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Enhancing business English proficiency through translanguaging: a CLIL approach to teaching all four language skills

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Abstract

This research principally intends to explore the effectiveness of the translanguaging-based CLIL approach on undergraduate students in terms of improving Business English proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Nikula & Moore, 2019; García & Li, 2014). The results of the research indicated statistical significance across all four language skills, with participants gaining more in listening and speaking due to the interactive and collaborative nature of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) curriculum (Cauli, 2021; Iswarya & Sundarsingh, 2022). The strategic use of native languages, for example, to re-explain business vocabulary, however, created a gateway for meaning, interest, and beliefs in the business vocabulary (Yuzlu & Dikilitaş, 2021). Translanguaging was claimed to lighten participants' cognitive load, enhance their understandings, and enable them to reach a deeper level in the contents dealing with business (Li, 2018). Among others, the implications of the study make a case for the pedagogical significance of translanguaging within multilingual classrooms of professional and academic CLIL settings (Lin, 2019). Educators are invited to consider translanguaging strategies that transcend linguistic barriers and advance equity in multilingual contexts (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2021), while policymakers are called to reconsider the development of language education policies that should be inclusive of the full linguistic repertoire of learners (García, 2009; Sah & Kubota, 2022). Results emphasise training for the teachers and preparation of resources to implement the translanguaging and CLIL philosophy accordingly, hence providing a transformative framework that fosters Business English proficiency and 21st-century skills in globalised educational contexts (Yang, 2015; Llanes & Cots, 2020).



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Introduction

In such a world, the demand for proficiency in Business English has never been so high (Ping & Ahmad, 2022; Chen, 2016). As a matter of fact, proficiency in English can no longer be regarded as an advantage but rather as a necessity for doing business in the global locus (Ikeda et al., 2021). This paper is a response to this demand and offers practical ideas of how CLIL and translanguaging can be harnessed into innovative teaching approaches in the Business English classroom and course book (Dvorjaninova & Alas, 2018). While CLIL deals with the parallel development of both language and content learning, this forms an immersive environment that is supportive of language skill development, along with developing critical thinking, collaboration, and cultural awareness (Sasajima, 2020; Lin, 2019). Translanguaging-added complementary support to CLIL by aiding in developing comprehension, engagement, and cognitive flexibility through leveraging multilingual learners' full linguistic repertoire (Li, 2018; García & Li, 2014). Together, these approaches represent one promising pathway toward comprehensive Business English proficiency in all four of the language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Cauli, 2021). Business English teaching possesses some peculiar features of its challenges, especially for non-native speakers, who need to learn the terminology and also practices of communication typical for this or that industry (Ping & Ahmad, 2022). Traditional monolingual pedagogies often provide limited opportunities for students to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, due to which effective learning is hampered (García, 2009; Sah & Kubota, 2022).

One of these options is translanguaging, which foregrounds fluidity and dynamism in language use (Poza, 2017). By allowing learners to tap into native languages as support for the acquisition of the language of instruction, translanguaging deepens their insights into content and reduces the heavy cognitive load usually resulting from monolingual instruction (Li, 2018; Nikula & Moore, 2019). In CLIL classrooms, this allows students to connect with subject matter at a deeper level, moving the language from a barrier to a tool of learning and expression (Yuzlu & Dikilitaş, 2021; Lin, 2019).

The incorporation of translanguaging into a CLIL framework has emerged as a trend in multilingual classrooms; the higher educational landscape especially prepares learners for careers on the global platform (Ikeda et al., 2021). This approach aligns well with the 4Cs of CLIL—content, communication, cognition, and culture—and thus represents a holistic approach to respond to the multidimensional needs of Business English classes (Nikula & Moore, 2019). Empirical research underlines the effectiveness of translanguaging as it allows for enhanced vocabulary gain, reading comprehension, and the development of communicative competence in a business milieu (Yuzlu & Dikilitaş, 2021; Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2021). It has, for example, been documented that through translanguaging, students can gain fluency and master technical vocabulary by strategically using the native language (Cauli, 2021; Goli, 2023). Such findings

support the view that with a translanguaging-based CLIL approach, the students can attain not only better linguistic but also cognitive and cultural competencies to deal with the complexities of global business life (Lin, 2019).

