
Effective grammar teaching: Lessons from confident grammar teachers

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Learning the grammar of a language is an integral part of learning a second or foreign language. Studies on teacher beliefs, teacher language awareness (TLA) and grammar teaching have reported that the majority of English language teachers recognise the importance of teaching grammar (Borg, 2001; Borg & Burns, 2008). At the same time, many teachers lack sufficient grammatical awareness, or appropriate skills, to successfully impart grammatical knowledge in a way that facilitates effective language learning (Brinton & Holten, 2001; Gordon & Harshbarger 2003). This article presents findings from a study that investigated teachers' attitudes to, and opinions about, grammar teaching in ESL and EFL contexts (Petraiki & Hill, 2010). It reports on teachers' beliefs about the keys to successful grammar teaching, and their understanding of the skills and knowledge needed by beginning English language teachers. The findings have implications for language teacher education and suggest that raising awareness of what is needed to be an effective grammar teacher may contribute to the development of confidence in those who are beginning, or struggling with, grammar teaching.

Keywords: *TESOL; language teacher education; grammar teaching; teacher language awareness.*

Background to the study

Teaching grammar is a potentially face-threatening exercise as it provides opportunities for students to test teachers' knowledge and understanding. Despite substantial literature on grammar and grammar teaching, and awareness of the role of grammar in language teaching (Brinton & Holten; 2001; Gordon & Harshbarger,

2003), many language teachers admit to feeling inadequate in their knowledge of grammar or their ability to explain grammar. Research into teacher beliefs has concluded that more research is needed to identify the pedagogical and subject matter knowledge that language teachers need in order to be effective grammar teachers. There has also been recent discussion about the professionalism of language teaching and the need to maintain and improve standards in language teaching (Andrews, 2007a; 2007b; Kirkpatrick, 2007). This is closely linked to research on understanding the core knowledge bases specific to language teachers (Andrews, 2007a; Shulman, 1999) that can contribute to strengthening the principles and curricula of language teacher education. Andrews' (1994, 2003, 2007a; 2007b) research on teacher language awareness (TLA) has contributed to the identification of the knowledge base required by language teachers. Andrews defines TLA as involving:

...a complex blend of learning and learner related understanding and sensitivity such that the teacher is able to provide the exact amount of knowledge the learner needs at a given point and to convey that knowledge in a form that creates no barriers to communication. (Andrews, 2007, p.7)

Andrews (1994) investigated teacher educators' beliefs about the levels of grammatical awareness and knowledge necessary for effective language teaching. The range of abilities identified in the trainers' responses were knowledge of terminology, understanding of concepts, awareness of language in communication, ability to reflect on language, ability to select language according to student level, ability to analyse grammar from a learner's perspective, ability to anticipate learner difficulties and deal *confidently* (authors' italics) with spontaneous questions, ability to think on one's feet during language lessons, ability to exemplify grammar in simple terms, awareness of 'standard' language or correctness, and sensitivity to how language works. In the same year, Leech (1994) proposed a list of qualities required of a language teacher. He termed these qualities 'mature communicative knowledge'. These are the ability to communicate how grammar interacts with the lexicon as a system; the ability to analyse the grammatical problems that learners encounter; the ability and confidence to evaluate the use of grammar; awareness of differences between L1 and L2; and an understanding of the process of simplification by which overt knowledge can be presented to learners.

TLA has been shown to exert a strong influence on the effectiveness of language learning and teaching (Andrews, 2003; Borg, 2003; Brinton & Holten, 2001; Horan, 2002). Lack of such knowledge can lead to failure to earn the confidence of learners; inability to evaluate and develop materials, or inability to adjust input to learners' needs (Andrews, 2007a; Thornbury, 1997).

TLA comprises subject matter knowledge, language proficiency, knowledge of learners and pedagogical content knowledge (Andrews, 2003, p. 85-86). Subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge are interconnected. Andrews suggests that TLA incorporates teacher reflection on subject matter knowledge as well as reflection on planning and teaching. Tsui (2003) expands the notion of TLA and categorises it into four dimensions: knowledge of the language, knowledge of language teaching and learning, knowledge of how learning should be organised, knowledge of other curricula and knowledge of students' interests. Research on TLA has the potential to contribute to our understanding of "what makes teaching language teaching" (Freeman and Johnson, 1998, p. 413). While there has been extensive discussion and reflection on the role of TLA and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in language teaching, more research into the knowledge bases needed by language teachers is required (Andrews, 2003; 2007a; 2007b).

