

Enhancing Higher Institution Student's Language Learning Involvement Through E-Learning

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Abstract

The widespread use of technology has accelerated many changes in the education sector including higher education. The Internet has made online learning feasible, and many researchers and educators are interested and took part in online learning to enhance and improve student language learning involvement while combating the reduction in resources. It is imperative that researchers and educators consider the effectiveness of language online learning compared to traditional face-to-face format and the factors that influence the effectiveness of online courses. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, in-depth interviews had been conducted with twenty (20) undergraduate students of a private university in Sibul, Malaysia, who had undertaken online courses. The study is aimed at understanding the learning effectiveness for online language courses and to identify multiple factors that contribute to the students' involvement in online learning. Based on the findings, the researcher considered that effective online instruction is dependent upon 1) well-prepared online learning tools, 2) students and instructors' proficiency in technology practices, 3) motivated interaction between the instructors and learners, and 4) well-prepared and fully-supported instructors. In doing this, it is hoped that this will stimulate an on-going discussion of effective strategies that can enhance schools, institutions, and universities success in transitioning to teach online.

Keywords: language learning, online education, online learning, students' involvement, students' motivation, virtual learning.

Introduction

The ever growing globalization has caused an immense growth in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in most of industrial sectors, particularly the educational sector which in turn has transformed the way of learning, training and teaching (Jabeen, 2015). The widespread practice and implementation of the various digital technologies along with other forms of teaching and learning materials has created an interactive, student-centred, open and flexible environment of online learning (E-Learning). The Internet has made online learning practical, and educators are interested in E-Learning in order to enhance and develop student learning outcomes while struggling with the declining of supplies and resources, particularly in higher education (Nguyen, 2015).

Even in the field of language education, educators have occupied to develop student oriented courses using the latest web tools for courses which have been majorly instructor-oriented. The practicality of E-Learning as an effective mode of teaching and learning has not only grasped the attention of language educators and practitioners, but has also expanded their understandings and perspectives on how to create student-oriented and open ended learning environments (Lee, 2005), which are the two vital aspects of the communicative language teaching.

Moreover, learning through online forums or in other words to put a discussion through online is an imperative learning strategy for students to improve their language skills. The language learning process is highly individual and complex (Launer, 2010). In traditional classroom (face-to-face) teaching, an instructor or a lecturer will infuse the learning content while students listen, take notes and participate in class activities. In general, students are different and diverse in terms of intellectual sights and perceptions. Some students can acquire and comprehend more quickly and easily than others. And some students are more impassive and they are willing to accept what the teacher or lecturer says without enquiring (Wiriyaichitra, 2002).

Therefore, for purposes of this study, online education is operationally defined as a format used in learning when learners do not need to be in the physical classrooms (Hockly, 2015). The terms E-Learning, online learning, online teaching, online education, online instruction, and online courses are used interchangeably throughout the research.

Hence, the aim of this study is to do a research on the effects of tertiary level students' language learning involvement through E-Learning. The main online teaching platform used for data collection was online databases including Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), which was OpenLearning.com. By studying current trends in online learning and conducting a survey on the same purpose, therefore, the main objectives of this research are to:

1. Identify different online language learning tools and its effectiveness to language learning.
2. Discover students' motivation to involve in online language learning.
3. Assess the acquisition of language skills in online environment.

A qualitative research design will be implemented for collecting information for the study where in-depth interviews with a number of twenty (20) UTS students who are/have undertaken E-Learning course(s).

Literature Review

A. Effectiveness of Online Language Learning Tools

The usage of the internet with concerns to learning and teaching has broaden rapidly in the education sector. Even in the field of language education, educators have taken interest to demonstrate student oriented courses using the latest web tools for courses which have been mainly instructor oriented.

Kee (2010), in his study of online adult learning, pointed out that cognitive existence in adult learners was about how they perceived their learning satisfaction. His study showed that "most adult students reported deep learning as the dominant learning approach" (p.814). He discussed individualistic learning as a principal approach in adult learners' cognitive learning activities, indicating that adult learners had mixed feelings about online discussions. In their view, the effectiveness of online discussion ultimately depended on who involved in the discussion, and meaningful and valuable discussion were grounded on whether the participating peers were "chatty and talkative." They were concerned that unbalanced

discussion performances among their peers would greatly undermine the quality of online discussion.