Despite such an appealing prospect, the adoption of translanguaging within CLIL has yet to be explored to a great extent within Business English instruction (Chen, 2016; Poza, 2017). Thus far, existing analyses have focused on either K-12 education or general EFL contexts, which leaves a gap in the understanding of how these approaches are tailored to the specifics of business learners (Cauli, 2021). This paper will, therefore, fill this lacuna by gauging how a translanguaging-based CLIL approach may favour the improvement of Business English proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Iswarya & Sundarsingh, 2022). The research unleashes students' native languages in working conjunction with English, offering insights into effective pedagogies that eventually could prepare learners with the required academic and professional skills (Li, 2018; Ping & Ahmad, 2022). The findings will be useful to educators and policymakers regarding how integration of translanguaging and CLIL can perhaps bestow transformative potential in multilingual Business English classrooms (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2021; Sah & Kubota, 2022).

Advancing 21st-century skills in multilingual education

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has emerged as an innovative educational approach that promotes the simultaneous acquisition of content knowledge and language skills. Advocates argue that CLIL nurtures 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, and cross-cultural awareness, making it highly relevant in contemporary educational contexts (Ikeda et al., 2021). However, despite its broader potential, the implementation of CLIL in many Asian countries has remained predominantly focused on enhancing English language proficiency, sidelining its applicability to other educational goals (e.g., Sasajima, 2020; Yang, 2015).

The persistence of monolingual ideologies within language education poses additional challenges to the implementation of CLIL in multilingual contexts. Despite the “multilingual turn,” which recognises the dynamic and diverse ways multilingual individuals engage with languages (Canagarajah, 2013; May, 2013), the prevalence of monolingual mindsets continues to influence educational systems. These perspectives often frame non-native English speakers as linguistically deficient compared to native speakers (Kubota, 2012). In the context of internationalisation in higher education, as seen in several Asian countries, including Japan, English-centric ideologies profoundly shape language learning practices, privileging English as the dominant language of instruction and social mobility.

At the international university where this study was conducted, the bilingual education system ostensibly seeks to produce "global citizens." However, student perceptions reveal a deeply hierarchical linguistic environment where English proficiency is viewed as a prerequisite for academic success and broader

societal advancement (Itoi & Mizukura, 2024). Despite the cultural and linguistic diversity introduced by international students, the legitimacy of languages is restricted to English and Japanese, the primary languages of instruction and mandatory language courses. This limitation constrains students' ability to develop broader competencies, particularly 21st-century skills crucial for both academic and career success.

In response to these challenges, a new language course incorporating translanguaging pedagogy and CLIL principles was introduced at the university. Translanguaging, which involves leveraging students' full linguistic repertoire for learning and communication, provides a pedagogical framework for fostering multilingualism and enhancing cognitive and cultural competencies. Such an approach is consistent with the 4Cs framework of CLIL-content, communication, cognition, and culture-advanced as part and parcel of developing 21st-century skills. While the theoretical possibility of CLIL to promote such skills is widely acknowledged, there has been little research so far examining how adding the 4Cs leads to such development, particularly in multilingual, culturally diverse classrooms.

Translanguaging in Business English

Translanguaging refers to the dynamic use of multiple languages in learning environments to develop both cognitive and linguistic abilities (Li, 2018; García & Li, 2014). Complex terminologies and business concepts can be better comprehended by the integration of such with the English language, especially through translanguaging with students' native language abilities (Nikula & Moore, 2019). It was evident from studies that such a process of translanguaging has improved learners' language much better. For example, in a study conducted about translanguaging pedagogy in Turkey, Yuzlu and Dikilitaş (2021) were able to establish positive impacts on the comprehension and motivation of EFL learners. More recently, Llanes and Cots (2020) compared translanguaging and monolingual pedagogies in the context of a bilingual Business English course. The results indicated similar proficiency gains on all counts, at least, though the advantages of translanguaging were found to lie in lexical sophistication and fluency (Llanes & Cots, 2020).

