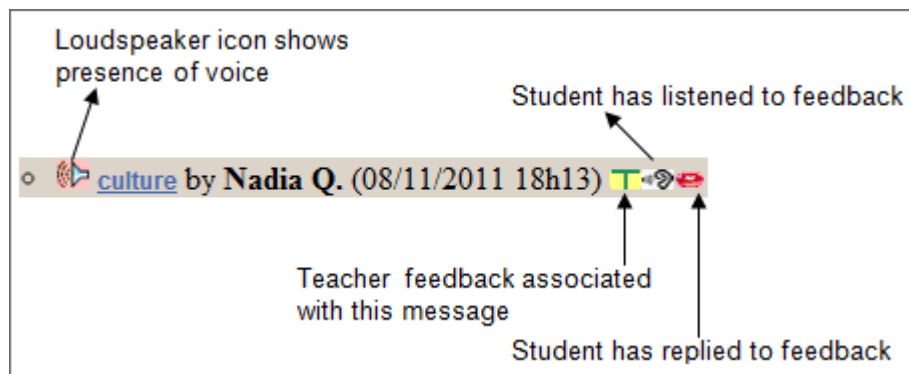


Fig.6. *VoiceForum* icons

4.2 Introduction and use of *VoiceForum*

VoiceForum is a convenient way to practise oral interaction in distance learning situations [4] but its asynchronous affordances justify its use in contact-based teaching also. Reasons for its introduction in the Chinese students' course included a potential increase in learner autonomy and reduction of the stress these students experience by real time (face-to-face) demands on speaking. The teachers also describe how during *VoiceForum* activity they anticipated their newfound availability to help students on an individual level. Thus, this study investigates the hope that the computer-assisted language learning platform would address the issue of reticence to participate orally in the target language, described in Section 3.2, and the teachers' wish to encourage unarbitrated peer-to-peer interaction.

Since its introduction, *VoiceForum* has been used with the Chinese students for discussion activities linked to the thematic syllabus with practice of language seen in class (see Figure 7).

Two of the predictable difficulties you can expect to encounter when you go to a different country to study (or to work) are those related to **language** and **culture**. In today's VoiceForum I would like you to think/reflect carefully about both of these aspects of your new life in France. Comment on both the challenge of living in a country where the language is completely different from your own, and where the cultural differences (between China and France) are quite substantial. Give examples with your commentary.

Fig.7. Sample *VoiceForum* task

5. Data and discussion concerning *VoiceForum*

5.1 Motivation for oral participation

Concerning the introduction of *VoiceForum*, students suggest they feel more confident to practise oral production. Using the scale described in Section 3.2, students rate their confidence speaking on *VoiceForum* at 8.4.

The same students, concerned about not giving a good impression when speaking in front of the class, state they feel:

“confident when I talk on VoiceForum. Because I'm with my own at that time. I don't need to care about others' opinions and I just need to be myself. I can express what I want to say on VoiceForum.” (SQ6)

“less afraid to talk on Voice Forum. [...] If I said something wrong I would console myself it doesn't a serious problem. Teacher will correct my answer.” (SQ1)

Working on *VoiceForum*, students do not perceive themselves as speaking in front of everyone although, on posting to forums, their communication becomes public to all class members.

Eleven students explain they systematically listen to messages before posting them. Reviewing messages before posting to the forum, allowing for re-recording of messages, combined with the possibility offered to intervene later in response to a previously posted message, e.g. to correct pronunciation or grammar, may contribute to students' increased confidence and decreased fear of losing face. As a student comments:

“there can be lots of chance for me to try again.” (SQ2)

Student data also illustrates a preference for *VoiceForum* speaking activities because they provide opportunities to prepare answers:

“I have a lot of time to prepare, if I don't know how to explain I can use my dictionary. A good prepare will give me more confidence.” (SQ5)

This relieves the fear of not giving a good impression and supports a study by Poza [7] concerning asynchronous computer voice conferencing which suggests students, by having time to prepare, gain security concerning the quality and accuracy of their oral productions.

Two students describe, however, their strategy of writing and reading aloud messages to help avoid errors. One teacher challenge is, therefore, how to accompany students from prepared to spontaneous oral production on *VoiceForum*.

5.2 Changed teacher role on *VoiceForum*

Our data suggests that during *VoiceForum* work, the teacher has a pedagogical rather than facilitating role. The platform, not the teacher, provides the primary mediation between the students. Indeed, forums exemplify peer-to-peer interaction in the target language without teacher intervention in the main message area to organise turn-taking or encourage interaction (see Figure 5). The threads exemplify that students are posting messages, listening and replying to each other's contributions as

well. In an example forum, during the allotted timeframe of 50 minutes, we observe 50 separate audio postings.

Students show a slight preference for correction of oral production on *VoiceForum* rather than in face-to-face situations. On a scale of 0 ('I don't mind at all, I feel comfortable if I am corrected') to 10 ('I really dislike being corrected') students rate face-to-face corrections at 1.2 and *VoiceForum* corrections at 0.9. Rated at 7.7 on a scale of 0 ('not at all helpful') to 10 ('helpful'), teacher feedback on *VoiceForum* is perceived as pertinent.

The separate pedagogical space for teacher-student dialogue may explain this receptiveness to feedback. Whilst student questionnaires express shyness at asking teachers questions in face-to-face situations, one teacher suggests that he is more solicited by students on *VoiceForum* due to the pedagogical space being perceived as private. In addition, the S2 teacher expresses his satisfaction at taking the time to gain a more detailed understanding of the students' linguistic needs rather than giving immediate unsettling face-to-face corrections. The S1 teacher adds that *VoiceForum* encourages students to self-correct whereas in the face-to-face situation a simple slip might be immediately corrected.

6. Conclusion

Our data shows, in answer to research question one, that the students do prefer the paradoxically perceived privacy of speaking in *VoiceForum*, the possibilities for review of oral production and opportunities for preparation, to teacher-mediated face-to-face class discussion. The felt relevance of teacher feedback suggests its potential contribution to progress. Investigating research question two, *VoiceForum* has encouraged peer-to-peer interaction unarbitrated by the teacher who, instead, is solicited for correction within the 'private' pedagogical space. Teachers expressed their satisfaction in giving delayed, contextualized feedback which they perceive as less unsettling to the students. Our study highlights, however, a real need to dissuade students from reading prepared messages into the microphone. Teachers report this habit is more prevalent among the Chinese students although it is to be put into the perspective of their B1 maximum level. With teachers alerted to this issue, a future longitudinal study might establish whether *VoiceForum* training in class can progressively lead to more spontaneous message posting and, in turn, greater progress towards initiative in turn-taking and risk-taking in face-to-face discussions.

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