

The Writing Center's Role in the Academic Life of an English Foreign Language Student from an Instructor's Perspective

Beth Bassima Bakkar

**Faculty School of Literature, Humanities and Sciences
Lebanese University-Beirut**

Abstract

The English Writing Center (WC) has recently become a writing support service in selective Lebanese universities even though it has been a common practice in Western universities for the last twenty years. The article from a university instructor's experience aims to bring forward the reasons the WC at Lebanese universities is slowly attracting students to its provided practices and how disciplinary instructors amongst other socio-cultural factors are contributing towards students misconceptions of the WC philosophy and services. The article first introduces the profile of the Lebanese university English as a foreign language (EFL) student to provide a background on their English language level of proficiency and expectations from the WC tutors and the misguided understanding of the WC philosophies and framework practices that are opposing students' expectations from the WC; and continues to construct the need for the WC to re-evaluate its current writing pedagogy and process between tutor and student. The article concludes by discussing the negotiated roles WC tutors, disciplinary instructors and faculty management should take in order to transfer students' misconception of the WC aims and objectives and to take responsibility for their writing.

Key Words: English foreign language, English language writing centre, English medium of instruction, English second language, Middle East and North Africa, writing centre, writing laboratory

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Introduction

The nuance for the attainment of the English language at an academic level has over the past twenty years become a practised requirement for students at the university level not only in Lebanon but across most of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The English language learning has become a relevant aspect of an Arabic speaking student's life, as to ensure a prosperous academic future and career both nationally and abroad. This standpoint has encouraged Lebanese university management and administration to place pressure on university faculty members to raise students' numbers by provided English language support services and to enhance the English language academic proficiency to a global level. This discourse between management and tutors' has contributed towards a re-evolvement of the universities English language writing centre (ELWC) from a writing lab philosophy that reflected more on the writing outcome than the writing process and becoming a member of the writing discourse community where students take ownership of their writing process and outcome.

The WCs philosophical practices in Lebanon as it has internationally is currently experiencing changes to what was previously implemented in the 1970s Writing Lab and since North's (1984) major undertaking on the objectives of working with students writers. North argued that the WCs is to be more than a place to edit student's papers. It is a learning center where tutors are to focus on student writing negotiation and planning throughout the writing experience. Since North's support for the WC to be a writing station that encourages the personal writing growth of a student community, the academic institutions have seen a surge of international students seeking to acquire the English language discourse at an academic level. Consequently, from this advancement, universities administration such as in the case of Lebanon, have increased the English language learning support by providing students with writing language centres. The WCs are aimed at aiding students in becoming independent, proficient writers of the English academic language by addressing writing pedagogical issues relevant to students writing discrepancies.

The exploration and development of the role, form and content a WC is currently supporting at Lebanon's higher studies, is slowly becoming a permanent approach by WC tutors and disciplinary instructors to the underpinning of various theories and pedagogical processes that aim to serve WC Philosophy, tutors and students. This support aims to provide and encourage students' ongoing discussion between faculty members, instructors and tutors; whereby this examination of the WC will aim to serve as Archer and Richards (2011) explained, as an exploration into student profile, teacher relationship and the discipline-specific in teaching writing requirements. From this perspective, what has been observed and argued by practitioners such as Hauer (2019), Rafoth (2015) and Richards (2011), is that the WC philosophical practices and students expectations from the WC tutors and tutors from the students are often mismatched. From this standpoint, what the article aims to highlight, is that students writing expectations are not met by the tutors and tutors are unable to address students writing concerns because students do not meet the current understanding that a WC is no longer a drop off-fix it WL but a learning and writing community where students' learning is negotiated, writing strategies are discussed, and complete control of the writing process is adopted by the student.

The objectives of this article are; one to discuss how the EFL programs pre-tertiary studies in Lebanon have prepared students for the academic writing process; and two, how the WC needs to re-evaluate its current writing pedagogy and process between tutor and student; and three to establish an understanding of the WC adopted philosophical rules and the need to encourage not only dialogue and negotiated instruction between tutor and student but also for students to understand the importance of taking control of their writing as to ensure knowledge growth of the writing process in all its form.

