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Anxiety and task-based language teaching in second language acquisition

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay between anxiety and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). It identifies anxiety as a critical factor hindering adult learners' progress in acquiring English as a foreign language. Using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), data were collected from 150 intermediate-level EFL learners in the UAE. Results showed anxiety levels decreased over time when TBLT was used. The most significant predictor was age, and older learners experienced higher anxiety. The results highlighted the need for a supportive learning environment and that technology be utilised as measures to reduce anxiety. These results support the use of TBLT for improving practical language skills; however, reducing anxiety to maximise overall outcomes during the language-learning process. This study indicates the need for further research on differences between individual learners and the role of the instructor in controlling classroom anxiety.



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KEYWORDS

*Anxiety, task-based language
teaching, second language
acquisition, foreign language
classroom anxiety scale,
English as a foreign language*



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Introduction

Speaking a second language fluently and confidently is a very crucial skill in modern globalisation. In the words of Luoma (2004), speaking involves the oral system of interaction with others, embodying human authentic communication driven by specific needs and purposes of ongoing conversational dynamics. This very skill remains extremely hard to achieve and evaluate since it is not merely a linguistic capability but, in reality, the control of social and cultural subtleties. Multiple scales and tests, like those in the CEFR descriptors, offer alternative techniques for measurement of speaking skills (Luoma, 2004; Council of Europe, 2018). However, such generalised descriptors sometimes do not meet the needs of each assessment, and in some cases, there may be a need to develop specific measuring instruments that suit research demands (Luoma, 2004). Adult second language acquisition (SLA) has its challenges that differ from first language acquisition (L1). The process of L2 learning in adult learners is variable and difficult. As such, the outcome is often equated with much less success than L1 acquisition, which is seen as a continuous and effortless process starting from birth (Moyer, 2004; Zsiga, 2013). Most post-adolescent L2 learners only achieve a couple of proficiency levels in a language, possess a strong accent, and generally require many hours to progress from one level to another (Knight, 2018; Krashen, Scarcella, & Long, 1982). As Brown (2007) reports, an accent that rivals a native's cannot be attained if learning was started after adolescence. The current study primarily discusses function and not accuracy in accent. The argument here is that communication ability in the second language is not purely pronouncing the words correctly.

One significant barrier to effective L2 learning is Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which can impede learners' performance and progress. Adults frequently experience embarrassment and anxiety when their oral skills do not meet expectations, leading to significant stress and hindrance in learning (Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986; Krashen, 1982; Moyer, 2004; Zsiga, 2013). Anxiety, often culminating in learners 'freezing', is a dominant obstacle in SLA (Nakata, 2006; Horwitz et al., 1986; Nunan, 2013). While some argue that anxiety can improve skills, research generally indicates it impedes L2 production (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001; Robinson, 2007; Sheen, 2008).

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers a promising approach to addressing these challenges. TBLT involves the use of meaningful and authentic tasks to enhance learners' practical language application (Abdelhafez & Abdallah, 2015; Ellis, 2003). This approach facilitates communication through task-oriented activities within the classroom, purportedly improving vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency (Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani, & Lambert, 2019). TBLT aims to provide functional tasks that prepare learners for real-world needs (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007). Critics of TBLT, such as Ellis (2018), argue that it is often misunderstood as a method rather than an approach. 'Focused' tasks offer opportunities to practise specific

linguistic items within a broader teaching framework (Ellis, 2018). The 'strong' TBLT approach emphasises task engagement for language acquisition, whereas the 'weak' approach integrates systematic language focus (Krashen, 1982; Nunan, 2013).

