

# The Role of Persian Elaboration on Incidental Vocabulary Learning from Reading by EFL Learners

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## Abstract

This study attempted to tap into the potential of reading for incidental vocabulary learning by exposing EFL learners to elaborated texts. This study was also concerned with investigating learners' attitudes toward using elaborated passages in their reading classes. To this end, 38 students were selected as the participants of this research and divided into two groups. Students attending the experimental group (N=20) read Persian elaborated texts in which the Persian meanings of the specified target words were provided in apposition to them. On the other hand, students of the control group (N=18) were required to read the non-elaborated version of the aforementioned texts. Generally, the results of the post-test pointed to the effectiveness of this approach in incidental vocabulary learning, and the participants of the experimental group were found to gain a significant vocabulary improvement in comparison to the control group. Furthermore, the interview suggested that students held positive attitudes to reading elaborated texts and regarded them as effective in their vocabulary learning experience. The findings of this study have implications for material developers who need to reconsider the role of modified materials.

**Keywords:** elaboration, reading, vocabulary learning, input modification, EFL learners

## 1. Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that vocabulary plays a crucial role in learning a second language. It is a component of language proficiency which influences all areas of language learning including reading, listening, speaking and writing. Lack of a sufficient amount of vocabulary knowledge, according to Richards and Renandya (2002), can be very discouraging and demoralizing for L2 learners, standing in their way of using language learning opportunities surrounding them. Limitations in vocabulary foil learners' efforts to either speak or write effectively in the target language (Read, 2004).

Among the sources from which learners can utilize to improve their vocabulary knowledge, reading is one of the most useful and effective ones. Studies conducted in this regard have all lent support to the idea that reading contributes to incidental vocabulary learning (Grabe, 1991; Kim, 2006). Evidence abounds that incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading is possible (Kim, 2003), and learners' acquisition of a larger vocabulary items than they have been taught is argued

by some researchers (Hulstijn, 2003) to be attributed to incidental vocabulary learning. Nation (2009) views reading as both "a source of learning" and "a source of enjoyment". He further adds that reading is beneficial for language learners in automatizing their previously acquired vocabulary as well as in learning new ones. Kim (2006) believes that reading is very much interrelated with vocabulary learning and deems it far more effective than explicit instruction, arguing that it enables L2 learners to learn more lexical items than they can do explicitly.

However, it must be noted that learning new vocabulary from texts is not always a straightforward task, and as acknowledged by Kawauchi (2010), increasing vocabulary is one of the major challenges that L2 learners encounter. Although reading is thought to be a highly useful source in learning vocabulary, L2 learners are not always able to profit desirably from the reading materials that they are exposed to. More often than not, they fail to get the meaning of unknown words from the text. One reason for this failure could be owing to the fact that they do not possess an optimal amount of vocabulary knowledge. Nation (2009) believes that learners need to know up to 95 percent of the words in a text in order to fully benefit from it. Another reason might be resulting from the insufficiency of the

textual clues or their being inadequately marked in the text, thus they are not obvious enough for learners to use (Kim, 2006). Moreover, reading materials designed for native speakers may lack “L2 reader-friendly features” and consequently, have a tendency to cause faulty comprehension as well as difficulties in comprehension (Kim, 2006). To put it another way, it can be said that reading, as long as naturally occurring texts are concerned, is likely to be of limited use and help unless it is modified, especially for learners from intermediate or lower levels of proficiency. This is where the importance of textual modifications, such as elaboration, lies that aim to assist learners to understand L2 texts more effectively. Elaboration, as defined by Nation (2009, p.59) refers to “the rewriting of texts but it involves adding to the original text rather than removing or replacing what is there. The unknown words are glossed in the text itself”. Providing learners with the meaning of unknown and difficult words right after they occur in the text, elaboration renders native texts more accessible to language learners, enhancing both their reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge (Negari & Rouhi, 2012).

A number of studies which have investigated the effect of elaboration on L2 vocabulary learning point to the fact that elaboration is an effective approach to reading and vocabulary acquisition (Chung, 1995; Kim, 2006). With regard to the usefulness of elaboration, Taylor (2006) mentions its efficiency in understanding an L2 text and helping learners expand their vocabulary.

