

ONLINE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING BASED ON TELECOLLABORATIVE TASKS AND PROJECTS

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Abstract. *The development of new forms of technology has resulted in new methodologies and approaches in pedagogical practices, particularly within the field of foreign language education. This is especially useful in foreign language teaching because it allows students geographically distant to interact remotely. Moreover, the integration of task-based and project-oriented approaches implies a substantial increase in the quality and volume of communicative exchanges in virtual learning environments. This study aims to undertake a comparative analysis of two distinct online groups engaged in the same English B2 level course, although with different pedagogical strategies. While one group engages in collaborative, communicative tasks and a collective project, the other focuses on the*

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individual completion of exercises and drills. Pre- and post-tests were administered to participants of both groups to gauge their linguistic progression. The findings reveal that the group involved in interactive tasks and collaborative projects demonstrated superior advancements in language proficiency. Furthermore, these participants reported an enhanced sense of confidence in their communicative competencies within professional contexts. The study concludes that integrating project-based learning and telecollaborative practices holds considerable potential to enhance the efficacy of foreign language instruction.

Keywords: Foreign Languages; Online Learning; Telecollaboration; Project work; Communicative Tasks

ОНЛАЙН-НАВЧАННЯ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ НА ОСНОВІ ТЕЛЕКОЛАБОРАЦІЙНИХ ЗАВДАНЬ І ПРОЄКТІВ

Розвиток нових технологій призвів до появи нових методів та підходів у педагогічній практиці, зокрема у сфері викладання іноземних мов, оскільки дозволяє студентам, географічно віддаленим один від одного, взаємодіяти дистанційно. Крім того, інтеграція навчання на основі завдань та проєктно-орієнтованого підходу дозволяють суттєво підвищити якість та обсяг комунікації у віртуальному навчальному середовищі. Це дослідження має на меті здійснити порівняльний аналіз двох різних груп, які вивчали однаковий курс англійської мови рівня B2 в онлайн форматі, але з використанням різних педагогічних стратегій. У той час як одна група виконувала спільні комунікативні завдання та колективні проєкти, інша зосередилась на індивідуальному виконанні вправ і завдань. Учасники обох груп пройшли тестування до та після навчання, метою якого було визначення рівня мовного прогресу. Результати показали, що група, яка виконувала інтерактивні завдання і спільні проєкти, продемонструвала вищий рівень володіння англійською мовою. Крім того, учасники експериментальної групи повідомили про посилення почуття впевненості у своїх комунікативних компетенціях у професійному контексті. У дослідженні зроблено висновок про те, що інтеграція проєктного навчання та практики теле-співпраці має значний потенціал для підвищення ефективності викладання іноземних мов.

Ключові слова: іноземні мови; онлайн-навчання; телеколаборація; проєктна робота; комунікативні завдання.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the fall term of the 2021/2022 academic year, in response to the challenges posed by the last period of the COVID-19 pandemic, an innovative teaching approach was introduced to engineering students enrolled in the English B2 course. Whereas the students had to regularly attend theoretical lessons in the classroom (45 hours), the practical lessons were held online (15 hours). On the one hand, the official approach consisted of individual work based on the completion of worksheets after watching specific videos and audio. On the other hand, the alternative approach offered students the opportunity to participate in an international project that emphasized project-based learning and communicative tasks.

The aim of our alternative approach was a telecollaborative practice, which consisted in the creation of a website requiring students from two different universities to collaborate regularly on discussions regarding its structure, content, and linguistic aspects. These interactions provided a practical framework for students to apply the professional language skills introduced in lectures, encompassing meeting participation, presentation skills, professional writing, and teamwork.

This study, therefore, seeks to evaluate the outcomes of these two adapted teaching methodologies, particularly in terms of student progression in English proficiency and their confidence in professional communication settings. The control group engaged with the course through audio-visual drill exercises and individual tasks, while the alternative group participated in a more interactive and collaborative framework around tasks and project work. The hypothesis guiding this research suggests that the group exposed to the more engaging and dynamic task-based and project-oriented approach will exhibit greater linguistic progress. In sum, this experience underscores the imperative for educators across various disciplines and educational levels to enrich online learning environments with more interactive and project-based approaches.