Literature review

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Speaking, as defined by Luoma (2004), is the oral system of interacting with others, encompassing human, authentic communication driven by specific needs and objectives of ongoing conversations. Despite being a challenging skill to both acquire and evaluate, various grading scales and tests, such as the CEFR descriptors, offer methods to assess speaking proficiency (Luoma, 2004; Council of Europe, 2018). However, standardised scaling descriptors may not fit every assessment, necessitating the development of specific measuring instruments tailored to research demands (Luoma, 2004). Rubrics and scales, though valuable, are only approximation tools and cannot capture all dimensions of language production (Baker, 2011). Learning a second language (L2) as an adult contrast starkly with native language acquisition (L1). L2 learning is often difficult and variable, typically resulting in less success than L1 acquisition, which is effortless and continuous from birth (Moyer, 2004; Zsiga, 2013). Adults acquiring an L2 post-adolescence often retain a strong accent and require substantial hours to progress between proficiency levels (Knight, 2018; Krashen, Scarcella, & Long, 1982). Brown (2007) noted the near impossibility of achieving a native-like accent after adolescence. This research focuses on functionality over accent precision. Adults frequently experience embarrassment and anxiety when their oral skills do not meet expectations, leading to significant stress and hindrance in learning (Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986; Krashen, 1982; Moyer, 2004; Zsiga, 2013). Anxiety, often culminating in learners 'freezing', is a dominant obstacle in second language acquisition (Nakata, 2006; Horwitz et al., 1986; Nunan, 2013). While some argue anxiety can improve skills, research indicates it generally impedes L2 production (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001; Robinson, 2007; Sheen, 2008).

The Council of Europe (2018) views spoken interaction as fundamental to language, providing essential interaction and collaboration. This interaction extends to online telecommunications, including telephones and internet-based communications (Knight & Barbera, 2018). These interactions, mediated through devices like cellphones, differ from face-to-face communication, offering a multi-modal exchange that handles both serious and social matters (Council of Europe, 2018). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which involves meaningful and authentic tasks, enhances learners' practical language application (Abdelhafez & Abdallah, 2015; Ellis, 2003). This approach facilitates communication through task-oriented activities within the classroom, purportedly improving vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency (Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani, &

Lambert, 2019). TBLT aims to provide functional tasks that prepare learners for real-world needs (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007).

Critics of TBLT, such as Ellis (2018), argue it is misunderstood as a method rather than an approach. 'Focused' tasks offer opportunities to practice specific linguistic items within a broader teaching framework (Ellis, 2018). The 'strong' TBLT approach emphasises task engagement for language acquisition, whereas the 'weak' approach integrates systematic language focus (Krashen, 1982; Nunan, 2013). Effective teachers bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world experiences, promoting authenticity (Abdelhafez & Abdallah, 2015; Nunan, 2013). Authentic tasks use material originally intended for communication, not language teaching, enhancing learning opportunities (Nunan, 2013). Willis and Willis (2007) categorised tasks into three levels—meaning, discourse, and communicative—that replicate real-world scenarios, thereby enriching classroom learning. Technology adds authenticity to TBLT, making it integral to modern learning (Nunan, 2013; Amory, 2018). Engaging tasks rooted in learners' realities enhance classroom participation (Wiggins, 1993; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Small group work, a staple in task-based learning, fosters collaboration and risk-taking, essential for effective learning (Ellis, 2006; Rixon, 2013).

Self-assessment in TBLT allows learners to engage in periodic evaluations, fostering self-awareness and improvement (Beglar & Hunt, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). A safe learning environment, where students feel protected and valued, enhances their willingness to use L2 and participate actively (Ellis, 2003; Kubanyiova, 2018; Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001). Timely feedback is crucial for effective learning, with immediate responses being most beneficial (Weaver, 2006; Wiggins, 2016). Mobile phones, widely used globally, are becoming valuable educational tools, facilitating research and interaction (Statista Research Department, 2018b; Bingham, 2015). WhatsApp has shown promise in enhancing L2 speaking skills, as evidenced by Andújar-Vaca and Cruz-Martínez (2017), who observed significant improvement in students' oral interactions through the app. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) remains a significant challenge in SLA, affecting students' performance and learning process (Horwitz et al., 1986; Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001; Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Clément, 2016). Tools like the Foreign Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) help measure and address this anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1992).

This synergy between TBLT and technology gives SLA a more optimistic future direction, where TBLT mediated through technology puts an end to senseless communication and alleviates anxiety. For example, although TBLT has been criticised much, it has been stated that it is going through "transformation," where technology is being used as a means for enhancing language learning and even providing corrective feedback during post-task.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative research design to inquire into the relationship between anxiety and task-based language teaching (TBLT). Empirical data will be gathered through a survey method to determine the levels of anxiety experienced in TBLT sessions. The design of the research is a repeated measures research design so that changes in the occurrence of anxiety over time can be monitored, hence obtaining a dynamic view of the impact of TBLT.