These features of motivation can also motivate language learners to feel more confident and comfortable in reading L2 texts. Another possible advantage of elaboration is that they obviate the process of searching for the meanings of words in dictionaries. This has also been acknowledged by Moradian and Adel (2011) who attributed the usefulness and effectiveness of elaboration to its fostering learners’ autonomy from classroom teachers and also dictionaries.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### *2.1 Input Modification*

Input is one of the most theoretical constructs in second language acquisition and plays a very critical role in L2 development. The recent decades have witnessed a great deal of attention devoted to the role of input in second language learning (Ellis, 1995; Gass, 1997; Krashen, 1981, 1985; Larsen-Freeman, 1985). However, input needs to be modified and made comprehensible in order to be effectively used by L2 learners. Regarding the significance of comprehensible input, Krashen and Terrel asserted that:

“Acquisition depends crucially on the input being comprehensible. And comprehensibility is dependent directly on the ability to recognize the meaning of key elements in the utterance. Thus, acquisition will not take place without comprehension of vocabulary” (1983, p. 155)

Input modification which draws insight from two well-known theoretical concepts, Krashen’s (1981) Input Hypothesis and Long’s (1981) Interaction Hypothesis, applies to both spoken and written language. Likewise spoken language which undergoes modification, written input needs to be modified in order to be comprehensible for L2 learners as well as to contribute to their acquisition of L2 features (Kim, 2003). Having said that, modification of input comes in two different types of simplification and elaboration. Simplification replaces difficult lexical items and grammatical structures with less complex vocabulary and syntax (Oh, 2001). On the other hand, elaboration, instead of removing difficult linguistic items, attempts to enhance text comprehensibility through providing definitions of difficult lexical items and paraphrasing sentences that contain complex grammatical structures (Kim, 2003).

Having compared the effectiveness of these two types of modification techniques, some researchers pinpointed the negative aspects of simplification. Blau (1982) argued that simplified texts result in unnatural and non-authentic language which considerably differs from authentic target language. Considering the fact that the removal of unfamiliar and difficult linguistic items denies L2 learners of the exposure to the items that they eventually need to learn, Yano, Long, and Ross (1994) maintained that simplified language may not be profitable for L2 learners. It must be borne in mind that both simplification and elaboration enhance reading comprehension, but when it comes to vocabulary learning, it is the elaboration technique which is more preferable. As acknowledged by Urano (2000), elaboration is more likely than simplification to trigger incidental vocabulary learning. In addition to rendering texts easier to understand, from an acquisitional perspective, elaboration also puts L2 learners at an advantageous position through exposing them to items that would have been deleted by the simplification process (Kim, 2003). Simplification does indeed lead to increased comprehensibility. However, this is achieved at the expense of elimination of difficult vocabulary items and complex grammatical structures that might be potential targets for second language acquisition (Long, 1996).

## 2.2 Empirical Findings on the Effect of Elaboration

A number of studies investigated the effects of elaboration on vocabulary learning through reading (Chung, 1995; Kim, 2006; Marefat & Moradian, 2008; Moradian & Adel, 2011; Negari & Rouhi, 2012; Oh, 2001; Shirinzarii & Mardani, 2011; Urano, 2000).

In his study of examining Korean English learners' vocabulary learning, Chung (1995) discovered that learners who were exposed to elaborated texts were more successful than other learners.

Urano (2000) attempted to study the effects of lexical elaboration and simplification on incidental vocabulary acquisition. Having collected and analyzed the data, it was found that the mean scores in the elaborated condition were higher than that of simplified condition, suggesting that lexical elaboration triggered incidental vocabulary learning but simplification did not. Moreover, it was found that learners of higher level of language proficiency were likely to benefit more from lexical elaboration.

Oh (2001) investigated the impact of elaboration technique on nonnative speakers' reading comprehension. The results pointed to the effectiveness of elaboration. Given that elaboration

preserves more native-like qualities and helps readers to exploit more opportunities to extract information from the texts, Oh suggested that rather than simplification, input needs to be modified in the direction of elaboration.