2. THEORY

In line with the work of Moore, Dickson-Deane, and Galyen (2011), online learning can be defined as an educational paradigm facilitated by digital technologies. This framework enables connections among students, educators, and peers, fostering diverse interactions and collaborative efforts. This conceptualization is an extension of Ali (2004), who highlighted the critical role of the internet in providing access to educational materials, facilitating interactions with content, instructors, and peers. Tsai (2016) further expanded upon this by categorizing online learning into three distinct models: teacher-directed classroom learning, student-initiated online learning, and a hybrid approach that merges elements of both. The teacher-directed model emphasizes a structured learning environment led by educators, whereas the student-initiated model empowers learners with autonomy in their educational journey within a virtual setting. The hybrid model synergizes these approaches to enhance the learning experience.

Regarding the learning process, regardless of being online or offline, it encompasses three pivotal stages: input, processing, and output, as outlined by Stern (1983). The initial stage involves exposing students to new concepts, a necessity for learning progression. Richards and Renandya (2002) and Krashen (1985) underscored the importance of providing input that is both accessible and challenging, thereby engaging learners and facilitating the internalization of new information. Muñoz (2007) and Skehan (1998) advocated for input that is not only authentic and diverse but also experiential, thereby enhancing the learner's ability to retain and apply new knowledge. The second stage concerns the practice and internalization of new concepts through drills, as explained by Paulston (1970) and De Keyser (1998). This approach focuses on repetition and application, and it solidifies the learner's understanding and mastery of the new content. At last, the culmination of the learning process is the output stage, where learners demonstrate their acquired knowledge through the production of new content. In language learning, this stage is crucial as it involves the practical application of linguistic skills in communicative contexts.

Tasks, as defined by Nunan (1989) and expanded upon by Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993), are instrumental in this stage, facilitating the use of language in real-world scenarios and enhancing communicative competence.

Undoubtedly, the combination of both drills and tasks seems to be convenient in the learning process towards the acquisition of new content. While drills are a conscious part of the learning in which students are training skills or now forms of the language individually, tasks represent the application of this new knowledge into a whole, as it is real communication. In a task-based approach, language is the instrument of communication along the process of completing a task (Ellis, 2003; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Some of the benefits of tasks are reported by Lee (2011), being autonomy, critical thinking, decision-making, and social interaction the most outstanding. In this sense, learners involved in tasks are responsible for their learning and consequently need to be involved actively in the completion of the activities. This active role encourages students to take part in decision-making and problem-solving, which also leads to the development of social skills as a result of collaborative work and its corresponding social reflective process (Little, 2003). In the foreign language classroom, task-based learning has been reported to enhance students' oral fluency, listening, and the acquisition of new vocabulary (Chacón, 2012); it also contributes to increasing the use of the target language in the classroom (Tinker Sachs, 2007), and to implement the new knowledge and skills in the real world (Macías, 2004). Other researchers have noticed that the use of tasks in the classroom increases learners' motivation (Park, 2012), their confidence in command of the target language and communicating with it (Lopes, 2004), and students also perceive this approach as entertaining (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). As a result, students are encouraged to perform a more active role in the Classroom and collaborate with other students (Iwashita & Li, 2012).

A step further in the task-based approach is to transform it into a project-based one. The main difference between projects and tasks is that tasks are smaller, and they are not structured in phases like projects do (Brataas, Hughes & Sølvsberg, 1994). In this sense, projects are longer, more complex, and require more effort. As explained by Larsson (2008, p.7), projects have "well-defined objectives, schedule, and budget which rely on contributions from several functional departments across the organization". Winch (2013) also highlighted the matter of length and complexity as crucial factors to distinguish a project from a task; however, he adds manifest intentionality to the list. This concept concerns forming and executing a plan, something that does not happen in a task. Projects require a global vision and broader organization skills to devise a strategy and procedures for its accomplishment. To illustrate this, Winch (2013) compared a project with building a house, in which raising a wall would be a task.

