INVESTIGATING LEARNER AUTONOMY AMONG EFL LEARNERS AND TEACHERS IN ALGERIAN SECONDARY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The present paper investigates learner autonomy in Algerian EFL context. It is a case study designed to investigate learners' readiness for autonomous learning, and teachers' roles in promoting it in secondary education. The purpose of the study is to discover whether or not pupils attending English Language in secondary school are ready to be autonomous in language learning. And whether or not teachers are well-informed to foster their learners' autonomy, this research work is an attempt to contribute in promoting learner autonomy in the secondary education in Algeria. It is in fact, an attempt to expand an awareness of teachers and students concerning the necessity of autonomy in English learning. The study provides suggestions and recommendations about how to promote learner autonomy, and argues that ELT in Algeria should aim at cultivating learner autonomy through attributing new roles for the language teachers and strategy training for EFL learners. Finally, this study insists on the need to integrate learner autonomy in English learning not only as a top-down decision but as a gradual procedure based on training. In fact what both teachers and learners really need is autonomy-oriented training.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Algerian Context, Readiness, teacher's role, promoting.

INTRODUCTION

Language teaching nowadays is seen not as an ability to teach but as an ability to make learners learn. Learner centered education puts the learner at the center of classroom organization. There is a change in the view of language learning from a set of rules to be transmitted to learners from teachers, to a process in which the learner takes more responsibility in learning. By doing this, the learner becomes autonomous. Autonomy is one of the bases on which learner –centeredness stands on, because it is a precondition for an effective learning. (Benson, 2001). In fact, learners nowadays are expected to assume responsibility in learning. The aim behind introducing the notion of learner autonomy in the educational context is to develop responsible learners, who are capable to take charge of their own learning. That is to say, learners who share responsibility with the language teacher in the classroom and, moreover, do further research in real life situations, so as to, improve their level in language learning. An autonomous learner is that sort of learner who continues learning when teaching stops. This is in fact, one of the fundamental objectives of the new approaches in language teaching. In this context, and in order to make the educational system more developed and more fruitful, Algeria has implemented certain reforms in the field of education.

The Algerian Ministry of Education has launched educational reforms in the academic year 2002-2003, so as to change the teaching methodologies. The Competency-Based Approach was implemented in Algerian schools. It is supposed that the CBA has reshaped teacher's and

learner's roles and their responsibility in the language classroom. This approach aims at producing responsible and autonomous learners. There is no doubt that the notion of autonomy in English learning can be partially or gradually implemented in the secondary education. When learners reach university they find themselves able to take charge of their own learning. However, Algerian English learners do not arrive at university with the capacity of learning English autonomously, because they have been accustomed to spoon feeding in the secondary education. They consider English as a secondary subject (except for those in foreign languages stream). For this reason, they are not highly motivated and feel that the teacher is more responsible for the learning process. And responsible even for their success and failure in English learning. Though teachers in the secondary education invest endless amount of energy in their students and they generally get a little response. In other words, learners are over reliant on the English teacher. The solution lies on promoting learner autonomy, so that learners become gradually independent from the teacher, and rely much more on themselves in English learning, both inside and outside the classroom. The present investigation is carried out under three research questions:

1 - Are EFL learners in secondary education ready to be involved in autonomous learning?

2- How do learners perceive their own and their teacher's responsibilities in learning
    English?

3- In what ways can learner autonomy be promoted in Algerian secondary education?