In another study Kim (2006) sought to examine the extent to which lexical elaboration and typographical enhancement influence language learners' vocabulary learning. The results of this study pointed to the fact that both types of lexical elaboration, implicit and explicit, equally contributed to meaning recognition of vocabulary. It was also found that typographical enhancement alone did not help learners in either form or meaning recognition vocabulary items from reading. In order for typographical enhancement to be effective, it needs to be combined with lexical elaboration.

Having investigated the effectiveness of explicit and implicit lexical elaboration in Iranian learners' vocabulary learning, Marefat and Moradian (2008) found that although lexical elaboration helped meaning recognition of L2 words, it was not effective in recognizing the forms of the target words.

Moradian and Adel (2011) carried out an investigation aiming to explore the effects of elaborated texts on vocabulary learning. The results of this study lent support to the effectiveness of explicit elaboration, showing that explicit lexical elaboration was the most beneficial technique in meaning recognition of target vocabulary items from texts. The results acknowledged the findings of other studies which have reached the conclusion that explicit elaboration tended to be more effective. Furthermore, regarding the importance of the elaboration technique, Moradian and Adel added the point that elaboration has the potential to liberate students from their teachers as well as dictionaries.

In the same line of research, Shirinzarii and Mardani (2011), in their study set out to compare two types of textual modifications - elaboration and simplification. Contrary to the previously mentioned studies, they found that simplified texts were more effective for students as long as incidental vocabulary learning was concerned.

Negari and Rouhi (2012) also studied the effectiveness of simplification and elaboration on Iranian EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning. Two types of elaboration were used in this study - parenthetical and non-parenthetical. Results of the data analysis revealed that unlike simplification, both types of elaboration positively affected participants' incidental vocabulary

acquisition. It was also argued that parenthetical elaboration draws learners' attention to both the form and meaning of words in the text.

Moradian, Naserpoor and Tamri (2013) conducted a study to investigate the effects of simplification and elaboration on reading comprehension of ESP texts. The results pointed out that both types of modifications contributed to reading comprehension. Nevertheless they viewed elaboration as more preferable to simplification since it preserved the naturalness and immediacy of the text.

Having briefly discussed the previous studies conducted in this area, it can be concluded that as yet no study has attempted to investigate the effect of Persian elaboration on vocabulary learning. As a result, using a rather different type of elaboration - Persian - in which students are presented with the in-text Persian translation of the unknown words, this study attempted to determine whether it had any effect on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary development.

The following questions were addressed in this study:

1. Does Persian elaboration have any effect on EFL learners' incidental L2 vocabulary learning from reading?

2. What are the students' attitudes toward the use of the elaboration technique?

### 3. Purpose of the Study

Likewise all other L2 learners learning English in an EFL context, Iranian EFL learners have difficulty in learning and improving their vocabulary knowledge. It is assumed that presenting them with elaborated texts is likely to help them overcome this difficulty. Drawing insights from previous studies and taking into account the potential that reading has for incidental vocabulary learning, the following study sought to determine whether exposure to Persian-elaborated texts had any impact on Iranian EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning from their reading materials. By so doing, it is hoped that they become more motivated to read English texts. This study was also concerned with enquiring into learners' attitudes regarding the use of elaborated reading texts.

### 4. Method

#### 4.1 Participants

A total of 43 English language learners who had enrolled in an English course at Behesht Language Institute participated in this study. They were all male and ranged in age from 13-15. Based on the placement policy of the institute, they belonged to the intermediate level of proficiency. However, in order to assure the researchers of the homogeneity of the participants, a proficiency test called Nelson English Language Test was administered. The results obtained from the proficiency test allowed the researchers to discard 5 students who were not compatible with the proficiency requirement of this study. As a result, the remaining 38 students were selected as the main participants of this study. The participants were divided into two groups of control (N=18) and experimental (N=20). Prior to the treatment, they were given a vocabulary knowledge scale test, consisting of 31 items, in order to check their initial knowledge of selected vocabulary items. After the treatment, the same vocabulary knowledge scale test was administered as posttest so as to help the researchers determine whether the participants had gained any improvement in their vocabulary learning. It needs to be noted that one of the researchers was responsible for teaching both experimental and control groups.