Access to reliable and appropriate materials is an important part of the learning process and is known to upsurge motivation and maximise learning. In an online approach, technology offers just-in-time support in a synchronous way by giving prompt feedback, and by providing various scope of learning tools for learners, such as language functions, many different types of activities, notes with practices, etc., which can be accessed when required. It is also offered in an asynchronous way, incorporating websites, forums, and chat rooms (McCarthy, 2016).

With online learning, teaching is not limited to the seating arrangement of the traditional classroom. A big number of learners can be reached, regardless of their location or institutional faculty (Thanekar, 2013). This is particularly pertinent for teaching institution-wide language programs where students come from all programs and are pressed for time. The e-learning elements of an online approach can reach them wherever they are and at any time that suit them. Thus, any language lessons or activities can be delivered to wide audiences with differing needs without affecting the consistency and quality of teaching and learning. Once the e-learning elements have been designed and developed, the changes required according to learners' needs are minimal from time to time.

In addition to support the e-learning approach, today's youngsters are technology-savvy. And today, many students are equipped with a desktop or a laptop with them, and a mobile phone. This gives them a prepared opportunity to leverage for learning the technology they already have at hand for everyday personal use, and without spending surplus budget on setting up the basic infrastructure (Thanekar, 2013).

B. Students' Motivation to Involve in Online Language Learning

An important element to ponder when adopting an online learning is students' attrition and retention. Many students, when they are first introduced to e-learning, they tend to say that they are not 'being taught' and feel that not only have they been wasting their time but that teachers or lecturers are not performing their job. The two vital debated elements were; academic factors such as difficulty and/or relevance with course materials and non-academic factors such as time pressure (Picciano, 2006). As for the academic factors, experience has

shown that well designed online courses develop student learning and increase student motivation (Amaral & Shank, 2010).

Furthermore, any online course requires high self-discipline and motivation on the part of the learners. Researchers in China, for example, mentioned the challenges that many of their students are regulating their own learning. Having been used to receiving traditional face-to-face classroom approach, applying typical drill-and-practice model, the students tend to overly rely on the requirements and demands of teachers (Huang & Zhou, 2005). They tend to follow guidance and supervision from their teachers, and could not be independent for their own learning. However, one factor encouraging motivation especially in e-learning is reliance on discovery learning and self-directed learning, the type of skill base that is often lacking among such students (Huang & Zhou, 2003). Ushida (2005) found that, in general, students had high anxiety at the beginning of the course due to a lack of familiarity, but later, as the course went on, that anxiety lessened.

Motivation is one of the key factors that affect language learners' success and performances in the language learning process; that is why, widely concerns educators and researchers. Researchers and educators have extensively been concerned in learner motivation since it is meticulously connected to achievement and desired outcomes. Lumsden (1994) defines motivation as learners' willingness to take part in the language learning process. Dornyei (2015) views it as an crucial part of the challenging task of language learning and its absence will fail individuals even if they're equipped with the most outstanding abilities and a strong great motivation will make up for important flaws. Motivation is the first condition to take on a learning task and is the mechanism that powers the process.

Motivation is another concern that calls for in-depth analysis when it comes to online learning environments (Burston, 2003). In online learning, motivation has been receiving attention in recent years (Chen&Jang, 2010; Baker, 2010; Hartnett et al., 2011; Richardson et al., 2015; Li&Tsai, 2017; Kyewski&Kramer, 2018; Ozhan&Kocadere.,2020). Various components have been suggested to interact with online learning motivation in an effort to address the problems of impairment and involvement. Learners experience lower levels of motivation when they skip classes or do not participate in the activities. De Barba et al. (2016) found state-level motivation at the moment of learning acts as a mediator between intrinsic motivation and involvement.

Course materials and tasks were also examined in relation with motivation. Hartnett et al. (2011) reports identified regulation (acknowledging the value of an activity) in online settings is as much important as intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, Ozhan and Kocadere (2020) found that the experience of flow and efficient commitment with the online educational setting with games significantly affected students' motivation. Furthermore, instructor presence, which is teaching practices observable by students usually in a live setting (Richardson et al., 2015), is also a major factor that determines students' motivation in virtual classrooms (Baker, 2010). Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a dynamic interaction between learners' motivation and positive learning experiences in online settings.