Grammar is thought by some to be an important component of the subject matter knowledge that language teachers need (Andrews, 2003; Borg, 2003). However, the role of grammar and methods of teaching grammar have been contested in ESL circles. While earlier TESL methods and approaches relied heavily upon the analysis of grammar, the communicative language approach and task based approaches downplayed the need for grammar teaching (Richards, 2001). These debates divided researchers and teachers and have influenced the design of language teacher education programs. More recently, there has been interest in and research on the role of grammar in language teaching and teacher attitudes to grammar teaching. The key findings from studies in this area reveal that:

1. Language teachers place emphasis on the role of grammar in language teaching (Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Ellis, 2006).
2. Teachers subscribe to the importance of integrating grammar into classroom practice rather than teaching it in isolation (Borg & Burns, 2008);

3. There is a relationship between teacher beliefs and teaching effectiveness in this area (Borg, 2001; Gordon & Harshbarger, 2003; Horan, 2002; Mak, 2011);
4. Teachers acknowledge their lack of confidence in teaching grammar (Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Brinton & Holten, 2001)

The above findings highlight teachers' recognition of the role of and need for grammar teaching and their support for integrating grammar with other skills. However, given this awareness of the significance of a knowledge of grammar in effective language teaching, there is little research into the extent of teachers' knowledge base in grammar.

The work described above has outlined the importance of TLA in the repertoires of language teachers. It has also indicated that TLA consists of concepts that interact in complex ways. This article examines practising teachers' perceptions of the knowledge they need to teach grammar effectively and continues the research on TLA, focusing on the notion of confidence raised in earlier literature (e.g. Andrews, 1994).

The research project

The authors' interest in teachers' confidence in grammar teaching was triggered by participants' responses in a project that focused on the following questions:

- What are language teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar?
- What do teachers know about grammar and how does that affect their teaching?
- Is there a relationship between teachers' backgrounds and knowledge of grammar theories and their grammar teaching as reported by the teachers?
- Which grammatical theories underpin teachers' explanations of grammar?

Two methods were employed in the data collection: questionnaires and interviews. Seventy-two participants filled in questionnaires about their attitudes to grammar and their use of different theories in grammar teaching. Questionnaires were distributed manually, via email, and through a web-based anonymous questionnaire tool, *Survey Monkey*, initially to University

TESOL graduates and local teachers. The snowball-sampling method was used to attract as many local and international participants as possible. Questionnaires were initially distributed to TESOL graduates who then distributed the questionnaire to their friends and colleagues either locally or internationally.

The seventy-two ESL and EFL teachers who responded to the questionnaire were a diverse group. They included people from a range of ethnic backgrounds: 23 respondents identified their first language (L1) as English; 43 identified English as their second (L2) or third language and 8 identified themselves as bilingual. The respondents' ages ranged between 21 and 60 years and included people with various grammar teaching experience. Three questions in the questionnaire related to participants' confidence in grammar teaching and beliefs about effective grammar teaching. These were:

1. Are you confident in teaching grammar?
 - [If] yes, why?
 - [If] no, why not? What would make you more confident?
2. What do you think is the key to successful grammar teaching?
3. In your experience, what kind of skills and knowledge do beginning English language teachers need to teach English grammar nowadays?

Follow-up interviews were conducted with ten teachers to elaborate upon answers given in the questionnaire and to provide a more comprehensive picture of their attitudes to grammar teaching. Interviewees were selected from questionnaire respondents who volunteered to participate in the interviews by writing down their email addresses. 'Confidence' was explored in relation to their own experiences and their observations of other teachers. A face-to-face, semi-structured interview process was used. The interviews were digitally recorded with the interviewees' permission and transcribed in English. The interviewees included four male and six female teachers. The interviewees were eight L1 English speakers and two L2 English teachers; three L1 English teachers had 1-2 years' teaching experience, while seven had over ten years' EFL/ESL experience. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. In this article, questionnaire and interview responses have been combined to provide an overall understanding of the teachers' perceptions of effective grammar teaching. The

interviewees have been coded as I1, I2, I3 etc. to meet ethical requirements. These codes are used in this article to introduce quotes from interviewees.

