# SOME MEASURES TO IMPROVE VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS 

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#### Abstract

: In the process of learning a foreign language, vocabulary can be considered as the most important part because it is a means of expressing ideas and at the same time it is a bridge to develop micro-language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. However, the teaching of vocabulary has not really been given much attention in the teaching process. With the traditional method of teaching vocabulary, it is the Grammar-translation method, which is commonly used in foreign language classes today. This paper uses the method of analysis, summarizing experience to form the theoretical basis. The practical investigation method using closed-ended questions with 5 levels of Likert is applied to find out the current situation of vocabulary learning of non-English major students. Based on the current situation, the study proposes measures to improve the effective vocabulary learning for learners. The results of the study contribute to teachers more useful reference information on how to teach vocabulary to non-English major students. Students possibly understand the necessary information for learning and developing their vocabulary through the finding of this study..


# MỘT SỐ BIỆN PHÁP NÂNG CAO CHIẾN LƯỢC HỌC TỪ VỪNG CHO SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH 

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## Thông tin bài viết

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## Từ khóa:

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## Tóm tắt

Trong quá trình học ngoại ngữ, từ vựng có thể xem là phần quan trọng nhất vì nó là phương tiện dùng để diễn đạt ý tưởng đồng thời đó cũng là cầu nối để phát triển các kỹ năng ngôn ngữ chính nghe, nói, đọc và viết. Tuy nhiên, việc dạy từ vựng chưa thực sự được chú trọng và quan tâm đúng mức trong quá trình giảng dạy. Với các phương pháp giảng dạy từ vựng truyền thống đó là phương pháp ngữ dịch, được sử dụng phổ biến trong các lớp học ngoại ngữ hiện nay. Bài viết sử dụng phương pháp phân tích tổng kết kinh nghiệm để hình thành cơ sở lý luận. Phương pháp điều tra thực tiễn sử dụng câu hỏi đóng An két 5 mức Likert được áp dụng để tìm hiểu thực trạng việc học từ vựng hiện tại của sinh viên không chuyên ngữ như thế nào. Căn cứ vào thực trạng hiện tại, bài viết đề xuất biện pháp nâng cao việc học từ vựng hiệu quả cho người học. Kết quả của nghiên cứu đóng góp cho giáo viên thêm thông tin tham khảo hữu ích về cách giảng dạy từ vựng cho sinh viên không chuyên. Sinh viên sẽ nắm rõ được thông tin cần thiết cho việc học và phát triển từ vựng của mình thông qua bài viết.

## 1. Introduction

In the process of teaching foreign languages, especially the English language, vocabulary plays an important role in the decisive practicality of foreign language acquisition. This is because learners are incapable of either understanding what people are trying to communicate in a target language or expressing their ideas in a foreign language due to the lack of vocabulary [1]. To illustrate the necessity of the lexical role in acquiring foreign languages, the researcher took the improvement of the effectiveness of teaching English vocabulary as a research object. Naturally, according to the human development process, at the age of about 24 months, infants start using simple information exchanges by copying the people
around while they purposefully or unintentionally use their speech to communicate. As a result, babies unintentionally develop their communication ability by copying their adults. Over time, children themselves enrich their vocabulary bank which enables them to express more complex sentences. Simultaneously, it is recognized that without grammatical knowledge, information can still be conveyed between two people; however, if there is no vocabulary, no information can be exchanged between two people in either verbal or written forms [2, p. 111]. In teaching foreign languages in general and English language teaching (ELT) in particular, the four basic skills which are Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing is often mentioned because these skills determine the mastery of students
no matter what language learners acquire in the first or second language. To achieve mastery of these four fundamental skills, three very important factors are highly influenced the fluency of the language ability; that is, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. As mentioned above vocabulary plays an important role in foreign language teaching because, without adequate vocabulary, learners cannot understand what others say and cannot express their views. Therefore, vocabulary can be defined as a group of words of a language consisting of a single word, phrase, or idiom used to convey a particular meaning. In other words, a vocabulary can be a word with a specific meaning, but it can also be a group of words expressing a certain meaning. Lewis [3, p. 89] argues that "Lexis is the core or heart of language". The influence of vocabulary in language learning is also recognized by learners through actions that "learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books" according to Schmitt [4, p. 4].