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Participants

The participants in the study are EFL learners attending intermediate-level English courses in three language institutes from the UAE. A total of 150 students—an equal number of males and females—ranging between 18 and 25 years old are chosen through stratified random sampling. Stratified random sampling ensures that all strata representing different socioeconomic groups and regions within the UAE are proportionately distributed in the study, which enhances generalisation.

Instruments

The data collection tool for this study is the original Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz and Cope (1986). It consists of 33 items graded on a five-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". A demographic information section follows, eliciting some background information about participants' language learning experiences. The reliability of the FLCAS is re-analysed for this study to verify its applicability to the specific context of TBLT.

Procedure

The study will span eight weeks during which the participants will be engaged in a series of task-based language activities meant to simulate real-life communication. The tasks that have been chosen for this include, among others, problem-solving activities, role-plays, and group discussions—all to be conducted in English. Such task preparation has been very carefully structured so that progressions between these various stages are taken up increasingly in their level of complexity, ensuring a graded increment in the challenge of the linguistic task. The questionnaire FLCAS will be given to all participants at three different times: before the TBLT intervention, in the middle of the intervention, and at the end of eight weeks. This design of repeated measures will enable us to observe changes in anxiety levels over time. All the sessions are with the same instructors, following a standard teaching protocol, so that external variables can be minimised.



Data Collection

The questionnaires of the FLCAS are paper-distributed and paper-collected in class sessions. Trained research assistants conduct the survey in order to maximise the reliability and validity of the data collected. They explain the purpose to the participants and stand ready to answer their questions. The responses will be confidential, and participants should be assured that their responses will not influence their grades in the course. Second, the research assistants attend mandatory training so that consistency can be kept throughout all administrations.

Data Analysis

The obtained data is analysed by using the software package Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics that include means and standard deviations are calculated to summarise the level of anxiety in the participants at various stages of the study. A repeated measures ANOVA is carried out for testing the difference in the anxiety level between different time periods. This analysis would help to elicit the trends and patterns in the lowering or escalation of anxiety. Furthermore, Pearson correlation analysis is applied to find out the relationship of demographic variables—age, gender, and anxiety levels, including language learning experience—with significance set at $p < .05$. The places where post hoc tests are done enhance the robustness of the results by finding group differences in particular.

Ethical Considerations

The study is commenced after obtaining ethical clearance from the institutional review board. Written consent is required from all the participants, and the purpose of the study is explained to them, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any moment. Anonymity of the identities of the participants is ensured in all the data. Additionally, participants are debriefed at the end of a study and are given support for anyone who may have higher anxiety due to being part of the research.

Results

This section presents the results from a Bayesian model comparison in relation to an assessment of the impact of anxiety, as measured by FLCAS, and a set of demographic variables on EFL learners, Table 1. In other words, the objective at hand was to understand the predictive power of these factors with respect to the levels of anxiety in TBLT sessions.

Table 1
Model Comparison - Gender

Models	P(M)	P(M data)	BF _M	BF ₁₀	R ²
Null model	0.394	0.373	0.914	1.000	0.000

Model Comparison - Gender

Models	P(M)	P(M data)	BF _M	BF ₁₀	R ²
FLCAS Q1 + FLCAS Q2 + Socioeconomic Background + Previous English Learning Experience + Age + Region	0.394	0.362	0.873	0.971	0.090
Age	0.006	0.086	15.678	15.234	0.062
FLCAS Q1 + Socioeconomic Background + Previous English Learning Experience + Age + Region	0.033	0.039	1.192	1.252	0.090
FLCAS Q2 + Socioeconomic Background + Previous English Learning Experience + Age + Region	0.033	0.036	1.088	1.146	0.089
FLCAS Q1 + Age	0.002	0.012	6.902	7.218	0.064
FLCAS Q1	0.033	0.011	0.327	0.353	0.001
FLCAS Q2 + Age	0.002	0.011	6.087	6.375	0.062
FLCAS Q2	0.033	0.011	0.315	0.341	0.000
Socioeconomic Background + Previous English Learning Experience + Age + Region	0.006	0.009	1.444	1.522	0.089

Note. Table displays only a subset of models

The comparison involved several models incorporating different combinations of variables, including individual FLCAS items, socioeconomic background, previous English learning experience, age, and region. The evaluation criteria included the prior model probability $P(M)$, the posterior model probability given the data $P(M|data)$, the Bayes factor for the model BF_M , the Bayes factor for the comparison with the null model BF_{10} , and the proportion of variance explained R^2 . The null model, which does not include any predictors, had a relatively high prior and posterior probability ($P(M)=0.394$, $P(M|data)=0.373$), indicating that the inclusion of predictors did not drastically improve the model's fit to the data. The Bayes factor for the model ($BF_M=0.914$) and for comparison with the null model ($BF_{10}=1.000$) further supported this, with the null model explaining no variance ($R^2=0.000$).