#### 4.2 Instruments

##### 4.2.1 Reading Passages

Five short passages taken from a simplified story called "Bleak House" was used as the treatment of this study in order to expose participants to new words. These short passages contained a total amount of 3544 words. 31 vocabulary items were included in the passages, which were all bold and italicized in an attempt to draw participants' attention to them. It must be noted that the participants of the experimental class were also provided with Persian equivalents of the specified words immediately after they occurred in the text (Appendix 1).

##### 4.2.2 Nelson English Language Test

Prior to the treatment, a proficiency test, namely, Nelson English Language Test 200 A, devised for intermediate level was employed in order to assure the researcher of the homogeneity of the groups. The Nelson test for the intermediate level contained 50 items, 14 of which were cloze tests and the other 36 were multiple-choice items.

##### 4.2.3 Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS)

A 5-point self-report scale of vocabulary knowledge, put forward by Wesche and Paribakht's (1996), was employed in this study as pre-and post-tests in order to measure the vocabulary learning of the participants. The reason for using this scale was due to the fact that it provided the researchers with the possibility of determining how well the participants knew the selected vocabulary items. The VKS was consisted of the following 5 levels:

1. I don't remember having seen this word before.
2. I have seen this word before but I don't know what it means.
3. I have seen this word before and I think it means ..... (synonym or translation).
4. I know this word. It means ..... (synonym or translation).
5. I can use this word in a sentence. e.g.: .....

The responses were coded based on the level chosen by the participants. In case that the responses were not accurate, they were downgraded by one level.

#### 4.3 Procedure

The current study was a quasi-experimental study with a pretest posttest control group design. Initially 43 students of

the intermediate level of proficiency studying English at a language institute (Behesht Language Institute located in Tehran) took part in this study. Although the institutional constraints did not allow the researchers to randomly select the participants, administering Nelson Proficiency Test gave them the opportunity to ensure of the participants' equal level of proficiency by excluding 5 students that were not compatible with this study. The remaining 38 students were selected as the participants of this study and divided into two groups; experimental (N=20) and control (N=18).

One week before the start of the treatment, researchers gave the participants a pretest, aiming to determine their initial vocabulary knowledge. The administered pretest was a vocabulary knowledge scale which was consisted of 31 items. The treatment employed in this study lasted for five sessions, during which both groups were required to read 5 short texts (every session one text). The passages that were extracted from a simplified short story entitled as "The Bleak House" attempted to expose the students to 31 target vocabulary items. In the beginning of each session and before giving the specified texts to the students, the teacher introduced several new words, including the words that they were going to see them in the passages. Participants attending the control group read the non-elaborated version of the aforementioned passages in which the target

words were only boldfaced. On the other hand, participants of the experimental group were provided with the exposure to the elaborated passages. In these passages, the Persian translations of the selected target words were added in apposition to them. It needs to be emphasized that the kind of elaboration used in this study was explicit lexical Persian elaboration.

One session after the treatment, a posttest was administered in order to enable the researchers to investigate whether there has occurred any vocabulary improvement on the part of the participants as a result of being exposed to the above-mentioned passages. In the final stage of the study, participants of the experimental group, who had used the elaborated texts during the treatment, were asked to attend an interview session to answer several questions regarding their attitudes toward the elaboration technique. In order to help students express their opinions more easily, they were free to use Persian. The questions were as follows:

1. How did you see the use of elaborated texts in reading?
2. Did you like it? What did you like about it?
3. Do you think it was useful for your vocabulary learning?
4. Do you think it was useful for your reading?
5. Which one do you prefer – using elaborated texts or non-elaborated texts?
6. Do you want to use elaborated texts in your reading classes in future?

## 5. Results

The first research question of this study was '*Does Persian elaboration have any effect on EFL learners' incidental L2 vocabulary learning from reading?*'. The descriptive statistics of the performance of the participating groups in the pre-test as well as in the post-test were measured. These statistics are shown in the following table.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Performance of Control and Experimental Groups

Groups	N	Pre-test		Post-test	
		M	SD	M	SD
Control	18	2.06	.35	2.07	.34
Experimental	20	1.91	.62	2.53	.85

As Table 1 shows, the participants of the control group who read the non-elaborated version of the texts, obtained a mean score of 2.06 in their pre-test. This mean score slightly increased in the post-test and reached 2.07. On the other hand, participants attending the experimental group that made use of the elaborated texts in their class, moved from a mean of 1.91 in the pre-test to a mean of 2.53 in the post-test. Since the descriptive statistics alone cannot provide conclusive proof regarding the effectiveness of the treatment employed in this study, a paired-samples t-test was computed to determine whether the use of Persian-elaborated texts had any impact on the participants' incidental vocabulary learning. The following table reports the results of this t-test.