Statistical analyses of the quantitative aspects of the questionnaire were conducted using Excel. Relative frequencies and average scores were calculated for multiple choice and Likert scale questions respectively (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). Qualitative responses were coded through a discussion by both researchers. The interview responses were categorised based on the frequency of an occurring theme. Qualitative responses in questionnaires and interviews were compared, collated and coded collaboratively by both researchers and sometimes with a follow up discussion with interview participants. In order to validate the interpretation of the results, participants were asked about their availability to discuss the interpretations either via phone or in a follow up interview. Only participants who were available, and who volunteered, participated in a follow up discussion. The use of participant and methodological triangulation was intended to enhance the validity of the findings, analysis and interpretation.

It is recognised that data presented here represent teachers' reported beliefs and practices, and do not necessarily represent the teachers' actual practices. However, as noted above, earlier studies have found a relationship between teacher beliefs and teaching effectiveness in this area (Borg, 2001; Gordon & Harshbarger, 2003; Horan, 2002).

Findings

Participants' level of confidence in teaching grammar was one of the most notable findings of the project overall. Despite their diverse and varied experience, only 53% of teachers felt confident teaching grammar while 47% acknowledged their lack of confidence. Of the 47% who regarded themselves as non-confident teachers there were many who had as much as six to ten years of language teaching experience. Confident grammar teachers attributed their confidence to a range of factors which were similar to those found by Andrews (2003; 2007a; 2007b). Language proficiency was not directly addressed in this study and did not emerge in the interviews.

Taking the literature into account, the data were organised into three categories: content/subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and individual/contextual characteristics. The first included a good understanding of sentence

level grammar and knowledge of different theories for explaining grammar. Pedagogical content knowledge included awareness of the various teaching skills involved in grammar teaching, appropriate use of materials, effective classroom preparation, continuous learning and reflection, and an understanding of the role of grammar in context. The third category of individual characteristics came from the findings which revealed that there are a number of characteristics drawn from individual experience or circumstances that have assisted participants to teach grammar effectively. These include interest in analysing language, knowing a second language, and teaching experience. While not all teachers will have these interests or experience, these characteristics can contribute to successful grammar teaching and they serve as useful indicators in designing appropriate TESOL courses. Each of the themes identified within the broader categories is explained in more detail below.

Good understanding of sentence level grammar

According to participants, the overwhelming contributor to lack of confidence is lack of grammatical knowledge. In response to the question “What do you think is the key to successful grammar teaching?” the most common response related to grammatical knowledge. Participants gave answers such as: “knowing your stuff”; “knows grammar well”; “knows differences between grammar and use of language”; and “I’ve always found it easy to understand and have a good knowledge of it”. As one questionnaire respondent asked: “How can people expect someone who is not quite sure about the topic... to explain it clearly to somebody else?”

These responses support Andrews’ (2003; 2007a; 2007b) suggestions that teacher training should aim at developing teachers’ subject matter knowledge, in this case knowledge of how language works. From the teachers’ perspectives, knowledge of grammar includes various components, the most significant being an understanding and awareness of the structure of the language. One interviewee, I3, when asked for an opinion about what new teachers needed to know, replied: “Well, to start at the beginning I think they’ve got to be able to identify parts of speech and then sentence structure”.

Participants also identified the importance of knowledge of grammatical terminology. Teachers who described themselves as lacking confidence tended to acknowledge difficulties with terminology, as illustrated by the following quote: “Although I

know grammar use, I do not know all the terms. Knowing how to make it clearer would make me more confident". Another participant argued that the growth of English language teaching as an industry, as much as a profession, has resulted in a greater number of TESOL teachers who come to teaching without the background knowledge and interest in language that may have been assumed in the past.

TESOL teachers, as opposed to say school English teachers, don't necessarily come out of a background where they were interested in language and wanted to teach it ... they come from lots of areas and TESOL is an interesting area for them to work in for other reasons, not necessarily because they like the language and want to teach it. (I1)

This comment provides an additional justification for our study as it suggests that language teachers do not necessarily have internal motivation to study or teach a language but choose this as a profession without sufficient training. This results in even greater challenges for TESOL programs and demonstrates the need for systematic language teacher training. One way of addressing this challenge is to ensure that the curriculum includes basic knowledge of the structure and patterns of the English language.