In addition to these differences and similarities, there are other features of projects that should be considered (De Graaf and Kolmos, 2003). Firstly, project work is based on constructivism; this implies that students are given opportunities for output, and this requires problem-solving skills. However, it shall be acknowledged that students also need teachers' scaffolding and guidance and having access to comprehensible input. This idea connects with the hybrid model of online learning (Tsai, 2016). Secondly, this approach requires learners' implication towards research, decision-making, and production, leading these to deeper learning and experiencing a real case study. Thirdly, project work is interdisciplinary,

and it connects with different curriculums, contexts, and real-life situations. At last, project work is also developed in groups and it requires students to develop cooperative working skills to decide in groups the best solution every time and fulfill the objectives successfully.

Regarding the benefits of telecollaboration, it has been reported to help enhance lexicon, grammar, and pronunciation (Bueno-Alastuey, 2011; Guth & Marini-Maio, 2010), language fluency, and confidence in using the foreign language (Polisca, 2011; Tian & Wang, 2010). Besides, raising learners' motivation (Jauregi & Bañados, 2008), and developing digital (Cunningham & Vyatkina, 2012) and intercultural competence (Helm & Guth, 2010) have also been reported. As suggested by Dooly (2017), telecollaboration in the foreign language classroom is a suitable approach since it engages students in multiple interactions through teaching based on tasks, project-based learning, and language teaching based on communication methodologies.

In conclusion, telecollaboration is a form of virtual exchange, most typically in foreign language teaching (O'Dowd, 2018), which can be defined as online mobility which follows similar rules as a physical one (Scherer-Bassani & Buchem, 2019). Bueno-Alastuey (2013) suggested that telecollaboration is a suitable approach in foreign language learning because it encourages its participants to have multiple encounters with other participants whose first language is different. Thus, their common interest to communicate with a foreign language should help them succeed in achieving their learning goals (O'Rourke, 2005). Furthermore, telecollaboration is based on continuous meaning negotiation (Jauregui, 2015), an action that is highly recommended within the foreign language classroom (Ellis, 2003).

3. METHODS

In this experiment there were 185 participants; most of them (161) belonged to the control group. However, only those students who had taken an initial pre-test were considered for this experiment (42). The other group of students (24) were the ones who voluntarily decided to participate in the alternative teaching plan which involved working with tasks and a project. This group will be named experimental group. All the students in this experiment were Spanish, and they were all taking the subject of English B2 at the Polytechnic University of Valencia during the second term of the academic year 2021/2022. They were industrial engineering students in their second year of their bachelor's degree. Age and gender were not considered. In the same way, the 32 students from the National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute" who participated in this project have not been considered since they had a different profile compared to the UPV students, both control and experimental ones.

There were some differences between the procedures and the materials in the two groups. The theoretical lessons (45 hours) were common to both groups whereas the practical ones (15 hours) were different. The theory lessons were based on the book 'Communication Across Cultures' (Dignen, 2011) and included some language exercises based on drills. These lessons focused on business language forms and vocabulary (i.e. meetings, negotiations, presentations, writing emails).

In the practical lessons, students implemented the new language forms through written and oral communicative tasks. There were six practical lessons, which accounted for 15 hours of class. In this case, the method for each group differed. For each of the six

lessons, students from the control group completed a worksheet with different individual activities based on listening and videos. In addition, students also recorded videos for the oral tasks (3) and wrote an essay or letter for the written ones (3). Then, the teacher corrected these activities and gave feedback to the students. The completion of these activities was part of the students' assessment.

On the other hand, the experimental group worked on an international project with students from the KPI. This project was based on creating a website on the topic of sustainability, and students had to include four entries, two oral and two written. Besides, students had to meet weekly to discuss some topics based on sustainability and apply the knowledge studied in theoretical lessons. There were at least six compulsory meetings among the students. Participation in their group meetings was obligatory, and the non-attendance was penalized. The experimental group used different Google Apps since it was necessary to work with open software in which students from both UPV and KPI could participate and interact together. In this case, Google Classroom was used by the teachers to communicate with the students and post messages with relevant information, instructions, and resources for the development of the project. The students used Google Meet for their video conferences and chat. Although OBS Studio was recommended, different software was used to record their video conferences. Next, Google Sites was the tool used to create and publish their websites jointly. Finally, Google Drive was used as the shared space among group members and teachers, where students uploaded the material and files, such as videos, pictures, or documents (Docs).