In this study we try to give evidence or refute certain hypotheses. Both teachers and learners in Algerian secondary education may consider the notion of autonomy in the language classroom as frustrating, because learners are dependent on the language teacher, this teachers may not be well-trained and informed in their teaching training programs how to inculcate in their learners the capacity to bear responsibility in learning. EFL learners in secondary education may not be ready to be self-reliant.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no consensus on the concept of autonomy in education. It is a multifaceted concept whose meaning has been discussed from many perspectives. One of the fields in which the concept of autonomy was firstly developed is politics. Autonomy as a political concept originated in the Ancient Greek. In the field of education some consider it as taking charge of learning. Others see it as a decision making, and others think autonomy is a cognitive and self-management process. Imported originally from the fields of politics and moral philosophy, autonomy as a political concept was popular in the Enlightenment period and the French revolution in 1789. The word autonomous comes from the Greek words "auto–nomus" referring to someone or something which lives by his/her own rule. It is, therefore, understood that autonomous learning is related to self- directed studies. The concept of autonomous learning has been given a great importance since the 1970's; it is one of the most valuable spin-offs of communicative language learning environment. It is generally agreed that the concept of autonomy first entered the field of learning and teaching through the council of Europe's Modern Languages Project which was founded in 1971. The current debate about autonomy in second and foreign language learning originated in Holec's <u>Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning</u> first published in 1979, where he provides a definition of learner autonomy as*:".. to say of a learner that he is autonomous, is to say that he is capable of taking charge of his own learning and nothing more ...to take charge of one's learning is to bear responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning."*Holec, (1981:3). He supports his definition by a set of roles the autonomous learner is supposed to play such as: determining the objectives, defining the content and progression,

selecting the method and the techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired.

Although Holec's definition covers all the areas that involve the transfer of control over learning from the teacher to the learner. Other researchers do not agree with him and maintain that Holec's account of learner autonomy does not take into consideration the nature of the cognitive capabilities, underlying effective self-management of learning.(Benson, 2001**).** Little (1991) argues that autonomy is a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action. It entails that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. Dickinson (1987) on the other hand, views learner autonomy as decision making in leaning context. According to him autonomy refers to the situation in which the learner is responsible for the decisions concerned with his or her learning, and the implementation of these decisions**.** A more elaborated definition of learner autonomy is also put forward by Jeffries (1990) who views it as:" *learning in which an individual or a group of learners study on their own, possibly for a part or parts of a course, without direct intervention from a tutor, so that to take a greater responsibility for what they learn."* Jeffries (1990: 35). His definition of learner autonomy seems to be the most suitable for the purposes dealt with in this study. This is because we are much more concerned with this kind of partial autonomy not with the total one.

The difficulty of defining learner autonomy is mainly due the fact that there are degrees of autonomy, and that the behavior of autonomous learners can change depending on their age, and how far they have progressed in their learning.

METHODOLOGY

The selection of the type of research is based mainly on the nature of the research itself. Learner autonomy is a phenomenon that actually happens both inside and outside the class. A case study is selected because: " *A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real- life context."* Nunan (1997:76) . The study is conducted in Tafna secondary school in the Wilaya of Ain Temouchent in Algeria. The following research instruments are used: a questionnaire for EFL teachers, another one to learners, because autonomy in learning is a process resulting first from interdependence between teachers and learners. In addition to a semi-structured interview with a General inspector of English in Ain Temouchent. . First, the data obtained from teachers' questionnaire are helpful in answering the research questions. Second, Learners' questionnaire is beneficial in investigating their readiness, because promoting learner autonomy should start first by the learners themselves, their motivation, their attitudes, as well as, their views of autonomy. Without learners' readiness, the language teacher may fail in fostering autonomous learning, both inside and outside the classroom, even if he or she does his best in teaching. Similarly, the Chinese proverb says: *"you can bring the horse to water, but you can't make him drink."* And last, a semi-structured interview as another contributory research instrument, that has been conducted with the General inspector of English, who has been asked to give his opinion on learner autonomy in secondary schools in general, and asked as well about teacher's training programs, and if they are prepared in a way that helps teachers fostering their own, as well as, their pupils' autonomy. The data collection has been carried out in an analytic approach**.** The data gathered by the research instruments are quantitatively and qualitatively analysed.

Participants

The sample population selected in the present study is consisted of 50 EFL teachers, their teaching experience varies from one another, and they are in charge of different levels. The questionnaire is addressed to randomly selected teachers holding "License" (BA) in English language, throughout the 16 secondary schools existing   in   the   wilaya   of   Ain Temouchent ,   without   reference   to   their   age, gender or experience. And 36 EFL learners (pupils of first year), their age is about (16-17) years old. They are holders of BEM degree. They have learnt the English language since the first year in the middle school. As these pupils come from government schools, they share nearly the same educational background. The general inspector of English has an experience of 20 years as an English teacher and about 10 years as an inspector.