Knowledge of different theories for understanding and explaining grammar

In addition to providing courses covering basic sentence-level grammar, feedback from participants in this study suggests that TESOL programs need to offer teachers exposure to different theoretical conceptions of grammar; this can contribute to reflection on grammatical knowledge and develop the ability to provide clear and appropriate explanations. When the respondents below were asked about the reason for their confidence, they acknowledged the value of being aware of a range of grammar theories and approaches to grammar teaching: "I have good background knowledge and am equipped with different approaches in grammar teaching" (I2).

...every language teacher has an idea of not just one grammar but a few theories because some people have an idea that there is only one grammar, and you must be right or wrong; so to have an idea that there is **not one** grammar is important for language teachers to be a bit more open minded. (I4)

The value of descriptive linguistics, which focuses on describing language as a whole, was also recognised as valuable in

understanding and explaining grammar. Descriptive linguistics, which includes syntax and semantics, offers an understanding of the relationship between different parts of language and does not treat each component as a discrete element as pedagogical grammars often do. It can help a language teacher see “what goes on with what and why” (I5). I2 explained this in detail:

If you want, the most valuable point that I learned was that grammar is a way of describing language, especially English. It is not a set of rules for language. And that was really important for me, to discover that and be able to say it to my students.

Systemic functional grammar (SFG) was also mentioned by questionnaire participants and interviewees. Experienced teachers may not have studied SFG as part of their training but recognised its value once they had been exposed to it:

I was good at English grammar. But I mean that’s traditional, structural grammar that I knew and then I actually had to lecture on grammar in Vietnam and I explored for really the first time, functional grammar and lexical grammar and other grammars ... and that was really valuable. (I1)

Other teachers, such as I5, discussed their selective use of this type of grammar in their teaching: “I don’t tend to teach it but it does... influence my teaching in that it influences my understanding of grammar”. For some teachers this knowledge came from their training and education, but it may also have developed through experience and exposure to course materials. The main argument is that the confident teachers had a high level of awareness of different theories of grammar, not that they necessarily had an in-depth knowledge of all theories.

Awareness of various teaching skills in grammar teaching

Insufficient pedagogical knowledge, reflected in the responses as a lack of variety of teaching methods, also contributed to lack of confidence. As one participant put it, “I believe I have good grammar, but I lack the knowledge to teach it”, while another commented on the need for “more knowledge on how to teach”. This suggests the need to explicitly link language teaching methodologies to grammar teaching in TESOL programs.

The research findings suggest that confident teachers use a range of approaches and methods when teaching and explaining grammar. Teachers identified explicit and implicit grammar

teaching, deductive and inductive approaches, use of games and activities, use of songs, computer games, pair work, group work, and reflection as important tools for making grammar easier and more interesting for students. As one teacher pointed out:

I think first of all strategies for presenting grammar whether it be from a model of the text or whether it be actually using the language in the class and getting the students to identify a piece of grammar that you're using, whatever the strategy used to present it, I think presenting grammar, hooking your students in and making it useful is very important. (I7)

Participants who described themselves as confident teachers were aware of the relationship between content and pedagogy. Not all English language teachers teach grammar explicitly, but as the participants indicated, grammatical knowledge is particularly important when giving feedback on writing.

I think it would really come up when you're doing writing classes and where you're having to correct, particularly people's sentence structures or verb structures and then be able to explain to that student why they are making that mistake time and time again and what the rules are to be able to avoid it. (I2)

Explicitly teaching pre-service teachers how to give feedback on writing at both sentence level and text level is a straightforward way of demonstrating the relationship between content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge.

Appropriate use of Materials

It has been suggested that teachers need to carefully evaluate textbooks before they use them in the language classroom (Ur, 1996). Participants in this study identified the importance of using good grammar books to consolidate their understanding of the material. Their comments included "I don't pretend to know all the answers particularly in a class where students are coming from a wide range of backgrounds" (I8); and "What we need is a good textbook, one which is structured to give you ideas and answers and a basic knowledge of those terms which you need to explain to the learners" (I6).