CLIL combines content learning with language acquisition; thus, students may discuss business matters while developing their linguistic skills (Cauli, 2021; Chen, 2016). This immersive environment fosters learning, using English as a tool instead of mere concentration. In this regard, one study investigated engineering students who were taught Business English using the CLIL approach and surfaced signs of significant enhancement in speaking skills and professional terminology acquisition (Iswarya & Sundarsingh, 2022). Besides, there is professional competence developed through CLIL beyond language. Chen (2016) indicated that a CLIL-based project in China supported teamwork and confidence while developing Business English proficiency (Chen, 2016). The inclusion of translanguaging into CLIL further empowers it because learners are allowed to use their full linguistic repertoire. For instance, Nikula and

Moore (2019) indicated that in CLIL classrooms, translanguaging improves comprehension and participation because of the strategic use of native languages (Nikula & Moore, 2019).

In another research, Goli (2023) has reported that the translanguaging strategy in CLIL favoured enhancement of reading proficiency among Japanese EFL learners, thus proving effective to nurture all four language skills. Similarly, Ping and Ahmad (2022) discussed another CLIL strategy known as the "Double Focus," wherein a business scenario was integrated into English learning, aiming at developing professional and linguistic competencies (Ping & Ahmad, 2022). The CLIL and translanguaging framework encourages practical use of language in professional settings, which will be very useful in enriching vocabulary, grammar, and contextual understanding. Cauli (2021) confirmed that the task-based CLIL activities cumulate a lot of oral presentations and translations, boosting students' confidence and communication skills immensely. However, the successful implementation of this needs adequately trained instructors and supportive materials. Some of the issues that arose, according to Dvorjaninova and Alas (2018), were a lack of proper teacher training and a general lack of content-specific resources (Dvorjaninova & Alas, 2018). This therefore necessitates professional development in this study. The following research questions have guided this study:

Q1: How does a CLIL-based translanguaging approach improve Business English proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking?

Q2: What are students' perceptions of using translanguaging in a CLIL approach for Business English?

Methodology

Participants

The target group of the study consisted of 30 university-level students enrolled in a Business English course targeted at proficiency in business-specific language skills in a Chinese university. The participants were sampled from a linguistically diverse background; all were non-native English speakers with intermediate proficiency in English, aged between 18 and 25 years. This group was targeted due to their dire need to improve Business English for both academic and professional purposes. The participants undertook pre- and post-assessment tests and a survey so full data would be obtained to understand the effectiveness of the translanguaging CLIL approach.

Design

This study used a pre-test/post-test experimental design in order to determine the effectiveness of a CLIL approach with embedded translanguaging techniques in improving the four major language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Quantitative data were collected through the pre- and post-tests, where paired samples t-tests were conducted across each skill area to determine improvement. Qualitative data were also collected by surveying and open-ended questions with regard to participants' views about

translanguaging. The attitudes of the participants were gauged using a Likert scale on their confidence in vocabulary, comfort in translanguaging, improvement in reading, comfort writing emails, and in listening comprehension.

Procedure

First, the participants were measured for pre-reading, writing, listening, and speaking proficiencies before the session. For the duration of the research, participants underwent Business English classes specifically using CLIL that incorporated translanguaging, wherein participants were allowed to use their MT strategically to break down perplexing concepts into understandable translations. Reading comprehensions, business email writing, listening to business dialogues, and speaking role-plays were given. After six weeks, a post-test was given as a way to measure some improvement in their proficiency related to Business English. Participants also completed a self-assessment questionnaire, which determined their confidence in business vocabulary and comfort with trans-languages, based on perceived improvement across the four language skills.