To adequately explore these points the article address the Lebanese English Foreign Language National Curriculum (LNC) that is delivered in the English Medium of Instruction (EMI) to affirm the reasons for students English language discrepancies in the writing process and to highlight the misconceptions between student and the WC adopted philosophies and writing practices between tutors and students. The article further reflects on the writer's experience in teaching at the Lebanese and Australian universities for comparison purposes between both of the WCs adopted philosophical writing objectives and instruction.

Profile of the Lebanese Writing Center student

From my experience in working at various universities in Lebanon the profile of the students that attends a WC compared to that of a WC student in an Australian university, for example, varies extensively even though their writing needs are very similar. For one, the profile of the student in Lebanon is homogenous. Students and tutors are mostly of an Arabic speaking background, and they all share the same geopolitical environment. Furthermore, tutors can communicate in the Arabic language with the students overcoming any frustration that may evolve from both sides due to language communication breakdown. Whereas, in Australia, the author worked with students that were either of an English second or foreign language and are of a various multicultural background. Students are expected to engage and apply the English language along with its grammatical functions and writing processes and undertaking as a native English language speaking student. Tutors as myself are expected to deal with a diversity of cultures and languages and seek pedagogical instruction to overcome language miscommunications. These international non-English speaking students are encouraged to seek remedial English language support to stamp out the remedial English as a second language (ESL) identity quickly and to provide written essays that are of a global English language academic level.

The profile of the Lebanese tertiary student English language also varies from student to student in the classroom but for reasons that are different from that of an Australian classroom. One reason depends on whether the student at the secondary level studied English as a second language in the English medium of instruction (EMI) or a third foreign language. It is important to note that the existing Lebanese National Curriculum consists of trilingualism; the medium of instruction in all public and private schools is the first language being Arabic, and depending on the teaching policy and philosophy of the school the second language is either English as a second language or French as a foreign language. A second foreign language is also instructed depending on the school's teaching philosophy and chosen medium of a foreign language. The understanding is that public schools in Lebanon adopt the same curriculum as opposed to the private school sector that implements another global English language education curriculum. Most Private schools in Lebanon do not apply the Lebanese national curriculum and textbooks and communicate and teach

all core subjects in the English medium of instruction (EMI). The communication and assessment that is delivered in the EFL class are expected to be communicated in the English language. From this perspective, the student from a private education sector whose holistic curriculum is delivered in the EMI arrives at the university level with extensive exposure of the English language discourse and culture. Hence, their English language academic needs and shortcomings are expected to be different from that of a student who attended a national school. Secondly, as dictated by a recent study by Bakkar (2018) on the Lebanese English foreign language (EFL) curriculum from a teachers' perspective, Lebanese national students in no small degree have acquired the English language through memorisation, and ongoing practices in grammatical rules; and teachers are most likely to instruct in the traditional teaching methods. The language classroom is teacher-centred; skills are dictated and tested through traditional assessment methods such as in short quizzes and tests. As a result, the LNEFL student arrives at university with little knowledge of the academic English language and control of their learning and writing processes. Students, in a short period, are expected to submit analytical essays that are at an international English academic standard (Bakkar, 2018) that are above their language writing and language analytical discourse.

The number of Lebanese universities that are currently teaching all core subjects in the EMI has escalated in order to attract national and international students from the MENA region. Globalized higher education enhances universities prospects of students' enrollments, increases finances consequently making up for lack of government funding, supporting students' needs for the global labour market and establishing the profile of the university on a local and international platform. However, offering these academic programs at higher studies do not come without their discrepancies.

Students are attracted to acquire their academic studies in EMI, but their lack of proficiency in the English language at a global academic level is posing various problems to faculty management and course instructors. What is noted is that the delivery of the courses in the EMI is highly ambitious on the students. In support of this, Preece and Martin (2010) ascertained in their study titled *Imagine higher education as a multi-lingual space*; that often there is a discrepancy between the pedagogical practices and philosophies of the EMI tertiary education and the language needs and profile of the ESL-EFL student. A derivative of these discrepancies are contributing towards students lack of mastery of the English language, comprehension of its theoretical reading contents, writing processes and study strategies. Consequently, these factors are pressuring faculty management to provide students with English language writing support centres as a solution to helping them achieve the academic results needed for them to reach global English language academic standards. Students are often directed by their course instructors to seek the WC support to learn how to research and write at an academic English global level. Hence, from experience and observation, instructors' heavy teaching load, lack of office student support time and the personal perception that "they are not EFL teachers" are additional factors that encourage them to direct students to receive the assistance of the WC tutors.