Table 2. *The Results of Paired-Samples t-test for Control and Experimental Groups*

	<i>Df</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Control	17	1.61	.11
Experimental	19	8.03	.001

As it was shown in Table 2, the experimental group improved from a mean of 1.91 to 2.53 in the post-test, undergoing a mean difference of .62. Table 2 demonstrates that this improvement from pre-test to post-test was statistically significant ( $p= .001$ ). However, the slight increase of the scores of the control group was not found to be statistically significant ( $p= .11$ ).

In order to determine whether there has been any difference between the performances of the involved groups in relation to their vocabulary gain, an independent sample t-test was computed, the results of which are displayed in the table below.

Table 3. *The Results of Independent Sample t-test for Pre-test and Post-test*

	<i>Df</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Pre-test	36	.91	.36
Post-test	36	2.2	.037

Table 1 demonstrated that the participants of the experimental group outperformed those of the control group in the post-test by a mean difference of .47. As Table 3 shows, this mean difference between the groups was statistically significant ( $p= .037$ ).

In order to answer the second research question of this study '*What are the students' attitudes toward the use of the elaboration technique?*', students of the experimental group attended an interview session to respond to a number of questions in relation to their attitude toward the treatment they experienced in their class. For some reasons, four students were not able to take part in the interview session, and thus it was conducted with 16 students.

The first question of the interview asked '*How did you see the use of the elaborated texts?*'. All of the students responded positively to this question and regarded the use of elaborated texts as useful and helpful in both their reading and vocabulary learning experience. Below are the responses of some of the students to this question.

*It was good. When I know the words I can read better.*

*It was useful especially for my vocabulary learning.*

*It helped me learn some new words. It also helped me in reading.*

The second question of the interview was '*Did you like it? What did you like about it?*'. The interviewees' responses to this question was also positive and they all seemed to like using elaborated texts. Moreover, they mentioned a few points that they liked about the elaboration technique. Apart from enabling them to remember the story more effectively and better understand the content, it helped them learn new lexical items. Two students responded to this question as follows.

*I liked it because it helped me better understand the story and I didn't have to use dictionary.*

*I learned some new words that I can use in future.*

The third and fourth questions aimed to elicit the students' opinions regarding the usefulness of elaboration for their vocabulary improvement and reading. Excluding one student who did not see elaboration as useful for learning vocabulary, all the other students responded affirmatively and pointed to the effectiveness of this technique in reading experience as well as vocabulary learning.

In responding to the fifth question that asked '*Which one do you prefer – elaborated texts or non-elaborated texts?*' all the students showed favorable attitudes toward the elaborated texts,

regarded it as more preferable. The final question of the interview asked students whether they want to use elaborated texts in their future reading classes. The responses suggested that students relished the thought of reading passages that have undergone elaborative modification.

## 6. Discussion

The results obtained for the first research question indicated that the vocabulary learning of the participants of the experimental group improved significantly as a result of utilizing the Persian-elaborated texts. Moreover, there was a difference in scores between the two groups which was found to be statistically significant, showing that learners who read the elaborated passages outperformed the other learners who read the non-elaborated passages. The results, therefore, point to the effectiveness of the elaboration technique in relation to incidental vocabulary learning, and indicate that clarifying the meaning of the unknown words through elaborating them in the text is beneficial for L2 learners. The findings of this study provide further support for the previous research that have investigated the role of elaboration in incidental vocabulary learning (Kim, 2006; Moradian & Adel, 2011; Negari & Rouhi, 2012; Taylor, 2006; Urano, 2000).

