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Difficulties of Mastering Speaking Skills for Jordanian EFL Learners

Dr.Fadi Majeed Kanakri, English Language Centre, Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the difficulties facing Jordanian EFL Learners in speaking skills and attempts to identify the significant factors of the low performance of the Learners in speaking skills. The tools used to collect data for this study were an interview and observations. The interviews were held with 20 of these students and eight highly qualified instructors. The sample of the instructors was purposively selected from among 20 Higher Secondary School teachers. The collected data were tabulated, classified, and analyzed using SPSS. The study came up with several significant results. It was found that there were linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical problems that constituted real challenges for the students and stood behind the students' low performance in speaking. It was also noticed that poor teaching methods, lack of enough practice, and inhibition stood as further obstacles that negatively impacted students' performance. The study gave several recommendations to improve students' speaking performance, including stressing extensive speaking, creating a comfortable environment in the classroom, and adopting modern evaluation and assessment techniques.

Keywords: Speaking, Performance, Observation, SPSS

Introduction:

Learning English speaking skills is a preference for many learners of English as a Foreign Language learner (EFL). Language learners sometimes evaluate their success in language learning based on how well they have improved in their spoken language ability. Teachers and textbooks use either direct approaches that concentrate on oral interaction, such as turn-taking and topic management, or indirect approaches that create situations for oral interaction through group work, task work, and other strategies (Richards 1990).

According to Harmer (2007) and Pourhosein Gilakjani (2016), human communication is complex. Persons need communication when they want to say something and transmit information. Speakers use communication when they are going to inform someone about

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something. Speakers apply language according to their own goals. So, speakers should be both listeners and speakers simultaneously for effective communication.

Speaking is critical in foreign language learning. Despite its importance, speaking has been overlooked in schools and universities due to different reasons like an emphasis on grammar and unfavorable teacher-student proportions. Speaking has been absent from testing because of the problem in assessing it objectively and the time it takes to carry out speaking tests (Clifford, 1987). Speaking is a skill that is worthy of attention in both first and second languages. Learning the speaking skill is the most crucial aspect of learning a second or foreign language. Success is measured based on the ability to perform a conversation in the language (Nunan, 1995).

Speaking is one of the essential skills of all four language skills because individuals who learn a language are referred to as the speakers of that language (Ur, 1996). English language teaching aims to give learners the ability to use the English language effectively and correctly in communication (Davies & Pearse, 2000). However, it seems that language learners cannot communicate fluently and accurately because they do not have enough knowledge in this field.

Non-native speakers of English seek to develop fluency and accuracy in speaking. However, some researchers classify speaking as the most fundamental of the four macro skills. They claim it is necessary for effective communication in any language, mainly when speakers are not using their mother tongue (Bailey, 2005). Students who study English as a foreign language (EFL) usually have limited opportunities to speak English outside the classroom (Zhang, 2009) and limited exposure to English speakers or members of the international community. This might be one reason for teachers to provide more situations and activities for students to strengthen their linguistic competence.

As English is universally used as a means of communication, English speaking skills should be developed along with the other skills to enhance communication both with native speakers of English and other members of the international community (Goh, C. 2007).

Speaking is generally thought to be the most important of the four skills. Indeed, one complaint commonly voiced by learners is that they have spent years studying English but cannot speak it fluently. (Bueno, Madrid and McLaren, 2006: 321).

It needs to be noted that speaking holds an important place in foreign language learning because, through speech, messages are conveyed. According to Ur (1996, p.120), "of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important."

This study is mainly intended:

- 1- To find out the problems that face students in speaking so that the teacher may instruct the students in a way that helps those students to overcome these problems.
- 2- To enhance fluency in speaking by stressing the importance of speaking.

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- 3- To help struggling students achieve better academic standards through improving their speaking skills.

The significance of this study is derived from the importance of the English language and its distinguished status around the world in general, and in Jordan in particular. Nowadays English language has become an international language. It is the first language around the world, and it is the language of science and technology. There are millions of people who use the English language as their first language (L1) or second language (L2). No doubt the Jordanian people need to communicate with these people who speak the English language around the world.

It can be said that this research is significant for Jordanian EFL learners because it may help them to overcome their speaking problems. Also, it is important to Jordan Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific research because this research may assist in changing the policies of English language teaching at universities. Moreover, the study is significant to Jordan's ministry of education because it may help to develop more adequate textbooks of English language for both primary and secondary levels of education. Moreover, the departments of English language in Faculties of Arts and Education at Jordanian Universities can benefit from this research because it sheds light on the problems that face the Jordanian EFL learners in speaking. Then, this will pave the way for suggesting some practical and effective solutions for problems that face students in mastering the speaking and reading skills.