Accordingly, students ambitiously approach the WC intending to escape the "Remedial English" identity inherited from received poor results and instructors' encouragement with a false understanding of the philosophy and practices of the WC and tutors. From observation, students often identify themselves as being academically proficient in the practices of the English language.

Their strong perception of their English language level is intertwined with their social-cultural identity (Martin, 2010); hence, falling short of personally interpreting the different language elements between academic language and literacy practices. They become frustrated with their course instructors when encouraged to approach the WC for writing support. This frustration is birthed from their identity that if they are proficient speakers of the English language, then they are academically strong in the writing and research elements of higher studies. Furthermore, students arrive at university with their understanding of the characteristics of language proficiency. Consequently, the provided WC practices and directive learning approaches placed towards students' participation is proving to be challenging between WC tutors and students.

What the author noted is what students perceive from the WC tutors is in contradiction with its noted philosophy and practices. Lebanese universities students come with past experiences in the writing mechanism and processes from secondary education with lack of personal knowledge, independence and consistency (Bakkar, 2018) thus, conditioning them to rely on WC tutors to take control of their writing essays. Students assume WC tutors as they did of their secondary teachers to provide directive-centred feedback in highlighted areas of writing concern and to narrow down the feedback to teacher controlled editing, paragraph writing and referencing. What is further observed is that due to the lack of experience and fluency and accuracy in the spoken and writing of the English language students are at ease at giving WC tutors full instructional command of their work. Students expect tutors to take on a much directive role in the one on one consultation and they perceive the role of their course instructor and the WC tutor to be of equal bipartisanship; meaning the writing outcome needs to reflect the expectations of their instructor and course assessment outcome.

Consequently, the WC tutors are finding themselves mediating between the student's language needs and their instructors and overlooking teaching aspects of how students need to take control of their writing process and outcome. Moreover, students to meet assignment deadlines and to ensure a high GPA expect WC to polish their paper into a monolingual standard written English that is a reflection of an English native speaking student. In the process, the philosophical directive tutoring technicalities of the writing centre are lost, consequently creating tutor and student frustration and loss of writing management and purpose.

Past and Current Philosophy and Profile of the Lebanese University Writing Center

A modest number of WCs are currently established in several Lebanese universities where once WLs were a common practice for writing deliberation between students and tutors and work correction. In the past, the WLs have been an essential constituent of higher education globally, providing language and writing support to English second language students. The educational support the WL imparted is much different to the philosophies the twenty-first-century WC bases its philosophical, pedagogical writing processes on. The WL was based on remedial services, and tutors adopted the quick-fix method. The quick fix method was back to basics method where tutors implemented to help students with their grammatical errors and sentences fragmentation (North, 1984).

The common practice between the previous years in Lebanon and WL globally at the university level is that they provided broad tutoring services to students from various academic

sectors at a large tutorial scale. The instruction broadly communicated the targeted framework content, and students' language needs were managed at a macro scale. Furthermore, one on one tutoring between student and tutor took place through appointed meetings during, after class or the corrected written assignment was picked up by the student without further conferencing. The WL objective was to provide a macro managed planning language framework that was aimed at providing learning support to non-English speaking students, where it focused on more than one particular pedagogical skill at a time (Rafoth, 2015). What is currently observed, encouraged and experienced between tutors and students at a WC is that the philosophical transition a WC adopts now is unlike the previously macro-managed level of language studies that are similar to an academic language syllabus framework.