Findings and Data Analysis

The present study aims at investigating EFL learners' readiness to be more responsible and self-reliant in learning, and investigates as well, teacher's role in fostering the capacity o f self-reliance in their learners, and to look for ways of promoting learner autonomy in Algerian school. Here is the analysis of teachers' and learners' questionnaires, and the semi-structured interview.

Teachers' Questionnaire Analysis

Teachers were asked whether learner autonomy is important in English learning. The aim is in fact to reveal their attitude towards learner autonomy. 96% of the informants have given positive answer. According to most of them autonomy is important except 04% claimed the opposite. If secondary teachers' attitude towards learner autonomy is positive, how about that of learners? To discover this, another question was addressed to teachers, 10% thought learners' attitude towards autonomy positive, however, according to 40% of them, learners' attitude was negative, and half of the informants 50% thought they were indifferent. Another question aimed at elucidating teachers' views of a possible change in pupils' attitude. Most of the informants were optimistic for a possibility of change, 80% thought that pupils' attitude can be positive. They justified their answer by saying that through motivating learners, raise their awareness, as well as, the use of variety of materials inside and outside the classroom; pupils' attitude can be changed. 20% seem to be pessimistic, they claimed that it was not easy to change pupils' attitude as they were much more reliant on the teachers.

Pupils attitude towards autonomy	A.F	R.F
Positive	05	10 %
Negative	20	40 %
Indifferent	25	50 %
Total number	50	100 %

**Table 1** Pupils' Attitude towards Autonomy.
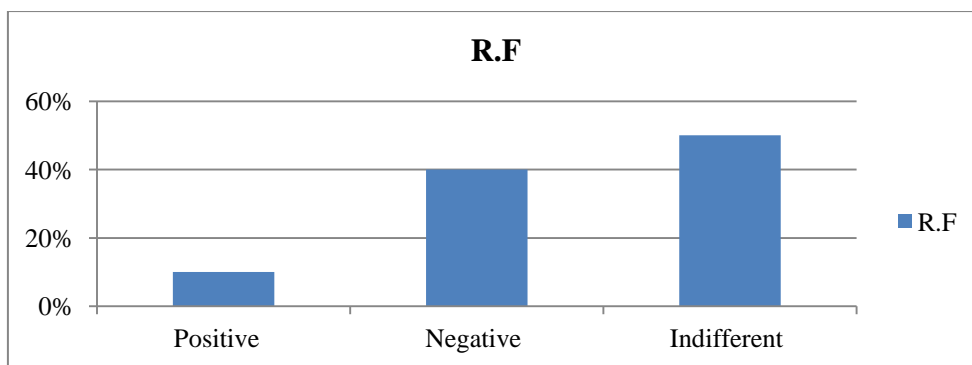
Bar-Graph 1: Pupils' Attitude towards Autonomy

The next question is one of the pillars on which our research is built up on. It was addressed to teachers so as to veil the ambiguity on pupils' readiness for learning autonomously. As expected 86% of the informants considered pupils not ready to take responsibility in English learning. They considered them as so reliant on the teacher and had no readiness for relying on themselves. Only very few teachers (14%) thought that pupils were ready.

Pupils' readiness for autonomy	A.F	R.F
Yes	07	14 %
No	43	86 %
Total number	50	100 %

Table 2 Pupils' Readiness for Autonomy
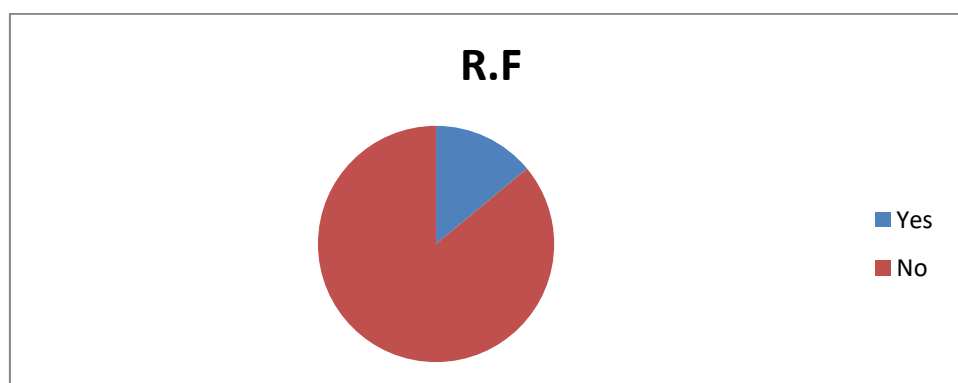
Pie-Chart 1: Pupils' Readiness for Autonomy