The higher vocabulary improvement that the students of the experimental group showed can be attributed to a number of factors. It is an axiomatic fact that input has a very critical part to play in second language acquisition, and all L2 learners need to be exposed to an optimal amount of input in order to succeed in learning a foreign language. However, input may only have a limited role unless it is modified. In fact, it is through modification that the potential of input for language learning becomes activated and is put into use. According to Kim (2003), when learners are exposed to the modified input - either elaborated or simplified - the following is expected to happen:

“Increased perceptual saliency = Increased noticeability = Increased comprehensibility = Increased learnability” (p. 31).

Reading is believed to provide L2 learners with the chance to improve their vocabulary knowledge (Grabe, 1991; Hulstijn, 2003). Nevertheless, in order to tap into this potential of reading for vocabulary learning, it needs to be modified in the direction of elaboration. When target texts are elaborated and made comprehensible in a way that potentially renders L2 forms more

accessible for second language learning, L2 learners are more likely to acquire them, provided that they are given ample amount of exposure (Kim, 2003). The current study attempted to make EFL learners' efforts to read for vocabulary learning more fruitful by supplying them with elaborated texts. In these texts, to which learners of the experimental group were exposed, the unfamiliar target words were elaborated through including their Persian meanings. This assisted the experimental group to acquire vocabulary from reading more effectively, and resulted in their higher scores in the post-test. On the other hand, learners of the control group, despite seeing the target words in context, could not exploit from the non-elaborated texts and their vocabulary improvement was not as equally successful as those of their counterparts in the other group.

Adding to the above points regarding the effectiveness of Persian elaboration in learners' vocabulary learning experience, it can be said that lexical elaboration is suggested to be conducive to incidental vocabulary acquisition (Negari & Rouhi, 2012; Taylor, 2006). In addition to facilitate comprehension, texts that undergo elaborative modification provide the opportunity to learn the target lexical items, and consequently trigger incidental acquisition of vocabulary (Moradian & Adel, 2011; Urano, 2000). Furthermore, maintaining the authenticity and naturalness of the native texts as well as offering more means to perceive the L2 forms, elaboration technique generates favorable conditions for L2 learners, and helps them make use of their reading materials in a better way (Moradian *et al.*, 2013; Oh, 2001).

Another characteristic of the elaboration technique that is thought to be facilitative of vocabulary acquisition is the conditions it creates for autonomous learning. Applying elaboration to L2 texts frees language learners from the need to search for the meanings of the unknown words, helping them to become more autonomous in their English learning experience. By so doing, as argued by Moradian and Adel (2011), it is believed that elaboration brings about the best conditions for learning vocabulary from reading.

The second research question addressed in this study concentrated on the students' attitudes with regards to reading elaborated texts. As a whole, the results of the interview indicated the students' favorable attitudes toward the use of elaboration. They also perceived it as effective and useful in both their vocabulary learning experience and reading comprehension. Moreover, the students favored the utilizing of elaborated passages and preferred them to the non-elaborated ones. The positive attitudes of students to the application of elaboration technique to their reading materials can be explained by the opportunities that use of such texts provides for them. These

kinds of modified texts enrich learners' experience of reading English texts, and at the same time, render their incidental vocabulary learning far more fruitful.

## 7. Conclusion

Giving the fact that reading is one of the main sources to increase vocabulary, this research was concerned with whether exposure to Persian elaborated texts could affect EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge. In general, having supported the results of previous research, the findings of this study pointed to the effectiveness of elaboration technique in incidental vocabulary acquisition and indicated that the vocabulary of the students who were exposed to the elaborated passages improved significantly. Additionally, the learners were found to harbor favorable attitudes toward using elaboration in their reading materials.

This study focused on one type of elaboration which was explicit lexical elaboration. Future studies may turn their attention to other elaboration types, such as implicit elaboration or structural elaboration, and investigate their impact on incidental vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, the future studies are suggested to look into the interaction between learners' level of proficiency and their use of elaboration, determining whether learners of lower proficiency levels can benefit more from elaborated texts.

Materials developers need to take into consideration the positive effect of elaboration on vocabulary learning as well as on comprehension, apply it to the materials they design. By providing synonyms or more frequent vocabulary items in apposition to the target words, they offer learners more effective means to better understand the content and acquire vocabulary from context. Lowering learners' frustration with reading and giving them more confidence to read, elaboration will be very beneficial for L2 learners, especially for those with lower proficiency whose lack of a good command of vocabulary discourages them from reading.

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