Literature Review

Definition of Speaking

According to Brown (1994) and Burns and Joyce (1997) define speaking as an interactive process of making meaning that includes producing, receiving, and processing information. Chaney (1998) speaking is the process of making and sharing meaning by using verbal and non-verbal symbols in different contexts. Bygate (1987) defined speaking as the production of auditory signals to produce different verbal responses in listeners. It is regarded as combining sounds systematically to form meaningful sentences. Eckard and Kearny (1981), Florez (1999), Howarth (2001), and Abd El Fattah Torkey (2006) defined speaking as a two-way process including a true communication of opinions, information, or emotions. This top-down view regards the spoken texts as the collaboration between two or more persons in the shared time and the shared context.

Attempting to elaborate more on the interactive nature of speaking, Burns & Joyce (1997) and Luoma (2004: 2) define speaking as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. It is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving. However, speech is not always unpredictable. Language functions (or patterns) that tend to recur in certain discourse situations can be identified.

The Importance of Speaking

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With the corresponding spread of English as a world language used widely in education and everyday's real-life situations, learners have become required to be competent speakers, to express themselves, to behave socially and culturally in any communicative context, to use speech sounds, stress, and intonation, to organize thoughts and select the appropriate utterances due to the social setting. English speaking is not an easy task because speakers should know many significant components like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Rivers (1981) studied the use of language outside the classroom situation and understood that speaking is used twice as much as reading and writing combined. According to Brown (1994), listening and speaking are learners' language tools.

Efrizal (2012) Pourhosein Gilakjani (2016) expressed that speaking is of great significance for the people's interaction where they speak everywhere and every day. Speaking is the way of communicating ideas and messages orally. If we want to encourage students to communicate in English, we should use the language in real communication and ask them to do the same process.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) stated that in the traditional methods, speaking skill was ignored in the classrooms where the emphasis was on reading and writing skills. For example, in The Grammar-Translation method, reading and writing were the important skills, and speaking and listening skills were not of great significance. According to Ur (2000), of all the four language skills called listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking is the most important one that is very necessary for effective communication.

The significance of speaking is indicated with the integration of the other language skills. Speaking helps learners develop their vocabulary and grammar skills and then better their writing skills. Students can express their emotions, ideas; tell stories; request; talk, discuss, and show the various functions of language. Speaking is of vital importance outside the classroom. Therefore, language speakers have more opportunities to find jobs in different organizations and companies. These statements have been supported by Baker and Westrup (2003) who said that learners who speak English very well can have a greater chance for better education, finding good jobs, and getting a promotion.

Concerning the speaking influence, Baker and Westrup (2003:5-6) elucidate that speaking has a positive impact on students educationally and professionally. Educationally, it reinforces students' grammar, vocabulary, and functional language, allows them to experiment with the language in different contexts, improves their English level, and provides them with the opportunity to study in an English-speaking country. Speaking is also a medium to study other subjects like Math and Science and obtain success in examinations. Professionally, speaking enables learners to maintain better future careers and gain promotion, since governments and companies currently only appoint staff who can speak English naturally and communicate efficiently.

When students learn English, speaking is significant to support their ability to apply the language. Speaking skill has been very important to the success of human beings. The

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significance of speaking skills is observed in the daily activities of persons. Speaking is an interactive task and it happens under real-time processing constraints. It means that they will be able to use words and phrases fluently without very much conscious thought. Effective speakers need to be able to process language in their own heads and put it into coherent order so that it comes out in forms that are not only comprehensible but also convey the meanings that are intended. Speaking skill enables individuals to produce sentences for real communication, in other words, they actually like to communicate in language to get specific objectives (McDonough & Shaw, 1993).

Teaching Speaking

Speaking is a crucial part of second language learning and teaching. Despite its importance, for many years, teaching speaking has been undervalued and English language teachers have continued to teach speaking just as a repetition of drills or memorization of dialogues. However, today's world requires that the goal of teaching speaking should improve students' communicative skills because only in that way, students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in each communicative circumstance.

What is meant by "teaching speaking" is to teach EFL learners to:

- 1- Produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns properly.
- 2- Use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns, and the rhythm of the second language.
- 3- Select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation, and subject matter.
- 4- Organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence.
- 5- Use language as a means of expressing values and judgments.
- 6- Use the language quickly and confidently with few natural pauses which is called fluency. (Nunan, 2003)

Now many linguistics and EFL teachers agree that students learn to speak the foreign language through interaction. Communicative language teaching and collaborative learning serve this aim. Communicative language teaching is based on real-life situations that require communication. By using this method in EFL classes, students will have the opportunity of communicating with each other in the target language. In brief, EFL teachers should create a classroom environment where students have real-life communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language. This can occur when students collaborate in groups to achieve a goal or to complete a task. The activities that can be done in the speaking classroom will be discussed later.