Online learners benefit impressively from online learning communities because of their connectivity with one another, they are able to share knowledge and fulfil common goals, which increase their involvement in learning. The relationship and interaction between the instructors and learners and among peer learners can also increase students performances and their satisfaction of the course, and learners can receive supports and assistances from their peers, and at the same time they can add their knowledge base through their interactive activities (Yuan & Kim, 2014).

Methodology

A mixed methods research design was conducted which incorporated a survey in order to collect data for the study by means of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with twenty (20) UTS undergraduate students as respondents (*R*) through quota sampling method. The respondents were in the process of undergoing or have undergone both or either one of the online courses in UTS; 1.) UCS3112 Communication in the Workplace and/or 2.) UCS3122 Professional English: Essential Communication Skills.

Due to the MCO (Movement Control Order) during the COVID-19 pandemic currently, the qualitative data was collected from audio recording in semi-structured face-to-face interview sessions had to be changed to virtual semi-structured interview through Google Meet. The primary data was analysed via thematic content analysis in order to gain a better understanding of the respondents' feedbacks. The first step in primary data analysis was an open coding process, in which data was observed, sorted and conceptualized. Then, analysis was matched to the coding process, in which the focus is on specifying a theme. The main

objectives of organizing the data this way are to help in the conceptualization of the data and to establish logic relationships among the developing categories of analysis.

The secondary data from various online articles and journals was analysed by online discourse analysis and synthesized into meaningful units or categories. The collected primary and secondary data was matched, discussed and presented in the results section.

Findings and Discussion

A. Effectiveness of Online Tools

Nowadays, an extensive range of tools are available to be utilized in the language learning environment. In order to get the response of the first research question and to assess the online tools used for the language learning, students surveyed for the present study were given multiple options. As a result, most of the students were accessing Internet as a main reference, followed by videos, animations and interactive web exercises for learning assistance. They also utilize discussion boards and e-mails. The reason stated for the high preference for these tools for these tools was their synchronous mode since they provided a connection between students and faculty for resolving issues. This was agreed by R7 as he mentioned,

“Most of the students nowadays are mostly relied on the Internet. No Internet means it’s hard to find references for our assignment. As we know, we can get any types or categories of information that we need from the Internet. You don’t have to buy reference books or magazines, newspapers, like previous years just to find information.”

R9 also indicated,

“Of course my main tool for searching information is Internet. We can just get any info we want within few seconds. Plus, there are various kind of sources that we can find such as interesting videos, animations, songs, movies, etc. So, our references won’t be limited. Urrmmm...and it will make learning fun.”

Tools	Average
Internet	4.45
Videos, animations and interactive web exercises	4.00
Discussion boards	4.20
E-mails	3.40

Table 1: Effectiveness of Online Tools

Interestingly, when students were asked to rate the effectiveness of these tools on a scale of 1 – 5 with 1= very ineffective and 5= very effective, their responses were moderately positive (M=4.45) towards Internet. The reason stated for the high preference for these tools was those sources produce much useful knowledge that could assist their learning enjoyable at the same time. Also, they stated they used videos and animations more as a learning aid rather than a primary tool.

R2 mentioned,

“I prefer online learning as I can choose from a wide selection of online materials and references, such as fun videos and animations. It also allows you to access the course material at any time. This means you can refer to material as needed and have extra time to review and study the course information and concepts. Since there are no scheduled classes to attend.”

To support, R16 also stated,

“Online Learning does help us in terms of time and concentration. For me, with the notes and quizzes given here (online medium), I can focus on my own (somehow it works better) and have discussion with my own friends about the topic given in discussion board at any time we want. Plus, we are given a time limit so we will not be drifted away with our own works.”

The samples viewpoints showed that the variety of materials and resources online did enhance learning. However, the study also revealed that there was a need for more facilitation in internet connection in order to attain the objectives of online learning. Although there were means to interact with other students and instructors online, more tools and technological

support were required to increase the interaction that could boost the effectiveness and performance of language online learning.