Six interviewees noted that teachers are not expected to know all the answers, and that using appropriate textbooks and grammar references contributes to a teacher's confidence. They suggested that beginning teachers could make use of teaching

materials available to them as a basis for designing their own material. For example, one interviewee noted:

You need to learn to use what books there are and put them together in your own creative way rather than create everything from scratch... I would say it is a good idea to find a really good text book whether it's Headway or whether it's English Steps or whatever and actually follow it through adding in extra things to go with, to supplement it, because the text book often has a really good structure to it and a really good guide for a new teacher. (I7)

Effective classroom preparation

Good classroom preparation emerged as another characteristic of confident grammar teachers. They considered rigorous preparation to be an important part of assisting students with their understanding of grammar. As I7 commented, "I spend a lot of time preparing my grammar, the grammar parts of a lesson". Another stated "I try and stay on top of it, so for example if I know I'm teaching a complicated piece of grammar that I feel is fraught with pitfalls for students I'll really sit down and explore that myself before I teach it. So I try to anticipate problems of understanding" (I6). For this teacher, preparation involves meticulous study of the subject matter, anticipation of problems and reflection on different ways of presenting language focus work to students, affirming teacher educators' views on the needs of language teachers in language teacher education (Andrews, 1994).

Continuous learning and reflection

The most confident grammar teachers emphasised that keeping up to date with research and developments in English language teaching was a key to successful grammar teaching. Pre-service teachers need to be aware that building grammatical knowledge does not end when they finish their courses; as one teacher observed, continuing development of, and reflection on, theory and practice is necessary: "You try to find ways of bringing to life those distinctions [between verb forms]... I enjoy it; I have had many years of experience and feel comfortable with teaching it, although it is an ongoing process and I've got to learn things" (I6).

This highlights the importance of promoting reflective practice as a way for teachers to evaluate and improve, based on their context and circumstances within TESOL programs. This can be done by involving them in action research projects or offering them possibilities of reflection on observed teaching.

Understanding of the role of Grammar in context

Even without explicit knowledge of theories of grammar, many respondents cited teaching grammar in context as important in effective grammar teaching. For example, in response to the questionnaire item: “What do you think is the key to successful grammar teaching?” answers such as the following were typical: “Putting grammar in context and providing appropriate examples”; “Teaching grammar in context”; “Context-based, meaningful and functional teaching”.

One participant criticised teachers who appear to know grammar rules yet find it difficult to explain their use in context, emphasising that teachers should understand the importance of teaching these rules in context and according to student need. This participant commented:

...a lot of adult teachers who've come from a structural grammar learning background fixate on grammar items that in fact we don't worry about a lot as native speakers... They're scared of focusing on why those patterns [work here] or how those patterns come together the way they do. (I1)

This is consistent with Leech's argument (1994) that teachers need to possess ‘mature communicative ability’ in teaching grammar. As one of the interviewees succinctly put it, to teach grammar effectively is similar to “...real estate: location, location, location, and I think grammar and vocabulary is context. You are teaching a grammar point because you are leading into something that you are going to use it with, like using past tense to teach recount” (I6). This participant recognised that learning the grammar of a language differs from other types of learning and can only be meaningful if it is integrated with, and discussed alongside, context of use. The notion of the importance of contextual teaching of grammar is reflected in functional grammars, discourse grammars and systemic functional grammar (Butt et al, 1999).

Interest in analysing language

Effective grammar teaching was considered to be closely related to a teacher's enthusiastic attitude and interest in the exploration of grammar and language. This was evident in responses from eight of the interviewees who felt confident and two who lacked confidence. When participants were asked what contributed to their ability to teach grammar effectively, six participants revealed that they enjoyed it, comments including “I love grammar and

have always loved grammar” (I5), and “I love grammar myself, so... I’ll explore it with my students and try and see it from their perspective” (I8). These comments suggest that TESOL programs need to offer a motivating and supportive environment to assist teachers to grow and develop as grammar teachers.

Learning a second language

The study revealed that teachers’ knowledge of a second language contributes to their improved understanding of the structure of language and their ability to analyse it. Four of the interviewees argued that knowledge of a second language helps strengthen their grammatical knowledge, as indicated in the following comments: “Another thing is that learning a foreign language helped me understand my own language better” (I5); “knowing my second language and having that knowledge of the second language has helped as I’ve just had continuous grammar education” (I8).