There are four things that students need to do with "new" language: be exposed to it, understand its meaning, understand its form (how it is constructed), and practice it (Harmer,

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1998:52). English in Jordan is still a foreign language, that is why EFL (English as Foreign Language) students need lots of exposure since they are much less exposed to the target language, target culture, and target people than ESL (English as Second Language) learners.

In the classroom, a major part of the teacher's job is to expose students to language so that they can use it later. Foreign language learners need opportunities to develop the skills especially speaking skills, by being exposed to situations where the emphasis is on using the language for communicating meanings as efficiently and economically as possible. The use of English is limited only in the classroom. The lack of exposure to real English-speaking settings can limit the quantity and quality of the input. Therefore, in EFL classroom, teachers need to set the situations and make them like ESL situations. When EFL teachers use only English, the EFL students can get adequate exposure. However, many learners are studying English simply just because it is part of the syllabus. Students can be exposed to the language through the teacher's utterances. They can also listen to tapes, read texts, and look at computer printouts. In each case, the students are given chances to see or hear the language before they are asked to produce it themselves. Context of learning is known as language exposure and context of teaching is known as instruction. Context of learning provides learners with natural input from interaction in community and context of teaching is a situation in which learners receive input from instruction. Indeed, exposure seems to be the main source of success in foreign language acquisition (Huda, 1999:158).

The goal of the classroom is not to substitute for the outside world, but to bring students to the point where they can use the outside world for further acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Although bringing the outside world into the classroom is not possible in the EFL setting, teachers can prepare EFL learners for further learning as independent learners in an English-speaking environment. The goal is not to produce fluent English speakers but to produce learners who can use their own language abilities and the language input in the real world to meet their own needs to function in English. Language learning can take place only through a natural process, which operates when a person is involved in using the language for communication. Therefore, communicative ability (inside or outside the classroom) is an important part of the total learning process.

In the communicative model of language teaching, the teachers help the students in real-life communication. They help their students develop the ability to produce grammatically correct, logically sound sentences that are appropriate to specific contexts.

Method

Participant

The participants in this study were full-time students, who were studying English as their major subject and were to be trained later to become English language teachers. They were 50 students in the Faculty of Arts, at Yarmouk University. They were randomly taken to form the sample of this study. The sample also includes 8 highly qualified English language instructors.

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The design of the English course reflected the students' needs for professional language, and the course was adjusted to the requirements for a Bachelor of English degree. The proficiency level of the students was either medium or low in their speaking and reading as reflected by the placement test.

Data Collected

To collect data for this study, interview was intended for the instructors and some of their students. "Interview" is mandatory in English classes. Here the "interview" is used in the form of "brief", up to 15 minutes meetings where the instructors and their students are asked to reflect on the problem that faces the students in reading and speaking the English language. For example, the students are asked to discuss the factors that affect their speaking and reading in the class, such as confidence and learning facilities. But to have a full view and to shed more light on the major causes of the problems that face students in reading and speaking, and to suggest some professional solutions, the researcher held a series of interviews with eight highly qualified and experienced instructors from High Secondary School

Data Analysis

SPSS was used to compile, tabulate, and analyse the quantitative data generated through the student's questionnaire. The calculation of frequencies and means of all items were done to provide information on students' academic reading and speaking components and the level of difficulty of each of these components. A frequency analysis was conducted to examine the distribution of responses generated via the students' questionnaire. For the analysis of qualitative data, inductive data analysis, as suggested by Patton (1990, p. 390), was implemented in which patterns, themes, and categories of analysis "emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis". The technique that was used in the inductive analysis was content analysis: a "process that involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the document's content" (Merriam, 1998, p. 160). Using this technique, the researcher coded all qualitative data obtained from interviews to reveal academic speaking and reading abilities and the difficulties that face these students in attaining these skills.

Result

Results of the interview revealed that the students theoretically know what effective communication implies. They admitted that it implies negotiation of meaning in a proper and effective way. It is also shown that the students could understand the message addressed to them, but their limited knowledge about the target language and lack of confidence made oral communication a great problem for them. The environment in which the students learn, and practice English does not encourage or motivate the students to develop their communicative competence. English does not have any communicative functions in the students' community. Furthermore, the interview revealed that the students possess very poor communication

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strategies which make it difficult for them to express their thoughts clearly and concisely. Syllabus designers should incorporate the activities that develop students' abilities to communicate when devising any learning programme. Teachers also should consider the needs of the students during their teaching process. As for the students, they need to be more motivated and prepared to engage in a more serious and effective process of learning.