Ethical Considerations

The study was carried out under ethical rules that would guarantee no participant was exposed to harm, that their dignity and privacy were genuinely respected. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study. The objectives of this study, the procedures involved, and expected benefits were explained to the participants, so informed decisions could be made about their voluntary nature of participation. The response rate was strictly on a voluntary basis; the students were also assured of their right to withdraw at any time during the study without facing academic or personal repercussions. During data collection, absolute confidentiality and anonymity were embraced by the participants. Data were coded, and personal identifiable information was eliminated to guarantee privacy. All the data were safely stored and accessible to only approved researchers. Qualitative and quantitative survey responses were anonymized. Thus, personal perspectives could not be traced back to an individual participant.

Since the research involved translanguaging, the linguistic backgrounds and identities of all participants were duly respected. Activities that involved translanguaging were designed in such a way that helped students build deeper understanding and expressiveness without degrading their native languages or cultural identities. The possibility of increased cognitive load or confusion from language switching was put into consideration, and students were offered assistance where needed to alleviate discomfort. Ethical approval was sought and obtained as appropriate from the institutional review board to ascertain the academic quality standards regarding research on human subjects.

Results

Paired samples t-tests showed statistically significant improvements in each language skill from pre- to post-assessment. For reading skills, the mean improvement was 9.8 points ($SD = 3.022$), $t(29) = -17.76$, $p < .001$. Writing skills improved by 10.37 points ($SD = 3.079$), $t(29) = -18.44$, $p < .001$. Listening scores increased by 10 points ($SD = 2.913$), $t(29) = -18.81$, $p < .001$. Speaking skills also demonstrated significant improvement, with a mean difference of 8.37 points ($SD = 2.697$), $t(29) = -16.99$, $p < .001$.

Survey responses revealed that 50% of participants felt their listening skills were most improved, while the remaining 50% highlighted speaking skills. For confidence in business vocabulary, 46.7% rated their confidence at the highest level (5). Comfort with translanguaging received positive feedback, with 43.3% rating it a 5. Additionally, 73.4% of participants rated their reading improvement as 4 or 5. The open-ended responses indicated that translanguaging "helped clarify business concepts" for all participants. These results collectively suggest that the CLIL approach using translanguaging positively impacted students' Business English proficiency and confidence.

Table 1
Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences						
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper		
Pair 1	Pre-Reading - Post-Reading	-9.800	3.022	.552	-10.928	-8.672	-17.763	29.000
Pair 2	Pre-Writing - Post-Writing	-10.367	3.079	.562	-11.516	-9.217	-18.440	29.000
Pair 3	Pre-Listening - Post-Listening	-10.000	2.913	.532	-11.088	-8.912	-18.806	29.000
Pair 4	Pre-Speaking - Post-Speaking	-8.367	2.697	.492	-9.374	-7.360	-16.990	29.000

Table 2
Most Improved Skill

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Listening	15	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Speaking	15	50.0	50.0	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Discussion

These findings indicate that a translanguaging-based CLIL approach results in significant improvement in the Business English proficiency of university students at all four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Nikula & Moore, 2019; Llanes & Cots, 2020). The discussion analyses the results in respect of the research questions of the study, the perceptions of the participants as well as the wider pedagogical implications of translanguaging and CLIL (García & Li, 2014).

Translanguaging and proficiency development in business English

These findings represent the results of the study that translanguaging strategies complemented with CLIL pedagogy create significant developments in students' Business English proficiency (Cauli, 2021; Yuzlu & Dikilitaş, 2021). The quantitative analysis showed that students significantly improved all assessed language skills: pre- and post-assessment scores revealed statistically significant gains (Iswarya & Sundarsingh, 2022). Among those, listening and speaking are the highest-growing areas of improvement, with equal numbers of participants highlighting these as their most enhanced skills. This is in harmony with the pedagogical advantages of translanguaging, which support comprehension and expression by permitting learners to use up to their full linguistic repertoire (García & Li, 2014; Lin, 2019). For instance, improved speaking skills by the participants could be attributed to the inbuilt interactive and collaborative activities within the CLIL curriculum, such as role-playing activities and discussions (Chen, 2016; Nikula & Moore, 2019). Such activities provided a context wherein students could switch between the mother tongue and English to negotiate the meaning, building up communicative confidence (Ping & Ahmad, 2022). Similarly, improvement in listening skills might indicate the effectiveness of translanguaging exemplar instances of complex business concepts during audio-based tasks (Goli, 2023). Translanguaging allows learners to make sense of the content by drawing upon resources with which they are more familiar and hence reduces cognitive load, fostering better retention and understanding of material covered in class (Lin, 2019).