Finally, the main focus of this experiment was to measure participants' language progress and their satisfaction with their respective teaching plans. To measure learners' progress, students took a language pre-test and a post-test. This test was entitled 'English Unlimited Placement Test' and had been created by Cambridge University Press (2010). The test contained 120 multiple choice questions, but it could be divided into three blocks of 40 questions each. These represent the three levels according to the CEFR: basic (A), intermediate (B), and advanced (C). We decided that each test should contain 20 questions based on the intermediate level. Questions with odd numbers (i.e.: 1, 3, 5) were used in the pre-test and those with even numbers (i.e.: 2, 4, 6) in the post-test. Regarding their confidence in using professional communicative skills, a survey was designed to ask students about their confidence in applying their communication skills in professional contexts. These skills were considered the most usual by Lehman and DuFrene (2013:2). Concerning learners' satisfaction, a survey was designed and circulated among all the students after completing the language post-test. Participants responded to 6 obligatory questions using a 1-5 Likert scale and to 4 volunteer open questions so they could also express their opinions and feelings freely.

4. RESULTS

As can be observed in Table and Figure 1, our students were initially tested with an intermediate English language level test. Participants from the control group scored a mean result of 6.04 out of 10, whereas the participants in the experimental group scored slightly higher, 6.16. Thus, the percent variation between the two groups was 1.99% before they started their classes. After they completed their courses, students from the control group

increased their mean result to 6.52; the experimental group also enhanced their performance and scored 6.89. In this case, the percent variation between the groups raised to 5.67%. Describing their performances individually, the control group enhanced their level by 7.95%, and the experimental one improved by 11.85%. These results show that both groups improved their intermediate level of English as a foreign language. However, their progress was different. This is shown in the percent variation between their levels in their pre- and post-test. Thus, students from the experimental group, who were involved in more interactive tasks and a project, seemed to have increased their language level more than the students from the control group.

Table 1. Learners' Language Progress (Intermediate Level)

	PRE	POST	Dif.	V%
Control	6.04	6.52	0.48	7.95%
Experimental	6.16	6.89	0.73	11.85%
Dif.	0.12	0.37		
V%	1.99%	5.67%		

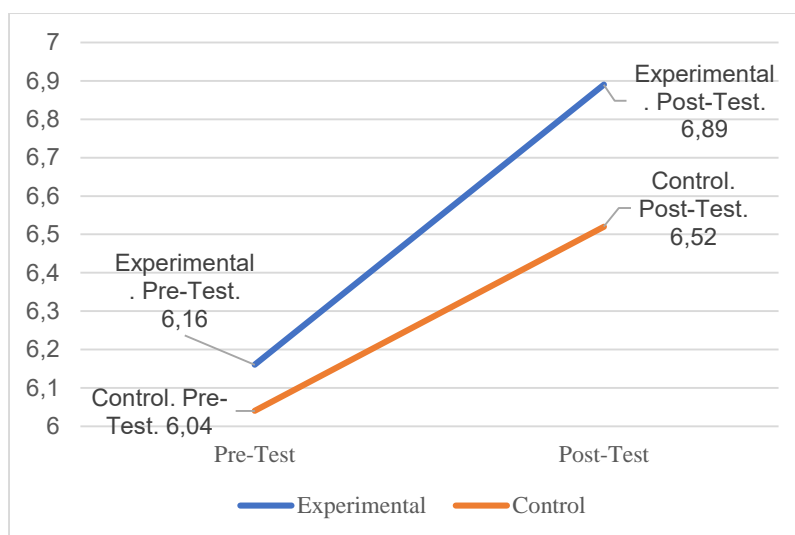


Figure 1. Learners' Language Progress (Intermediate Level)

In addition to the previous results, we also asked our students how confident they felt when communicating in professional situations (Lehman and DuFrene, 2013). Table and Figure 2 show that students' opinions from both groups on their confidence in communicating in these professional situations with a foreign language were similar, although results in all the categories were not the same. The control group scored a mean of 3.53 among the seven skills on a Likert scale of 5 items. On the other hand, the experimental group scored slightly below the other group, 3.45. The difference between the two groups was 0.08 at the initial stage, being the control group superior. After completing the course, the control group increased their confidence to 3.71; this implies a percent variation of 5.10%. Similarly, the experimental group also seemed to gain more confidence in communicating in these communication skills and increased their confidence to 4.08, with a percent variation of 15.30% in this case. After the course, the difference between the two

groups was 0.37, being the experimental group superior. These results suggest that our students from the experimental group not only enhanced their foreign language level more than the control group but also gained more confidence to communicate with a foreign language in professional contexts.