To have a strong technological supports agreed by R12 as she affirmed

“We know that live session required good internet connections, but sometimes poor connections also occurred within campus area or our own house that affects our learning process. Therefore, for me, we need to ensure we have a strong and stable connection all the time or at least to prepare for a backup in case of any circumstances. Or else it’s hard for us to achieve the goals.”

To add, there seemed to be a strong indication by students that a slightly more frequent interaction with peers and instructors would help them stay focused as compared to being left to study at their own pace which tended to decelerate things down and in turn, affected efficiency of overall learning process.

Another surprising finding was that most of the students found themselves to be above average when it came to web technology or web efficiency.

R4 specified,

“I am still unclear with the application and the platform itself. Sometimes, I still have no idea which section to select when it comes to specific materials or tasks. I had no idea where to select to get at our rubric or the announcement on the due date till my friend had to show me where it was. Thus, sometimes, we as a student still need lecturers’ or instructors’ support to guide us.”

Hence, this points out that the lack of knowledge in handling these tools can affect learner’s efficiency and indirectly slow down the momentum of learning development. Thus, self-efficacy and technical support are the main factors that could contribute to the enhancement of the effectiveness of an online language learning.

Whilst, as shown in Table 2 below, students were briefly questioned to rate the following statements in terms of agreement/disagreement on scale 1-5 (indicate 1 for Strongly Disagree to 5 for Strongly Agree).

Statement	Average
There are resources to interact with fellow students online.	4.35
The use of videos and animations has increased the amount of information obtained.	4.75
There should be more material like notes, practices, videos, etc.	4.15
There are mediums to interact with instructors online.	4.10
I communicate with my instructors face to face.	3.40
I communicate with other students face to face.	4.40
If left to work at my own pace, I procrastinate.	2.15
I am web proficient.	3.10
My instructors are web proficient.	3.05

Table 2: Response for Online Learning Tools

The results show that video and animations did actually enhance learning process. However, the study also revealed that there was a need for more support material like notes, practices, videos, etc. as a quite a number of students expressed their desire for the same approach.

R9 mentioned,

“Though language or communication courses are not as tough as science or calculation courses, we still need proper amount of notes and other supporting materials to enhance our comprehension, especially now, we have implemented the online learning which means less face to face communication with lecturers. So, students have to be more independent in finding more sources.”

Although there were mediums to interact with other students and instructors online, more tools and technological supports were requires to increase the interaction.

R1 affirmed,

“As we are dealing with technology, there will be drawbacks and unpredicted issues happened that can decrease the effectiveness of the learning process.”

And that's why, in my personal opinion, we can't depend only on one or two tools or mediums. We have to think of a backup plan."