The current curriculum of the Faculty of Legal Foreign Languages uses the English File: Preintermediate textbook for English module 1 (with a duration of 3 credits) and English module 2 (with a duration of 4 credits) to develop the four basic skills (Listening - Speaking - Reading - Writing) of learners. The textbook, currently used, also emphasizes the role of Grammar, Vocabulary, and Pronunciation, where Vocabulary is integrated with reading comprehension or listening comprehension skills to enhance the effectiveness of developing the respective skills. Although vocabulary makes an important contribution to the development of language skills in general and foreign language learning in particular, this factor has not been paid enough attention to developing compared with the other four basic skills of foreign language learning, which can lead to a "lack of vocabulary necessary to learn other language skills well" [5, p. 46]. Within the scope of this study, the author synthesized, and analyzed theories related to vocabulary development to the current practices of vocabulary development, and suggested some implications for teaching English vocabulary to bring back high efficiency in English language learning for non-English major students in general and at Hanoi Law University in particular.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research design

The study employed a descriptive quantitative research method to exploit a closed five-scale Likert questionnaire compiled by the researcherusing Schmitt's concept [6] to build 45 closed-ended statements of fivescale Likert choice. In addition, the method of analysis and summarization of experience was also used as a premise for the formation of a theoretical basis. Through the actual results from the survey, combined with the
theoretical bases, the author analyzed and synthesized to suggest measures to improve vocabulary teaching methods for a non-English language major students at Hanoi Law University.

### 2.2. Subjects

To meet the learning outcomes by the provisions of Circular No. 01/2014/TT-BGDDT dated January 24, 2014, of the Ministry of Education and Training on the 6-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam to apply for the student learning outcomes in terms of foreign language ability, students' learning outcomes have to be satisfied Level 3 according to Vietnamese Standardised Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) for graduates of non-foreign language majors [6]. In practice, the English program is taught entirely in 7 credits with the English File: Pre-intermediate curriculum for non-English major students at Hanoi Law University. In this study, the researcher is limited to students of course No. 46 who are studying English module 2 , using an online survey together with handouts directly to 700 students registered for credit. As a result, the researcher used the formula to select representatives using Slovin's formula through data screening and obtained a standard sample of 249 students. Specifically, 93 male students, accounting for $37.3 \%$, participated in the survey, which was lower than 156 female students, accounting for $62.7 \%$. When considering students' residence, the results showed that students from rural areas were 123 ones, making up $49.4 \%$, followed by urban students with 80 students, equivalent to $32.1 \%$, and in mountainous areas with 46 students, same $18.5 \%$. The purpose of examining where students come from is to understand the influence of the environment which students had experienced.

### 2.3. Research instrument and Data analysis

The close 5-level Likert scale is fine-tuned according to Schmitt's research instrument [7] that examines 5 groups of strategies students use to learn vocabulary. Specifically, 45 questions are divided into 2 main parts, which are (1) Strategies for the Discovery of a New Word's Meaning. With this group of questions, there are 14 statements used to discover the vocabulary learning strategies of two aspects, which are (a) social strategies consisting of 9 questions, and (b) determination strategies examining differences in lexical meaning with the help of 5 questions. The second part of the survey refers to Strategies for Consolidating a Word Once it has been Encountered, including 31 questions divided into 4 groups. Specifically, (a) the group of questions about social strategies has 3 questions, (b) the Memory Strategies include 15 questions, (c) the group of Cognitive Strategies consists of 7 questions, and (d)) Meta-cognitive Strategies have 6 questions. The above questions have been fine-tuned after carrying
out a dry run with 15 students, the researchers removed the unqualified questions according to the Cronbach alpha coefficient [8] and kept the questions that met the acceptable level $(0,58 £$ a $£ 0,97)$. Students were expected to rectify question levels (1) seldom used, (2) rarely used, (3) occasionally used, (4) frequently used, and (5) always used. Based on the data collected from the survey, the researcher used the statistical software SPSS v. 25 to process the information. In particular, the demographic information of participants is processed by using frequency calculation, 45 questions in the study used descriptive statistics with specific levels: (1.00-1.80) rarely used strategies, ( $1.81-2.60$ ) seldom used strategies, ( $2.61-3.40$ ) sometimes used strategies, (3.41-4.20) frequently used strategies, and (4.21-5.00) always used strategies. In addition, ANOVA was also used to compare whether there was a difference in vocabulary learning strategies between male and female students, and between regions based on a confidence level of $95 \%$.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Regarding strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning, learner autonomy seems not to be promoted. The ability to discover the meaning of new words is not highly employed by students, but the highest use by students is the search for the meaning of the word in a bilingual dictionary ( $M=4.38 ; S D=.507 \%$ ). This finding is similar to previous studies $[1 ; 5 ; 9]$ when these studies also clearly show that learners completely rely on their bilingual dictionaries to find the meaning of new words without being interested in using other methods such as analyzing words, guessing meanings in context or using English - English dictionaries to find out the corresponding meaning. When considering social strategies to understand the meaning of new
words, learners likely tend to choose this method as the main way to learn new words. During the learning process, it is the a synonymmost convenient for students to seek help from their classmates for new words $(M=4.45)$. Additionally, learners also expect their teachers to give the meaning of new words ( $M=$ 3.87), they also ask their teachers to describe a similar meaning or provide a synonym for the word ( $M=$ 3.53). In general, the method of teaching new words that learners expect is a traditional teaching approach; that is, Grammar- the translation method, simply thinking as the direct translation of meaning from the second language into the first language. This method of teaching English by using the first language to teach the second language is considered a passive teaching method [10, p. 6], in which learners only know how to take notes in the first language, while the teacher plays a central role in the classroom or commonly referred as teacher-centered teaching [11]. In this regard, learners think that learning vocabulary does not take much time, and require no effort of learners to find out the meaning of new words but their ability to retain the new words does not prolong [9]. Similarly, in previous research [5], it reflects similar results when learners expect that new English words should be introduced by teachers and given Vietnamese meanings immediately to avoid wasting time. With this Grammar Translation method, learners completely rely on the Vietnamese language to understand English, and this method is not currently used by foreign language teachers because the learnercentered role is much more important. The focus on teaching is not only on teaching foreign languages but also on other subjects.