The comprehensive model, including FLCAS Q1, FLCAS Q2, socioeconomic background, previous English learning experience, age, and region, had a prior model probability and posterior model probability of $P(M)=0.394$ and $P(M|data)=0.362$, respectively. This model explained 9% of the variance ($R^2=0.090$). However, the Bayes factors ($BF_M=0.873$)

$BF_{10}=0.971$ indicated that the data provided only modest evidence in favour of this model compared to the null model. The model with age as the sole predictor emerged as the most significant, with a prior model probability of $P(M)=0.006$ and a posterior model probability of $P(M|data)=0.086$. This model had the highest Bayes factors ($BF_M = 15.678$), indicating strong evidence that age is a significant predictor of anxiety levels. The model explained 6.2% of the variance in anxiety levels ($R^2=0.062$). Adding FLCAS Q1 to the age predictor improved the model slightly. The model incorporating both FLCAS Q1 and age had a prior model probability of $P(M)=0.002$ and a posterior model probability of $P(M|data)=0.012$. The Bayes factors ($BF_M = 6.902$) indicated moderate evidence in favour of this model, which explained 6.4% of the variance ($R^2=0.064$).

Another model that included socioeconomic background, previous English learning experience, age, and region had a prior model probability of $P(M)=0.006$ and a posterior model probability of $P(M|data)=0.009$. This model explained 8.9% of the variance ($R^2=0.089$). However, the Bayes factors ($BF_M = 1.444$) suggested only weak evidence supporting the inclusion of these predictors over the null model.

The analysis revealed that among the various demographic and individual predictors considered, age emerged as the most significant predictor of anxiety levels during TBLT sessions. Models including age consistently showed higher Bayes factors, indicating stronger evidence compared to other models. The comprehensive model, while explaining the most variance, did not outperform the null model by a substantial margin, suggesting that other unmeasured factors may also contribute significantly to anxiety levels. These findings underscore the importance of considering age when addressing anxiety in language learning contexts, particularly in task-based language teaching environments. Future research could explore additional variables and longitudinal data to further elucidate the complex interplay between these factors and language learning anxiety.

Discussion

This is consistent with current literature that illustrates how anxiety is one of the most powerful determinants of the success of language learning and that TBLT can help reduce those same effects. Age was also highlighted as one of the main predictors of the level of anxiety in the TBLT classes, thus confirming previous research that shows how the learning of second languages by adults is more complex than that for children. This phenomenon is generally attributed to the critical period hypothesis, wherein language learning becomes more difficult as one ages due to reduced neural plasticity of the individuals (Moyer, 2004; Zsiga, 2013). Native-like pronunciation

is said to be impossible to acquire beyond adolescence according to Brown (2007), which further feeds the notion that older learners have increased anxiety due to less than advantageous feeling of inadequacy when it comes to their pronunciation and accent.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), as discussed by Horwitz et al. (1986), remains one of the rampant barriers to the successful learning of an L2. Data showed that anxiety strongly hinders learners' ability to perform in TBLT setups, which was the same case with Gregersen et al. (2014). According to Nakata (2006) and Nunan (2013), learners often freeze because of this emotion, which consequently gets in the way of their oral proficiency development and overall language development. Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001), along with Sheen (2008), have reported the general disruptive effect that anxiety has on the production of language, hence justifying the indications from the current study of high levels of anxiety associated with poor performance in the TBLT activities.