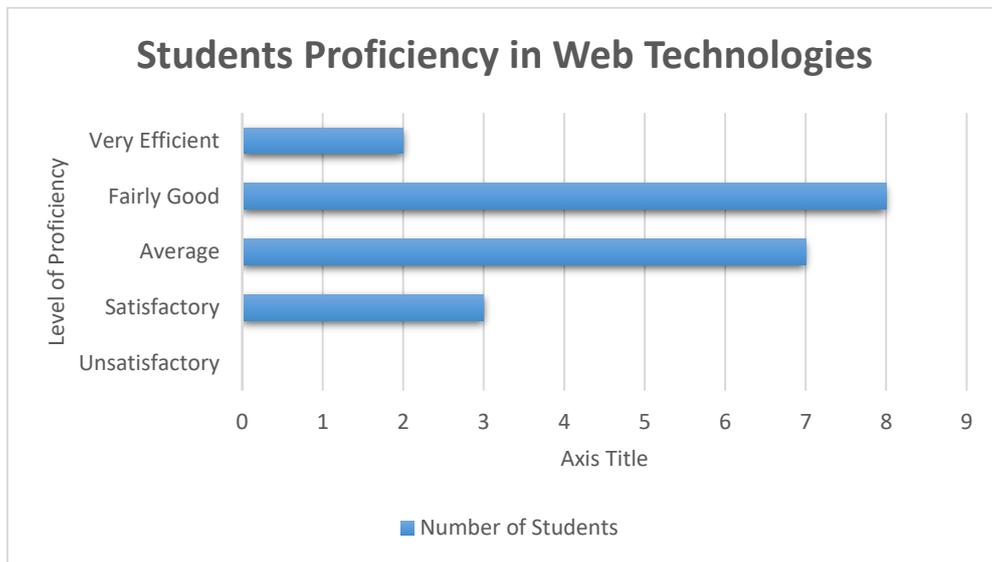


Figure 1: Students Proficiency in Web Technologies

Another appealing finding was that most of the students surveyed found themselves to be above average when it came to the usage of web technology. While on the other hand, many of the students did not feel the same about their instructors. Moreover, students who rated themselves to be fairly good (Fig 1) in using web tools averaged a mean of 5.2, while students who rated themselves who were very efficient averaged 5.87. This points out that the lack of knowledge in handling these tools can affect learner's efficiency, too. Therefore, self-efficacy and technical support are the factors needed to increase the effectiveness of an e-learning language programs. The statements were corroborated by the students as R3 stated,

"...and I also can't deny that strong technical support is essential to ensure the effectiveness of the online learning. For example, at certain location or at certain times, the server, the platform, the internet connection can be disconnect and unstable. Not all students have a good knowledge on how to cater this issue."

R15 also stated,

“For me, once we have carried out an online learning, one has to be more independent and should have a higher self-discipline because there will be less face-to-face interaction with lecturers. One has to know how to manage their own study.”

The results discovered that a slightly more than occasional interaction with peers and instructors would help them stay focused as compared to being left to study at their own pace which tended to slow their progress and in turn, affected the learning involvement and effectiveness. Additionally, sufficient technical guidance should be provided to students and instructors to improve the effectiveness and overall online learning and teaching experience. Additionally, in order to boost the students’ learning involvement and achieve the effectiveness of online language learning.

B. Students’ Motivation to Get Involve Online Language Learning

Interviewing 20 students, all of whom had taken UCS3112 and UCS3122 courses addressed the importance of instilling the awareness of education and self-motivation. In their viewpoints, they believed that university students should be matured enough to be independent in learning and to realize on how education could give high impacts on their future. This agreed by one of the students, R5, as he believed that, *“students become more active than ever, proven with the comments posted by students. Students will study (slides, etc.) more frequent due to time limit and quiz.”* To strengthen the point, another student, R17, also stated, *“At the age of above 18 is considered as adult, so that it is the time to be more mature and independent in learning in which students should know how to prioritise and manage their own study.”* Relevant comment by students who had a high level of motivation to successfully complete the course and possessed a good attitude towards online learning.

R8 indicated,

“This course helped me to be more responsible. Marks gained from the weekly tasks increase my motivation to keep moving. Arranging time-table to finish those exercises kept me motivated too and I did it with enthusiasm as sometimes my friends and I make it as a competition to get the highest marks.”

Whilst, the majority of the students reported that lack or poor internet connection as most common challenges in undertaking open learning. 7 out of 20 students claimed that unfamiliarity of the platform knowledge or other technical proficiency, followed by poor self-discipline, which refers to the high dependence among participants expecting full guidance and assistance from lecturers or instructors, especially in giving reminders of the datelines. So, as a whole, it can be seen that majority of the students still found that online learning is helpful and interesting. However, they agreed that some challenges could hinder the effectiveness of online learning.

R5 mentioned,

“...so does students who went back during the time, thus, giving them lack/poor access to internet connectivity and is not able to commit to the online learning activity which results in being left out or not able to keep up with the progress.”

R20 did not deny that ignorance among some students can be a major issue in ensuring the effectiveness of online learning as she specified:

“I have to admit (perhaps my own fault), I am still carried away with my own things that I'd forget to check on my online learning app. So, it brings me horror if I really do miss out any due dates as we know that most online learning is more to self-pace.”

R9 also identified,

“For online learning, I need to make sure that I am 24 hours alert, where I cannot be late for any update in here. For the assignment, it may take some times for me to get use to the system in the open learning such as where to get the materials. This really teach me on how to be more discipline and learn to manage my own learning.”

It was observed that new students who did not possess self-learning skills tended to have low motivation associated with anxiety and lack levels of awareness. They still preferred learning language in a face-to-face method since they were not ready to learn independently.

This statement was supported by R5, as he indicated,

“I felt motivated when I studied in the classroom. Class attendance motivated me to attend the class. Hahaha... The teacher can answer my questions promptly. In online learning, I have to wait for any feedbacks. And I do not want to ask my friends because I trust the lecturer more.”