Teachers who aim at promoting their learners' autonomy should start by themselves. (Little, 2002). In fact, we cannot expect secondary teachers in Algeria to foster pupils' autonomy, if they do not know what autonomy is. Unexpectedly 55.81% of the informants considered that learner autonomy was dependent on that of the teacher. In contrast, 44.18% of the teacher claimed that the notion of autonomy should be dealt with at the level of university not in secondary education. Since according to them English secondary teachers were not independent, because the curriculum, the syllabus as well as the approach of teaching are imposed on them, thus, no room for freedom is left for them.

Since the general objective of this study is looking for ways to promote learner autonomy, secondary teachers have been asked about the bases on which they should rely in promoting learner autonomy. 40% considered learners' readiness as the first basis while 34% of them thought that teacher's role was basic in making pupils gradually relying on themselves in

English learning. Whereas 26% of the informants considered that the availability of materials and study aids was the first condition that should be provided for learners, so that they become self-reliant and autonomous.

| Promoting learner autonomy	A.F	R.F
Teacher's role	17	34 %
Learners' readiness	20	40 %
Availability of materials	13	26 %
Total number	50	100 %

Table 3 Promoting Learner Autonomy

As for English teachers in the secondary school, their pre-service training is mainly done at universities. The informants are required to give their opinion towards the training programs. Surprisingly 94% of the teachers considered themselves as poorly trained towards developing pupils' autonomy. Clearly said, the training programs did not offer them any strategies or techniques, so that they made their learners more self-reliant. Few other teachers' opinion is dissimilar, 06% of them consider the programs beneficial in paving the way to autonomous learning.

Learners' Questionnaire Analysis

The learners are asked about autonomy in indirect questions unlike teachers. While being asked about the responsible of English learning in the classroom, most of them (72.22%) considered the teacher as the first and the most responsible. 22% of them were somehow more autonomous while claiming that the responsibility of English learning in the classroom was shared between pupils and teachers. only 5.55% of the informants seemed to be autonomous. The informants whose answers were negative justified this by saying that they used to rely on the teacher since he knows best. Whereas 5 pupils did not know which strategies to follow so that to be independent in one's learning in a ratio of 15.62%. 4 of them only thought that the lack of materials was the first cause of their over-reliance on the teacher in a ratio of 12.5%. Moreover, 72% of the informants complained that the teacher does not train them to use techniques and strategies that helped them becoming autonomous, whereas, 27% of them claimed the opposite.

Pupils perception responsibility	A.F	R.F
Teachers' responsibility	26	72.22 %
Learner's responsibility	02	05.55 %
Shared between the	08	22.22 %
Total number	36	100 %

Table 4 Responsibility in Learning English in the Classroom
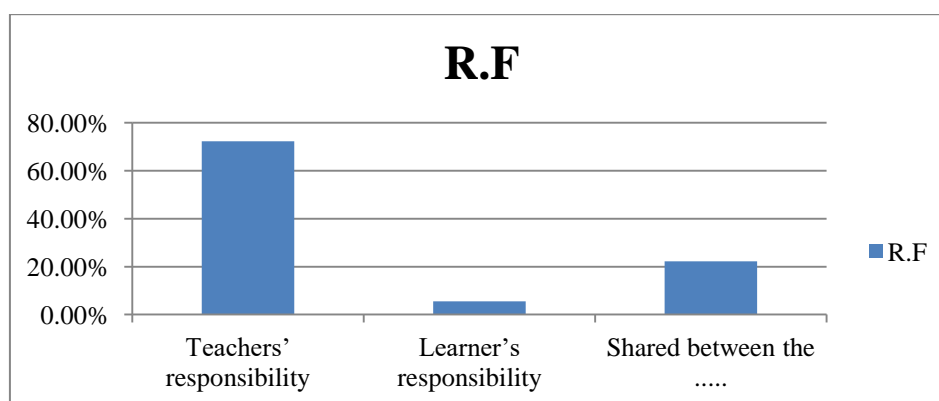
Bar-Graph 2: Responsibility in Learning English in the Classroom