As a result, the writing and reading skills greatly improved, and the participants announced that they had become more confident while performing tasks like composing business emails and reading business texts (Cauli, 2021). The structured infusion of translanguaging—for instance, annotating a text in English with explanations in the native language—triggered deeper engagement with the reading materials. It corroborates findings from the translanguaging literature on its scaffolding role in academic literacy development (Yuzlu & Dikilitaş, 2021; García & Li, 2014).

Participants' perceptions of translanguaging

Qualitative data from the survey and open-ended responses further describe students' perceptions about translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy. A total of 43.3% of the participants judged their comfort with translanguaging to be highest, floating acceptance of the strategy as useful support for learning a second language. The common comment that emerged was that translanguaging "helped clarify business concepts," indicating pragmatic usage of the strategy for reducing linguistic barriers. This finding is in line with previous studies that position translanguaging as a resource for meaning-making in multilingual classrooms (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014; García & Li, 2014).

Indeed, the respondents also related to an increased confidence with their business vocabulary, almost half of them rating their confidence at its maximum. That would suggest that translanguaging develops

the lexicon by allowing learners to fill linguistic gaps through comparison across languages (Nikula & Moore, 2019). For example, in classes that involved explaining business terminology, the use of native languages of explanation for important concepts should have led to more detailed understanding and recollection (Goli, 2023). However, within the overall very positive comments, some participants did note difficulties with the translanguaging approach. Some responses—only a few—claimed that they felt "somewhat uncomfortable" using translanguaging, rating this on a 5-point scale between 2 or 3. These responses might mean that navigating multiple linguistic systems at the same time was difficult; this may be especially problematic for those language learners who have not been well acquainted with the idea of translanguaging. This underscores the need for careful scaffolding in implementing translanguaging, at least in early stages of instruction (Lin, 2019).

The research questions of the study, therefore, revolved around how the CLIL-based translanguaging approach realises Business English proficiency and perceive students' thoughts on the methodology. Clearly, the results indicate that this approach remarkably improves proficiency in all four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Iswarya & Sundarsingh, 2022; Llanes & Cots, 2020). It was a structured curriculum that made strategic integration of native language support with Business English tasks. It allows learners to switch between languages for comprehension and production purposes, hence effectively addressing challenges at both linguistic and cognitive levels, which in turn promoted comprehensive language development (Cauli, 2021; Yuzlu & Dikilitaş, 2021).

About perceptions, the participants responded very well to the translanguaging approach: the majority characterised it as a very useful tool to solve complex content and improve language. Many identified it as one that reduces anxiety and allows confidence in speaking and vocabulary acquisition (Ping & Ahmad, 2022). The chances to employ native languages along with English allowed students to delve deeper into the material and be part of a supportive and inclusive learning environment that helped students to succeed (Nikula & Moore, 2019).

Translanguaging and 21st-century skills

Apart from the issue of language proficiency, the results of this present study indicate that translanguaging fosters broader cognitive and collaborative competencies. The fact that the curriculum aligned with the 4Cs framework—content, communication, cognition, and culture—is what gave students the chance to practise critical thinking and creative problem-solving (Lin, 2019; García & Li, 2014). For instance, one-on-one discussions of international business problems represented a case study analysis from different perspectives, which further developed cross-cultural understanding (Ikeda et al., 2021). Employing translanguaging in these activities also allowed learners to draw on both cultural and linguistic knowledge to arrive at a higher quality of contribution (Chen, 2016).