It was found that the senior students who possess self-learning skills were more ready to study online course compare to junior students. This was because most lower grade students still need sufficient time to adapt themselves to a new learning mode since they had been learning within traditional mode which they had been fully guided by teachers for a long time and are still attached to it. Thus, proficiency, maturity, and experiences in online learning could also play a significant role in online language learning.

C. Acquisition of Language Skills

The responses in Table I are based on 1-5 scale indicating 1 for Very Ineffective to 5 for Very Effective.

Skill	Average
Reading	4.44
Listening	3.67
Speaking	3.56
Writing	2.89

Table 3: Summary for Acquisition of Language Skills

In response to the question which of the four language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking) developed the most involvement in the online learning setting, reading received the highest percentage (38%) of all the skills used in language online learning. Listening was the second most used skills in the online setting with 33.4%, followed by speaking (23.8%), whereas writing was an issue that needed to be addressed while learning languages online as it had least response with only 4.8%. Students stated that reading attained the highest percentage due to most of the given or provided sources are materials such as

reading notes. However, some learners believe that online learning does not give a high impact or implications on the acquisition of any language skills.

This seems to be a clear indication that reading and listening skills tend to have more opportunities to be practised online and more effective when studied through the internet. Other findings showed that practicing writing and speaking skills online seemed to be no different in terms of involvement. Both the online and traditional classroom methods yielded the same outcome. Even for writing, the online method had a better average at $M=3.56$, while learning through face-to-face interaction averaged at $M=3.44$

This result was also corresponded by *R13*,

“It enhance my language as it provided more time for me to learning the English and digest what I learned from the slides and video, especially in reading and listening as we could listen to variety of pronunciation through online resources. The other language skills...I don't think they have effects.”

To add, *R8* indicated,

“For me, in terms of whether online learning enhances my language proficiency especially in areas such as, writing and speaking; I would prefer the traditional learning approach as there is opportunities of interaction, guidance of pronunciation, observation of body language and so forth.”

This finding showed that peer interaction does not influence writing skills as compared to performing it online. It is worth stating that reading and listening have produced the better involvement when students interact with other students which shows that peer interaction can boost learner's motivation and proficiency. This results at the same time revealed that the issue to confront were the lack of learning projections for speaking and writing, as students believed that the only means to learn how to speak and write well was through interactions and comprehensive practices with peers and instructors during face-to-face learning. To put the online speaking and writing activities into suitable practice, instructor's assistance and support are required. However, in many cases, this may not be achievable as many students find time constraints to be a major hindrance. This leads to less frequent interactive sessions, thus affecting the overall involvement of language learning as a whole.

Conclusion

Overall, it can be concluded that effectiveness of language online learning is not at par when compared to face to face learning. The study mostly indicated that the participation in online learning is perceived positively by the students in language learning and language acquisition. It implies that lecturers concerned should not just create a platform for students but be part of the platform to stimulate valuable discussions and promote more efficient learning.

The other limitations of this online method were inadequate interaction, low self-motivation due to online learning tools shortcomings, and lack of training in using the required technology. It was also observed that the overall effectiveness was much higher when students learnt under the supervision of instructors.

Online learning is an approach which takes into account different learning styles and combines diverse learning environments in a flexible, integrated and complementary way in order to assist, support and enhance learners' diverse needs and provide an effective, proficient and pleasant learning experience. Mixing different media and learning materials, different modes of delivery and different instructional strategies is not a new approach, but the capabilities of today's technology can make an online learning easier and more meaningful for learners.

As the world progresses, the use of e-learning, electronic devices, internet, computers in teaching and learning process increases too and all related groups; educators, learners, parents, and communities, have to coordinate themselves with the development and upsurge self-abilities to be able to work with technologies to increase knowledge. The more educators and learners get familiar with technologies, they more they can use and incorporate them with their teaching and learning styles.

Therefore, to conclude, related programs should be arranged to educate all teachers and learners on how to utilize computers and increase their information about multimedia and other devices which can be used for language learning and thus they can keep up with the e-learning. Simultaneously, students must be further exposed to the growing potential of how

online learning could contribute to their learning process and must be made to understand that online learning are not merely for teaching but sharing and learning.

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