As for decision making in the classroom, learners did not consider themselves able to set the goal of the lesson. According to half of the informants (52%) setting time for each activity as a decision can be sometimes taken by them. 27.77% of pupils thought themselves capable of selecting the materials, and for assessing the learning progress only 04 pupils thought they could do such a task in the classroom in a ratio of 11.11%. only 03 considered themselves able to do so. Besides decision making other classroom management procedures are questioned. .

Grammar books, dictionaries play a role in making pupils more independent from the teacher, through the use of dictionary pupils can find meaning of words themselves without referring to the teacher. Unexpectedly only 2 pupils brought with them a dictionary in the classroom in a ratio of 5.55% and 94.44% did not. In order to know whether or not pupils' mistakes were self- corrected and to which extent they were reliant on the teacher in error correction. Pupils have been asked whether they preferred their mistakes to be corrected by themselves, their teacher or their classmates. The lion's share 83.33% was that of pupils preferring the teacher to correct them. 19.44% are capable for self-correction.

The autonomous learner is the one who can discover his strengths and weaknesses in learning English. Pupils are supposed to be capable to do so. However, only 3 considered themselves capable for such a task, whereas, no one thought the classmates could do so. Surprisingly 33 pupils pointed out that the teacher was the responsible for assessing them in a ratio of 91.66%. EFL learners in Algerian secondary education seem not ready to be responsible in learning, and not aware of the importance of autonomy in learning. Their attitudes towards it seem negative and somehow indifferent.

The Inspector's Semi-Structured Interview Analysis

In order to broaden the scope of research, we have added a semi-structured interview with the General inspector of English in the Wilaya of Ain Temouchent. He has been asked open-ended questions, in order to collect data on his general understanding of learner autonomy. Whether or not it was included in teacher training programs, and how can it be fostered. He has been questioned about how much autonomous the pupils in the secondary school were. Carried out in the inspector's office, and took about 30 minutes, this semi-structured interview provided a rich qualitative data.

According to the General inspector of English, learner autonomy is very important in English learning. It is through autonomy that the skills and knowledge acquired could be reinvested in real life situations. The project work if suggested in an appropriate way can prove to be a very interesting tool to make students learn, be enthusiastic in their learning and eager to learn more. Unfortunately, added the inspector this rarely happened in our classrooms, as teachers seldom took time to foster autonomous learning. They rather dealt with the project work as a burden and suggested it to their students, just because it was part of the approach they were supposed to implement in their teaching. The students were left without any assistance and made of their project a meaningless 'copy and paste' patchwork from the Internet, which neither their teachers nor themselves have read entirely.

According to the interviewee various factors prevented the teacher from implementing the CBA in his teaching. This approach which has been adopted for a decade now, and which advocated autonomous learning met some limits in the Algerian classroom for a number of reasons:

a) Overloaded classes that do not leave much space to promote pupil-centered teaching, and autonomous learning.
b) Lack of equipment and material.
c) Insufficient teacher development.
d) Resistance to the new approach.
e) Fear to lose authority.
f) Use of official yearly distributions of the syllabus which are content-based.
g) Discordance between teaching which is meant to develop competences in using a language, and certificate assessment which is content-based.

These obstacles, among others, hindered the development of learner autonomy in Algerian schools.

Fostering students' autonomy according to the inspector was at the heart of every teacher development program whether during seminars or during teacher conferences following an inspection visit to a teacher. Methods and techniques are provided to the teachers, in order to 'stop teaching and let students learn'. Some of them put them into practice in their everyday teaching, but many remained reluctant to operate changes claiming that students were weak, unwilling to make effort. In reality, some teachers had negative attitudes towards implementing students' autonomy in their teaching strategies, since they have not been trained themselves in an autonomous way.