The Lebanese universities' that are adopting a modern WC philosophy and objectives are staffed by peer tutors, faculty members or professional writers who are there to guide and support students in their writing. The WC is set up by the university administration to provide students with a safe, non-judgmental learning environment that encourages a one on one approach to instruction and direct a meaningful discussion (Harris & Silva, 1993) around the writing process and experience in order for students to become better writers (North, 1984). In support of this mission, some students at various Lebanese universities the author has instructed at have demonstrated an eagerness to approach the WC but become reluctant users because they do not want to be identified as a member of the "Remedial English" language community. Their assumption as expressed by them that they have a good command of the spoken language and others lack the personal skill of gaining writing ownership because their secondary teachers took full control of their writing process prevents them from seeking writing support. Gillespie and Lerner (2000), explain that the WC should aim to teach students how to become better writers not better at writing as the WL previously did and to encourage the student to be self-reliant in the management of their writing timeline and adopted writing strategies. The WCs at Lebanese universities are aiming at evolving just like most Western universities WC's, into a student-centred learning space that welcomes inquiry analytical discourse that is encouraged and guided by tutors. They are developing a tutor-student relationship that is non-intrusive and non-judgmental. Tutors are encouraged by WC management to encourage dialogue between students collaboratively and to guide the student to discover effective writing strategies that reflect on their style of writing and to encourage students to move beyond aiming at writing to gain better score results on their assignment. The aim for WC tutors is to provide a tutor-student micro-managed language target skill support that aims to solve language problems that are centred on the student's language needs one skill at a time (Mackiewicz, 2015) and to empower students in taking control of their work and finding their writing voice and identifying with their audience.

However, what is encouraged philosophical practices at a WC by tutors are not always consistent with students' expectations from the center. The article accepts these different expectations to be a derivative of students' experiences with the English language macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing at secondary schooling and being teacher reliant in all aspects of their learning (Bakkar, 2018). Consequently, the EFL student arrives at university with minimal comprehension of the academic writing process and have inherited from their secondary schooling learning skills that conflict with the expectation of tertiary level. Students are instructed

by their disciplinary instructors to visit a WC to enhance their writing discrepancies in order for them to reach the university's required academic level.

These tutoring philosophies that are practised in many global WC universities are not always accepted positively by students who are seeking a quick fix to their writing assignment. From my experience, tutors as myself, feel that students' expectation of the writing session has nothing to do with building their technical writing process but centred on grammar, writing techniques and most importantly to ensure an above-passing grade. They arrive at the WC session to write up their assignment to hand it in on time, and as soon as they finish, they only return to work on a new one. They do not acknowledge the WC as an academic place where they can develop their writing techniques and become a member of their writing community. Hence, due to students misconception of the role of a WC adopts tutors are finding it challenging to manage the language philosophy delivery that is put into place by the WC management. Students place a high responsibility on tutors to take leadership of their writing process and embrace tutors feedback as a definite solution to their writing discrepancies, not as an added value to research and problem-solving.

To better understand the misconception, a Lebanese EFL student at a university level brings with them to the WC, the article delves into the student academic profile and investigates their reasoning behind such misunderstandings.

Discussion

In the following section, I aim to highlight the reasoning behind EFL Lebanese academic students' misconception of the WC and tutors responsibilities. I reflect on and provide suggestions on the WCs adopted philosophical strategies and practices and the responsibilities of the student towards their academic writing. I approach each recommendation with a heading to raise individual topic awareness, judgement and discussion and to collectively examine the interrelationship and expectations of these topics from WC tutors, course instructors and faculty management.

EFL Lebanese University Students and the WC Tutors

To be able to construct the philosophical aims and objectives of the Lebanese universities WC, tutors and course instructors need to acknowledge students socio-cultural and academic secondary experience within the writing process. The English academic profile of the Lebanese students are of a Multilanguage English level, and this is especially highlighted in the level of academic writing they produce. From observation, students enter university with the expectation that they will receive extensive support in their writing just as they did from their secondary English language teachers. Their academic institutional, cultural habits are transferred with them into higher studies, and to change this mindset has proven on many occasions to be exhausting from an instructors' position. From experience in delivering writing tutorials to students from various course affiliations, it is encouraged that instructors and WC tutors commit to studying students' academic profile, English language attained and proficiency in their spoken and written language before they dictate the WCs philosophical aims and objectives to them. The WC adopted ideologies should be attainable and supportive of the tutor's teachings and students learning.

The misconception students have of the WCs role is because they arrive at university with little knowledge of its purposes. The WC is virtually a new concept, and students have not been addressed of its practices and management before their transition into university. Their experience with the writing process is close to the past concepts adopted by the WL tutors, where students work was micro-managed, edited, and grammatical syntax errors are highlighted and corrected with or without their input. The aim is to shift students negative attitude they may have about writing and to encourage them to take ownership of their writing and to become a member of the writing community. According to Hauer (2016), the tutor may highlight lower-order elements such as grammatical and syntax errors but be sensitive as not to overlook higher-order concerns that address thesis focus, purpose, audience, organization and development. Furthermore, some students do not take university-tutor students seriously because academic statuses in Lebanon is part of their culture. I have had to on several occasions introduced the student tutors as competent and professional as other the WC tutors are and that their knowledge of the WC philosophy and objectives are comparable to their colleagues.