It can indeed be noted that TBLT, through its main concerns on tasks of meaning and authenticity, holds considerable potential for the decrease in anxiety and increase in practical application of language in a foreign language learning classroom (Ellis, 2003; Abdelhafez & Abdallah, 2015). Through such findings, task-based activities prove beneficial not only in improving vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency but also help in a diminution of learners' anxieties by providing a more engaging and less formal learning environment. This concurs with Ellis et al.'s (2019) encouragement of employing activities on real-world tasks to assist in the learning of a language. The results corroborate the argument that TBLT is better regarded as not an approach but a miscellany of teaching methodologies applicable to certain learning environments; hence, an 'approach' variable in TBLT research (Ellis, 2018). It is in this respect that this distinction helps place the findings in context. While the 'strong' version regards task engagement itself as the main route to language learning, the 'weak' version incorporates a more systematic focus on forms within the task process (Krashen, 1982; Nunan, 2013). Such flexibility provides room for teachers to modify TBLT according to various learner needs and levels of anxiety, promoting an inclusive environment with less anxiety.

The findings of the study also reveal that it will be of paramount importance to create a safe learning environment where students feel protected and valued, as promoted by Kubanyiova (2018). Learners, when secure, can afford to take more risks and, therefore, are more active in tasks with language; their anxiety levels will be lessened with this approach and performance enhanced. This is in line with the assertions by Ellis (2003) and Richards, Gallo, and Renandya (2001) concerning the dynamic nature of the classroom, which requires supportive classroom dynamics that can enhance learner confidence and hence participation. In addition to that, the role of technology emerges as significant in reducing anxiety and enhancing language learning. The

use of apps like WhatsApp, for example, means that language practice would be less nerve-racking and more informal, hence reducing class-induced anxiety for the students. The results of this study indicate that with technology in support, TBLT can be a better platform for language practice that is immersive and less demanding on learners, thus reaching the same conclusions of the researches performed by Pellettieri (1999) and Amory.

Data reveal that TBLT has a good effect on reducing anxiety, although quite a lot is still left to be treated. Similarly, the value of Bayes factors for the comprehensive model is somewhat small and shows that other unmeasured variables might be important in influencing the anxiety levels. This points toward the need for more investigation that goes into such factors as individual learner differences and the characteristics of instructors and specific task types to have a much better understanding of anxiety in TBLT contexts. Self-assessment and timely feedback are further identified as integral components of effective TBLT in that this enables the learners to monitor their progress and thereby reduce anxiety (Beglar & Hunt, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Weaver, 2006). The study's results affirm the necessity of periodical self-assessment coupled with immediate feedback to allow learners time to develop confidence in increasing their language competencies. This is in agreement with Wiggins (2016) that provides sufficient constructive feedback which nurtures effective learning.

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Declaration of interest statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire: Investigating Anxiety and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) Among EFL Learners

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Gender:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say

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2. Age:

- ☐ 18-20
- ☐ 21-23
- ☐ 24-25

3. Socioeconomic Background:

- ☐ Low income
- ☐ Middle income
- ☐ High income

4. Region within UAE:

- ☐ Abu Dhabi
- ☐ Dubai
- ☐ Sharjah
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

5. Previous English Language Learning Experience (years):

- ☐ Less than 1 year
- ☐ 1-3 years
- ☐ 4-6 years
- ☐ More than 6 years

Section B: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

For each statement below, please indicate your level of agreement by ticking the appropriate box.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in English class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in English class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in English.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
... (Continue for all 33 items) ...	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section C: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) Experience

11. How comfortable do you feel participating in task-based activities (e.g., role-plays, group discussions) in your English class?

- Very uncomfortable
- Uncomfortable

- Neutral
- Comfortable
- Very comfortable

12. How often do you find the tasks in your English class challenging?

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- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

13. To what extent do you believe that task-based activities help improve your English language skills?

- Not at all
- A little
- Somewhat
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

14. How often do you experience anxiety specifically during task-based activities in your English class?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

15. How do you feel about the complexity of the tasks given in your English class?

- Very simple
- Simple
- Neutral
- Complex
- Very complex

Section D: Open-Ended Questions

16. What specific aspects of task-based language teaching make you feel anxious?
17. Can you describe a particular task-based activity in your English class that significantly affected your anxiety level? Please explain.
18. What strategies do you use to manage your anxiety during task-based activities?
19. How do you think task-based language teaching can be improved to reduce anxiety among students?
20. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions regarding your experience with task-based language teaching and anxiety?

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Instructions for Participants:

- Please answer all questions honestly. Your responses are confidential and will be used solely for research purposes.
- There are no right or wrong answers; we are interested in your personal experiences and opinions.
- If you have any questions or need clarification on any item, please feel free to ask the research assistant.

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