The results of the study indicate that the students face many problems in speaking, which reflect students' achievement in their learning. The results also show that there were many factors affecting students speaking performance as follow: (1) knowledge of basic skills of reading and speaking; (2) motivation to speak and read; (3) teacher's feedback during speaking and reading activities; (4) confidence; (5) pressure to perform well; (6) time for preparation for the activities.

Communication without vocabulary will break down. One of the most useful ways to improve your communication skills is extensive reading. Extensive reading will help you to develop your ability to express ideas, whilst also enlarging the size of the vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge is one of the crucial factors that will influence fluency in speaking. Reading introduces learners to a wider body of language and contexts. Reading helps learners build up better grammar skills. As learners develop stronger reading skills, they develop more sophisticated speaking skills.

Teaching students to speak is a challenging responsibility. Fulfilling this responsibility requires knowledge of effective instructional practices and a willingness to use them. Teachers who have a thorough understanding of the essential components of effective speaking instruction are equipped to teach students to speak using instructional strategies and materials that have proven to be effective.

Effective teachers know how fluency facilitates comprehension, and they know how to use research-based strategies for helping students become fluent readers. These teachers are continually building each student's vocabulary and the ability to learn the meanings of new words through a variety of word-learning strategies. Finally, they know that comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading instruction, and they are adept at helping students learn to apply appropriate comprehension strategies as they read.

Those who accept the responsibility for teaching students to speak understand that it includes a commitment to continually search for more effective ways to help students gain competence in this very important skill. This paper is intended to provide teachers with a clear description of these components, how they influence speaking and speaking achievement, and how they can be taught effectively. An in-depth understanding of these components will enable teachers to plan an effective program of speaking instruction, diagnose speaking difficulties and provide instruction that targets those difficulties effectively, evaluate speaking materials and instructional practices, and help others become more effective teachers.

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Discussion*****Students' Perception of Good Communication******1- Students' Perception of Good Communication***

No	Item	Frequency
1	Do know that good communication entails expressing one's thoughts clearly and effectively?	85%
2	Do you have the ability to understand all the messages addressed to you during any communicative event?	55%
3	Does your limited knowledge of English is one of the problems you encounter when communicating?	90%
4	Do you ignore many of the conventions and norms of language use?	85%
5	Do you experience any problems developing your oral communication abilities?	75%
6	Does the education that you receive give much importance to the communicative use of language?	25%
7	Do your learning syllabus incorporate activities which help me develop your communicative competence?	40%

The table above shows students' perception of communication, 85% of the students reported that good communication means negotiating one's thoughts more clearly and effectively. 55% of the students also claimed that they have the ability to understand the messages addressed to them during oral communication. But they experience great difficulties when they try to give oral responses. 90% of the students said that their knowledge of the target language is limited, which causes difficulties when making the right rhetorical choices to express their thoughts. It is observed that 85% of the students ignored the socio-cultural rules and conventions that they should abide when communicating. The subjects of the study complained that it is not easy for them to raise an awareness of how to develop their communication abilities by 75%. Indeed, 25% of the students reported that the education they receive does not put much emphasis on the communicative use of language. That is, the learning syllabus does not contribute to the development of the students' oral communication abilities by 40%. This coincides with the results obtained from the interview conducted with the students. It was obvious that the students experience great problems expressing their thoughts and making them understood even during this interview.

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The role of the Learning Environment in Enhancing Students' Communication Skills

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No	Item	Frequency
8	Does your teacher comment negatively on the mistakes you make during speaking sessions?	
9	Do your colleagues comment on the mistakes you make during oral communication?	
10	Does your teacher encourage you to develop your communicative competence?	
11	Do you cooperate with your colleagues in order to develop your communicative skills?	
12	Do the community in which you live foster and enhance your speaking abilities?	

The table above shows the environment where the students learn and practice their English does not play any influential role in the development of the student’s communication abilities. 80 % of the students maintained that their teachers negatively comment on their poor performance. While 75% of the students said that their colleagues negatively comment on the mistake they make when they speak. This, in turn, makes the students fear making mistakes which eventually leads them not to take part in any activity. In any learning situation, it is known that the role of the teacher is to increase the students' opportunities to learn properly. However, 60% of the respondents claimed that their teachers do not encourage them to develop their communicative competence. On the other hand, 30 % of the respondents reported that the community does not play an important role in encouraging the students to develop and improve their communication abilities. This is not surprising since English does not have any communicative function in the students' local community. Analyzing the interview conducted with the students also revealed that the students possess poor communication skills. Some of the students found it very difficult to express what they feel. Part of the respondents refused to take part in the interview, asserting that they did not know what to say or how to express their thoughts to others in English. This makes it obvious that the community does not play any influential role in developing or enhancing students’ communication abilities.