To alter students understanding of the WCs as a writing tutoring centre, course instructors and WC tutors need to reform students acceptance of a WC role. Students need to accept it as a place where they take command of their writing process, and that tutors are available to guide them in the writing discourse where and when needed and not to take control of the writing as to eliminate their writer's voice. They should understand that tutors are not there to evaluate their work; and that they should not put the responsibility on the tutor in micromanaging their final writing piece as a production of the final product before submission. In the process of achieving this, tutors along with student-peers presenters, brochures and online websites could students understand its aims and practices and accept the fundamental philosophy of a WC, whereby they experience the WC environment in a nonintrusive way where learning is encouraged through negotiation and an analytical mindset.

The multifaced profile a WC tutor's role occupies where a student is concerned should be clarified. Negotiation between course instructors, WC tutors and students on the management of students work should be an initiated practice from the beginning. Student's comprehension of the role a WC delivers is of language support, negotiation, planning, and micro-managing the technicalities of specific language skills. The tutor is there to instruct and guide but not to eliminate the students writing voice.

The WC tutor can go further as to encourage the student to publish their writing on the WC website as to inspire other students to take up writing independently and gain a better understanding of its aims and objectives. The advantage of having students publish their work is to promote undergraduate peer review, improve their multi-disciplinary research skills and to write for journal publishing post-graduation.

The Transition between Secondary School into Higher Education

The collaboration between universities WCs and secondary schools in Lebanon is still at its infancy stage. Most schools in Lebanon with the exemption of three are not aware of the WC philosophy, strategies or practices. If secondary students are to be part of this academic writing community before entering university, then misconception of the WC and tutors expectation could

be avoided. This misconception can be evaded when universities WC tutors and secondary schools instructors consider working together in creating writing workshops and providing an in schools WC environment that practices the same philosophies and strategies that are implemented at university.

From personal observation during my teachings at university, students were introduced to the WCs offerings only after they received a poor result on their essay, and by that time, most of the academic term had lapsed. It is advisable, and I know that most universities are aware of this, that at the initial stage of entering university students should be presented with a tutorial on the WCs arrangements, philosophy and expectations from them and the tutors. Students need to be encouraged by their course instructors to attend the WC regularly not only when they have an essay to produce but to become a member of a writing community that offers writing support in a variety of topics and fields. From extensive years of experience in teaching Lebanese students, I have witnessed how much they are grade driven. Therefore, in agreement with course instructors and faculty management, a small grade can be allocated to students that are frequent members of the WC community. This grade can act as an incentive for students who are seeking to enhance their GPA grades.

Course Instructors and Faculty Management

The culture and reiterated nuance by students on the nature and processes of the WC at the Lebanese university level can no longer be ignored. Faculty management, course instructors and WC tutors are equally responsible for altering students' misconceptions of the purpose of the WC. Instructors and tutors must initiate conferencing with students to draw students' attention to its existence, aims and objectives and how they can benefit from its services. In order to see substantive change in the students' mindset, ongoing in-class and online discussion that reflects the existing students writing community should take place. Course instructor's role should not be limited to the teaching of the course material but to also encourage students in their writing process and to help them discover their writing techniques. It is recommended that instructors express their expectations from their students and value that their students are of an EFL background and that their English language level is most likely not to a global academic level. The course instructor cannot overlook their responsibility towards the student in the writing discourse and needs to acknowledge that what is expected of them towards their student is different from that of a WC tutor. The course instructor is compelled to highlight rules that concentrate on higher thinking order such as the principles of academic writing discipline, research, referencing and provide a critical assessment on students writing progress. Different to that of an instructor, the WC tutor is encouraged to remain neutral in their assessment, not to evaluate students work and highlight useful writing techniques and habits, and encourage students to adopt personal writing strategies that reflect on their audience and writing voice (North, 1984). Students should not expect the WC tutor and their course instructor's responsibilities towards their writing assignment to be at par, hence, all should engage in the conversation of separating responsibilities in order to achieve as North noted the "concept of a WC and its philosophy", and to prevent miscommunication and management between all members.