Table 2. Students' confidence on their communication skills in Professional Contexts

Control Group	Pre	Post	Dif.	V%
1- Attending to and participating in meetings	3.29	3.27	0.02	-0.61%
2- Writing professional reports	3.37	3.55	0.18	5.34%
3- Presenting oral and written information	3.25	3.62	0.37	11.38%
4- Explaining and clarifying procedures to other colleagues	3.71	4	0.29	7.82%
5- Teamwork	4.08	4	0.08	-1.96%
6- Evaluating and counseling other people	3.58	3.91	0.33	9.22%
7- Promoting your product or service/persuasion	3.45	3.64	0.19	5.51%
<i>Mean</i>	3.53	3.71	0.18	5.10%
Experimental Group	Pre	Post	Dif.	V%
1- Attending to and participating in meetings	3.31	4.09	0.78	23.56%
2- Writing professional reports	3.26	4.11	0.85	26.07%
3- Presenting oral and written information	3.31	4	0.69	20.85%
4- Explaining and clarifying procedures to other colleagues	3.53	4.07	0.54	15.30%
5- Teamwork	3.88	4.34	0.46	11.86%
6- Evaluating and counseling other people	3.48	4.07	0.59	16.95%
7- Promoting your product or service/persuasion	3.38	3.91	0.53	15.68%
<i>Mean</i>	3.45	4.08	0.63	18.39%

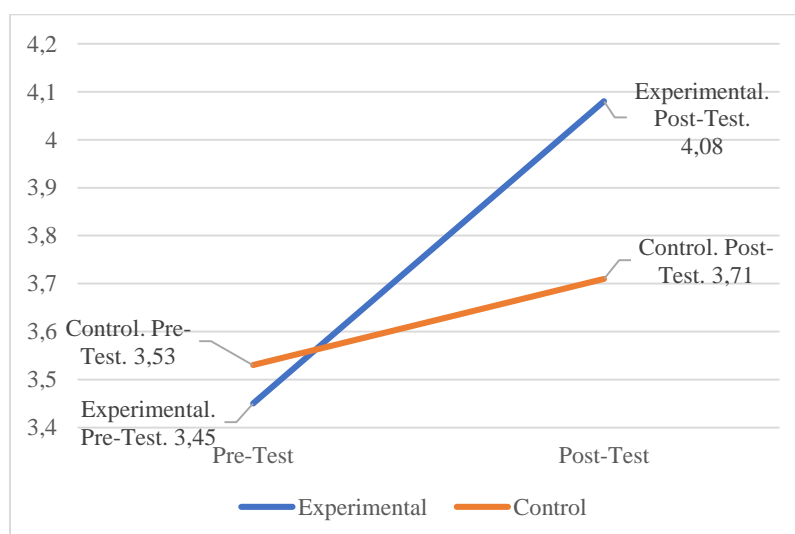


Figure 2. Students' confidence on their communication skills in Professional Contexts

Finally, participants were also asked open questions about their satisfaction with their teaching plan. In this case, students from the experimental group who had participated in project work seemed to be more satisfied with their teaching plan than the students from the control group. On a scale from 1 to 5, students from the experimental group declared that their mean satisfaction with the teaching plan was 4.35, whereas the students' satisfaction from the control group was 3.75. Among their comments, the students from the experimental group considered relevant the opportunities that they had received to communicate in a natural environment with other students, both written and oral. Whereas students from the control group explained that communication was limited to participate in forums, and they and their classmates were not eager to participate in oral activities because they felt shy. Furthermore, the experimental group students stated that they felt more confident interacting with their classmates because they were interacting with equals, students. On the other hand, the students from the control group acknowledged that they had not participated more often in the live sessions because they felt shy to speak with the instructors or in front of the whole class in an online environment.