As he has explained before; the inspector claimed that the teaching/learning environment in Algeria is not ideal to promote autonomous learning. Much effort has to be made from the different stakeholders: a more realistic and adequate schooling system, smaller classes, equipped classrooms and laboratories, rich libraries, more pertinent syllabuses and textbooks that develop students' autonomy, more teacher development, as well as a redefinition of the teacher's role. In light of the interview data, the following suggestions and pieces of advice were provided by the inspector for promoting learner autonomy in Algerian schools:

- The first thing to start with is to tell the student that he is part and parcel of the learning process, that the teacher is not a knowledge dispenser, but rather a guide and facilitator, who helps students acquire competencies that enable them learn English.
- He ought to reassure learners that he can assist them individually when they need help.
- At the very beginning of the year he should suggest a diagnostic test, to be aware of his students' individual strengths and weaknesses so as to provide remedies.
- Students need to know the learning objectives, to know what is expected from them, the way they are going to be assessed, and the different supports they may use.
- Teachers should link the learning objectives to the students' own experiences and their interests, and provide meaningful choices congruent with the learning objectives, so as to develop a sense of students' ownership over the learning process.
- The teacher should encourage group work, peer and self assessment, so as to leave space to peer negotiations and individual involvement.
- The teachers should engage the students' curiosity and promote active learning. They should make use of problem solving situations that are challenging.
- Teachers should provide feedback on the students' acquisition and what is left to improve. They should praise them for their effort and help them overcome their disappointment, if they failed to succeed by reassuring them.
- The use of journals and portfolios is recommended and encouraged to make students evaluate their own progress. This will motivate them do better and develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

To sum up, the analysis of data has veiled the ambiguity on the notion of autonomy in secondary education. It has confirmed that EFL learners in Algerian secondary education are neither aware of the importance of autonomy nor ready to engage in it, Furthermore, neither project works, nor teacher training programs are adequate and helpful in providing teachers and pupils alike with the skills to develop autonomy in English learning. In fact, the idea of autonomy is somehow new in the Algerian context; both teachers and pupils should have training towards it. Ushioda says**: "** *The concept of autonomy in the classroom invariably brings to mind the vision of learners working happily in groups, pairs or individually while the teacher hovers in the background."* Ushioda, (2003:9). Taking into consideration what she says and the results obtained, we confirm that our secondary classroom is not an autonomous one. Still learners consider the teacher as the most responsible. The problem is that neither teachers nor pupils can be blamed since both have been poorly prepared for autonomy. English teachers should create an atmosphere that foster autonomy, As suggested by Littlewood **: "** *for students, the ability to behave autonomously is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted."* Littlewood (1999: 33). The success of the learner autonomy is, to a great extent, determined by the educational system and the role of the teacher. The current study provides recommendations that could foster learner autonomy which include first, motivating pupils, it is important to inform the students of the importance of learner autonomy and raise their awareness. Second, strategy training sessions for pupils in the secondary education are highly beneficial. Through strategy training pupils in the secondary level start taking charge of their own learning. Third, teachers can also have students use journals and diaries as a tool to reflect on their strategies and goals. Think-aloud protocols, self-reports, self-assessment on quizzes, and tests may be another affective means in promoting learner autonomy in our schools. Teacher's role as well should be redefined to meet such challenge of autonomy.

CONCLUSIONS

In English learning, in Algerian secondary schools, learner autonomy cannot be realized overnight. Due to the long-term traditional spoon-feeding method. Students will undoubtedly have some difficulty shifting their learning styles and taking the responsibility for their own learning. In this case, teachers' encouragement is highly demanded to help those passive learners improving their autonomy, and help them to realize that successful language learning largely depends on themselves not on the teacher. In this context a Chinese proverb may serve to clarify farther, it says*:" when you offer me one fish you feed me one day, but when you show me how to fish you feed me all the life."* What pupils really need is not offering them knowledge but rather showing them how to find it. In this way, teachers can succeed in establishing what is called life-long learning which is unfortunately lacking in our schools**.** This study highlights the need to integrate learner autonomy into the language curriculum, not only as top to down decision imposed on both teachers and pupils, but as step by step procedure based on rising awareness, motivating learners and training them alike with teachers towards autonomy. Thus, we can deduce that a hard work is to be done if we want autonomy to be a reality in Algerian secondary education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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