The author has always made it a point to educate themselves and encourage other instructors on the learning techniques and language discrepancies EFL students' face in the

language classroom as to adopt strategies and instructions that promote effectual long term learning that supports students' academic writing. It is encouraged that WCs hire trained EFL tutors but as reiterated by faculty management lack of financial funding does not make it feasible. In such circumstances, instructors and tutors should be trained on how to accommodate students learning in an EFL setting, acquiring the academic English language courses in the EMI. According to Kiedaisch and Dinitz (2007), tutors being familiar with students' language needs and can provide language writing assistance and empathy is an essential element towards ensuring students effective learning outcome. Furthermore, instructors encouragement for students to seek directed writing assistance from the WC tutors should not be based on personal value but on assisting them in learning the techniques of research and conventions of writing; understanding the value of becoming a member of the writing community and becoming aware of their writing and reading audience.

It is an added benefit to the WC tutors to have a shared link of the faculties' syllabus across all academic disciplines in order to be theoretically aware of the literature and thesis topics students are working on. Furthermore, collaborated learning provides integrated conceptual understanding of the assignment's aims and objectives, motivates organized discussion between student and WC tutor and in the case of a peer tutoring, the tutor will appear more knowledgeable and experienced hence, as Forman and Cazden (1985) highlighted removing any existing peer doubt and inhibition between the two.

Another way of changing students' misconception of the WC is for faculty management to provide students with an appealing learning environment that encourages students to enter frequently. What I have frequently observed is that the smallest, dullest room with an inefficient number of tutors are provided. Tutors are unable to timetable a large number of students and students are unsuccessful in booking a follow-up session with the tutors before submitting their writing assignment. Consequently, students fail to receive further negotiated writing support and feedback. They voice a contradiction in the WCs stated philosophy and practices, hence, maintaining a negative perception of the WCs theorization and operations.

Conclusion

One cannot deny that the WC in Lebanon as it is globally, has evolved extensively since the making of the WCs. The philosophical discourse that once encouraged tutor control and focused on editing, grammar and citation now champion students through mentoring on content, organisation and voice and through becoming comfortable in the writing discourse discipline. It should be encouraged that students should not see the WC as a last "stop shop", "quick fix" service to solving their writing problems but as a tutorial service environment that supports their writing journey. A WC where attention is drawn towards the students, initiating tutor-student conferencing, creating a personalized writing plan and adopting a writing strategy that develops their writing voice.

Furthermore, when the WCs philosophical technicalities are made manifest through theory and practice, then students perspective on the role a WC holds may change. The conflicting understanding of the purpose behind the WC and the functions of the tutor where a student is concerned is a conversation university administration, lecturers and tutors should have to provide

clear policy guidelines of the WC and the expectations of the students from the tutors. Through this process, it is hoped that the misguided conception that a WC provides as a paper drop off services, and complete editing and rewrite of the paper is erased. Conjointly, fundamental issues are discussed on how to create a WC that services EFL students who are acquiring the English language at an academic level in the EMI. Ongoing discussion between faculty management and course instructors with WC tutors on the expectations from students writing and academic research is encouraged as to ensure students support and awareness of current global academic EFL practices that they can compare to past theories and adapt to their current student's academic needs.

In conclusion, the existence of the WC philosophy and objective at the university level in Lebanon in an EFL environment is a new shared practice amongst tutors and students. The article encourages, WC tutors and faculty management and instructors to reflect on past research and current adopted strategies by international universities in an ESL and EFL context and become a member of conferences similar to the ones held by MENAWC on the role a WC plays in supporting students writing from other MENA universities whose native language is Arabic and academic instruction is in the EMI. When observing other universities conferencing on their adopted WC instruction and how students are progressing in the elements of writing, we narrow the gap between theory, research and practices (North, 1984) and work on transferring students' misconception of the WC and becoming a member of the writing community.

About Author:

Beth Bassima Bakkar was brought up and educated in Melbourne and is currently a lecturer at the Lebanese University of Beirut. Her work focuses specifically on the teaching of the English literature to English second language and English foreign language students in the English medium of instruction.

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