Factors Negatively Influence Students' Communicative Abilities

Factors Negatively Influence Students' Communicative Abilities

No	Item	Frequency
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13	Do you worry about the mistakes you commit when speaking?	
14	Do you fear speaking English in public; therefore, you encounter difficulties when communicating?	
15	Do you afraid that your colleagues laugh at you when you make mistakes while conversing in English?	

There are some psychological factors which hinder the students from performing well in the instances of their oral communication. 65% of the students stated that they worry about the mistakes they commit during communication sessions. While 75% of the respondents showed that they fear speaking English in public. Furthermore, 80 % of the students were afraid when they make mistakes, their peers will laugh at them. Being as such, the students might not attempt to exploit their cognitive abilities in order to engage in an effective and meaningful learning process. The result of the interview showed that the students lack the necessary confidence to be involved in a real and natural communication. It takes much time and great effort to push some of the subjects of the study to talk.

The Style and Strategies Adopted by the Students when speaking

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No	Item	Frequency
16	Can you make correct and effective word choice for the content of your message?	
17	Do you consider the function of the grammatical structures of the message you wish to convey?	
18	Do you engage in group work and discussion to develop your communication skills?	
19	Do you often practise English with your colleagues in the university?	
20	Do you practise your English whenever you get the opportunity?	
21	Do you consider the relation that holds between you and the other participants in any communicative event?	
22	Do you have the ability to correct yourself when you feel that your message is not appropriate?	

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23	Do you adopt different styles while speaking to make your message more effective and comprehensible?	
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During the interview, it is observed that 60% of the students had problems selecting the appropriate and the right content for the message they wish to communicate. While 40% of the students considered the functions of the structures they use in their oral performance, they will manage to adopt an effective style in their communication. Unfortunately, the students never consider the communicative value of the structures they employ when communicating. This might be due to the gaps in their linguistic repertoire. They are not so proficient to the extent that they can retrieve a variety of grammatical structures in order to construct the message they wish to convey. Furthermore, 20% of the students said that no attempts were made on the part of the students to engage in group work or discussion so that they can improve their communication skills. 40 % of the respondents stated that they do not use English for their natural communication which makes it difficult for them to improve their oral competence. On the other hand, 30% of the students showed that they did not have the strategies that enable them to consider the sort of the relationship that holds between the participants. As such, the students ignore the fact that the nature of the relationship between the parties involved in any communicative event determines the paths and the end product of this event. While 35 % of the students reported that they lack the strategies that enable them to correct themselves if their message is not appropriate while communicating. Furthermore, 20% of the students maintained that they adopt no particular style or strategy during their oral communication. The performance of the students during the interview was very poor. This supports the claim they made that they are not aware of any effective strategies or styles that facilitate the communication process. But a few students and only a few, performed well and they expressed themselves without any apparent difficulty; they spoke clearly and concisely.

Conclusion:

This study reveals that Jordanian EFL learners face significant difficulties in speaking skills. Speaking difficulties encountered by EFL learners in Jordan are largely due to linguistic factors, psychological factors, poor teaching methods, lack of practice, and inhibition. Students are unable to speak in English because they lack the necessary vocabulary items and grammar structures that they could use when speaking. They also lack sentence formation skills, and this forces them to resort to using their mother tongue. Students also fear making mistakes in speaking in front of their classmates and they see this as very embarrassing. This situation leads to students' withdrawal and forces them not to speak to avoid such embarrassing situations. Research on English language teaching methodology reveals the main factors that may contribute to the existence of these speaking difficulties, and these are summarized in the following points: teachers' perceptions and erroneous beliefs of teaching speaking, poor teaching

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strategies, imbalanced curriculum, lack of extracurricular activities, and out-dated assessment regulations. The study shows clearly that teachers believe in the importance of teaching speaking, yet they do not spend enough time because priority is given to the coverage of the textbook topics, which focus on teaching reading and writing rather than speaking. The teaching strategies that are used by the teachers emphasize teaching the form of the language, which is characterized by focusing on teaching grammar rules and vocabulary items separately. Students are required to produce short accurate sentences while the communicative use of the language is almost neglected. In addition, teachers think it is very important to use L1 in order to give the meaning of some words and explain the grammar rules. They believe that using L1 is necessary to make sure that the students understand the meaning and get the intended point.

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