Moreover, integrating translanguaging enabled collaborative learning to take place through peer interaction, especially during group activities where often students were found alternating between explaining to one another in their L1 and then collectively preparing to present their findings in English (Yuzlu & Dikilitaş, 2021). This dynamic use of the languages not only ascertained comprehension but also developed teamwork and interpersonal skills, hence falling under CLIL's emphasis on collaborative learning (Ping & Ahmad, 2022; Nikula & Moore, 2019).

Implications for pedagogy and policy

These findings have a number of implications for language pedagogy and educational policy, in particular, with respect to multilingualism and CLIL settings. First, the overall success of the translanguaging condition in developing Business English competence suggests that it clearly has potential as a key element of CLIL teaching methodology (Nikula & Moore, 2019; García & Li, 2014). Translanguaging strategies should be put into practice within the teacher's repertoire in the hope of overcoming linguistic gaps and creating deeper learning. For example, taking advantage of student opportunities to annotate texts in their native languages or discuss content bilingually may support both language acquisition and access to the subject matter (Lin, 2019; Yuzlu & Dikilitaş, 2021).

The study also reveals the importance of training in translanguaging methodologies for practising teachers. While the advantages of translanguaging are clear, its practice entails quite a bit of preparation and sensitivity to students' linguistic backgrounds on their part (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014). Professional development programmes should hence focus on equipping teachers with strategies to plan activities with translingually effective, yet pedagogically and culturally appropriate, designs (Chen, 2016).

The findings indicate that from a policy perspective, translanguaging should be recognised as a valid and valuable practice in language education. This is especially so in contexts dominated by monolingual ideologies precisely because the approaches offer alternative frames that view multilingualism as a resource, not a liability (Sah & Kubota, 2022; May, 2013). Such is the case with regard to institutional language policies that are in need of revision to accommodate and encourage students to deploy their full linguistic repertoires during learning (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2021; García & Li, 2014).

Limitations and future research

While this study does build a strong case for the benefits of a translanguaging-based CLIL approach, some limitations should also be declared. The relatively small sample size of just 30 participants and the short duration of the intervention of six weeks constitute real limitations in generalisability (Iswarya & Sundarsingh, 2022). Future longitudinal studies with more and larger groups of participants could be one direction for future research. Moreover, the research focused only on the Business English course, and therefore the possibility of applying translanguaging to other disciplines within CLIL is still open.

Research into how such translanguaging influences proficiency in various academic disciplines will substantially benefit its wider pedagogical potential (Ping & Ahmad, 2022). Finally, and most importantly, a deep understanding is required regarding the cognitive processes underlying translanguaging: for example, how do learners switch between languages in carrying out complex tasks, and what strategies do they use to manage cognitive load? Such research could underpin the design of more effective translanguaging-based curricula (Lin, 2019; Goli, 2023).

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Appendix 1

Confidence in Vocabulary (1-5)

		Frequency			
			Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	9	30.0	30.0	30.0
	4	7	23.3	23.3	53.3
	5	14	46.7	46.7	100.0
Total		30	100.0	100.0	

Comfort with Translanguaging (1-5)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2	7	23.3	23.3	23.3
	3	4	13.3	13.3	36.7
	4	6	20.0	20.0	56.7
	5	13	43.3	43.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Improvement in Reading (1-5)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	10	33.3	33.3	33.3
	4	12	40.0	40.0	73.3
	5	8	26.7	26.7	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Comfort Writing Emails (1-5)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	14	46.7	46.7	46.7
	4	9	30.0	30.0	76.7
	5	7	23.3	23.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Listening Comprehension (1-5)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	8	26.7	26.7	26.7
	4	11	36.7	36.7	63.3
	5	11	36.7	36.7	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Moment Helped Translanguaging

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Helped clarify business concepts	30	100.0	100.0	100.0

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