The importance of experience

TESOL programs can and should play a significant role in developing subject matter and pedagogical knowledge. However, confidence also develops with experience. Confident teachers attributed their skills to the experience they gained throughout their teaching. The majority of participants noted that teachers without grammatical knowledge were able, with significant effort, to learn from different sources and may achieve a level of grammar knowledge that allows them to assist student understanding. Two teachers commented on the value of their experience. One stated “The more experience in teaching grammar the more confidence you have” (I6); while I1 commented “When I started teaching I taught grammar because I had to teach grammar... Now... I personally feel the value of being a little bit analytical of the language and passing that way of analysing the language on to the students”.

Tsui (2003) argues that experience needs to be clearly distinguished from expertise, highlighting the difference between a novice expert and an experienced non-expert. However, experience is more likely to be effective when the teacher begins with a good grounding in grammar and an understanding of its relationship to pedagogy. Effective teacher education, therefore, provides the basis on which teachers can build their knowledge and understanding through experience.

Discussion

This paper emerged from a study on confident teachers' beliefs about the elements that contribute to effective grammar teaching. All participants noted the significance of language awareness in language learning and teaching, supporting studies about the importance of form focused teaching (Borg, 2003; Ellis, 2006). Teachers' voices provided feedback on curriculum priorities in TESOL programs. The most significant implication emerging from this research is the need to include a focus on language analysis in TESOL programs. This was highlighted by two of the teachers who spoke of limitations in existing programs: "I think most teachers feel that they don't have that grammar knowledge and to my knowledge most... teaching courses for English teachers don't actually contain that grammar knowledge as a subject" (I6). For I7 it was the type of language analysis that was problematic:

One of the big difficulties that teachers have is because they spend so much time in teacher training, learning things like semiotic functional linguistics instead of learning the kind of stuff that comes in Murphy [a popular grammar book for learners and teachers] which they're actually going to have to teach... so they kind of have to just learn that on the run as they're presenting things.

It is also evident from these findings that a focus on language awareness needs to be combined with a focus on pedagogical grammar, and exposure to different theories of grammar, such as functional grammar. As Derewianka (2001) demonstrates, pedagogical grammar draws on different theories of grammar such as transformational, traditional, lexical and systemic functional grammar. The responses in this study support the arguments put forward by Hughes and McCarthy (1998), as well as Purpura (2004), who suggest that some 'grammars' are better suited to teaching particular areas of grammar. This has significant implications for teacher education as local and international TESOL courses have different focuses according to their underlying assumptions about language learning.

Our findings suggest the need to offer teachers opportunities to develop and reflect on a variety of techniques for presenting and practising grammar. These findings are similar to those in Brinton and Holten's (2001) study in which some teachers avoided teaching grammar because they found it difficult to decide which combination of approaches to use.

Teachers highlighted the value of personal reflection, good classroom preparation, and the need to undertake continuous development as part of their own grammar learning. This suggests that pre-service teachers should be given opportunities to do practical teaching or simulated teaching and be asked to prepare and reflect on the material to be presented to students. The continuous practice of reflection and preparation of material during their course might raise their awareness of the importance of doing so.

Conclusion

The study offered insights gleaned from self-professed confident 'grammar teachers' into the effective teaching of grammar in language classrooms. It also revealed important principles that can underpin TESOL curricula. First, student teachers do not need to have comprehensive knowledge of all grammatical terms during their courses, but need to understand that grammar is an instrument for successful communication. This is consistent with research findings about the practical nature of teaching (Borg 2001; Borg & Burns, 2008; Burgess & Etherington, 2002). It also suggests that, regardless of the language analysis input that student teachers receive during their studies, growth and development of language awareness while teaching should not be undervalued. It is important to acknowledge that interest and enthusiasm can bring about a change of attitude to individual teachers' perspectives, as deeply ingrained views about grammar and painful personal experiences can have a negative impact on teacher performance in the classroom. Prospective teachers need encouragement and support in a constructive learning environment and this can provide the basis for effective and long-lasting positive teaching and student learning experiences.

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