5. DISCUSSION

Our experiment suggests that online foreign language learning based on communicative tasks and a project seems to be more effective than other less dynamic and less collaborative tasks. As stated by Moore, Dickson-Deane, and Galyen (2011), online teaching depends and varies on the use of the technology, whereas Tsai (2016) identified different online approaches, which two of them have been implemented in this experiment. The control group was controlled by the teacher, and the experimental group represented a hybrid form which was both teacher and learners pushed.

Besides, Stern (1983) explained that any approach should contain input, process, and output stages. In this case, both groups had the same input and process opportunities, but the output was different. We can intuit that a project work based on telecollaboration among students from two different institutions has been the distinguishing factor to make the teaching proposal for the experimental group more dynamic and communicative. Thus, this seems to be the main reason why the experimental group progressed more than the control group and they were also more satisfied.

As explained in the theoretical framework, telecollaboration has been reported to bring several benefits such as enhancing lexicon, grammar and pronunciation, fluency, and confidence in using the foreign language, or raising learners' motivation, among others (Bueno-Alastuey, 2011; Guth & Marini-Maio, 2010; Jauregi & Bañados, 2008; Polisca, 2011; Tian & Wang, 2010). Besides, it was Dooly (2017) who suggested that the multiple interactions based on tasks and project work in telecollaborative environments would increase the opportunities to practice the new language. This idea seems to align with the satisfaction survey responses; students from the experimental group commented that they had felt confident in an online environment because they had to participate with other students without the presence of the instructor and other students. In contrast to these comments from some students from the experimental group, participants from the control group suggested the opposite, they felt shy because they had to communicate in front of a larger unknown audience and the instructor. Therefore, creating close and acquainted

environments with small groups should help students to communicate with their classmates, and this would contrast with communicating with larger audiences as it happened with the control group.

According to these ideas and our results, we believe that online teaching requires promoting learners' opportunities to practice the new knowledge in real scenarios, as it happens in the offline classroom, where they communicate together, simulating role-plays or completing tasks and projects. Undoubtedly, an expected situation, as it was COVID-19, made that classes had to go online. If the two models are compared, the experimental group had plenty of opportunities to communicate with other colleagues, whereas students from the control group were teacher-driven with asynchronous and individual tasks. Thus, the design of the course in an online environment seems to be vital; with the result of our experiment in hand, tasks and project work seem to be a suitable resource to increase the amount of communication among students and practice the new language forms. In addition, students were also working collaboratively in an environment where the participants were treated equally and without the pressure to communicate with larger audiences and in front of the instructor. Therefore, the feeling of shyness or anxiety to speak in public should be overcome more easily.

In our experience, students involved in the project had to continuously communicate with the members of the groups to make decisions on the design of the website, its structure, content, and language. In addition to practicing the language forms studied in class, our students also had to attend and participate in meetings, write professional reports, present new information, or work in teams, the elements suggested by Lehman and DuFrene (2013) as the most usual in professional situations. As a result, students from the experimental group became more confident in communicating in professional environments than the participants from the control group. Therefore, it can be considered that telecollaborative project work also helps to gain some communicative, professional skills like the ones reported in this research.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This research hypothesized that different online teaching plans would lead students to achieve different results in the foreign language classroom. Our results have shown that the language progress among the experimental group, which participated in more dynamic tasks and projects, was superior to that of the control group. This research has allowed us to compare the progress of students participating in two different online courses. This is an unusual case among educators because most of our work is offline, and we can rarely compare two online groups.

In sum, the COVID-19 crisis seems to have allowed us to carry out this experiment and realize that online teaching needs to be more dynamic, and using learning approaches based on tasks and projects can be a suitable option. As a result, one teaching method seems to have been more suitable than the other. The urgency and relevance of this study, shaped by the COVID-19 crisis, should be a call to action for future research in the field of online teaching and language learning.

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Regarding limitations, it should be noted that the unexpected crisis brought a blurred horizon in which what would happen next was still unknown; this uncertainty and change of reality might have influenced our results since some students reported having some difficulties completing this course due to the aforementioned crisis. Fortunately, our engineering students in the subject of English B2 finally managed to complete this subject, and these difficulties seem to have been an anecdote.

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