Table 1. Results presenting the students' vocabulary learning strategies
(Source: own author)

| Strategy |  | z |  | E 0 0 0 0 0 |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Strategies for the Discovery of a New Word's Meaning |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Analyze part of speech such as verb, noun, and adjective. | DET | 249 | 2.70 | . 502 | Sometimes |
| 2. Analyze affixes and roots | DET | 249 | 1.31 | . 704 | Seldom |
| 3. Check for L1 cognate | DET | 249 | 2.41 | . 606 | Sometimes |
| 4. Analyze any available pictures or gestures | DET | 249 | 1.17 | . 609 | Seldom |
| 5. Guess word meaning from textual context | DET | 249 | 3.00 | . 627 | Sometimes |
| 6. Use a bilingual dictionary | DET | 249 | 4.38 | . 507 | Always |
| 7. Use an English-English dictionary | DET | 249 | 1.16 | . 742 | Seldom |
| 8. Use flash cards | DET | 249 | 2.74 | . 809 | Sometimes |


|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Strategy |  |  |  |  |  |

## Interpretation:

SOC $=$ Social Strategies. These strategies help learners discover the meaning of a new word by asking someone who knows. Learners can ask their teacher or classmates for L1 translation, paraphrase, synonym, a model sentence containing that word; or they can discover the meaning through group work activity.
$D E T=$ Determination Strategies. These strategies help learners discover the meaning of a new word by using four options: guessing from their structural knowledge of the language, guessing from an L1 cognate, guessing from context, using reference materials.

MEM $=$ Memory Strategies. These strategies are used to retain the word, using some form of imagery, or grouping. A new word can be integrated into many kinds of existing knowledge (i.e., previous experiences or known words) or images can be custom-made for retrieval.

MET $=$ Meta-cognitive Strategies. These strategies are related to planning and self-evaluation to reflect on the learning processes.
$C O G=$ Cognitive Strategies. These strategies contain repetition and using mechanical means to study vocabulary. Learners can write or say a word again and again to remember it. Besides, they can take notes in class, make use of special vocabulary sections in their textbooks, study by listening, record a tape of word lists or label their physical objects in L2.

When considering the strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered, with social strategies, students tend to use no method to reinforce vocabulary. The nature of learning is generally to form a new habit, turning newly learned knowledge as a skill into a long-term skill through regular practice. In memory strategies, the practice of creative memorizing vocabulary is not used by the students, which results in the loss of the practical meaning of new words, namely paraphrasing the words meaning ( $M=1.35$ ), and group words together within a storyline ( $M=1.18$ ). As mentioned in Table 1, students often reinforce vocabulary learning through a pictorial representation of its meaning ( $M=3.80$ ) or stick the word and its meaning in the place where it can be seen ( $M=4.09$ ). With this method of vocabulary learning, learners often connect vocabulary and its meaning most simply, but only comprehend at the level of knowing vocabulary and have yet to apply a higher level in the use of vocabulary. This is the early stage of vocabulary learning. Research findings of Rasouli \& Jafari [12; p. 42] suggest that to memorize vocabulary, learners are advised to know that there are four tasks for vocabulary learning such as (1) repetition, (2) focus on both
meaning and form, (3) engagement, and (4) interaction and negotiation. However, the researchers also state that learning vocabulary is a challenging task that takes time to achieve proficiency in using vocabulary. Other memory strategies as shown in Table 1 also signify at the level of occasional usage by learners to reinforce vocabulary. The group of cognitive strategies in Table 1 also shows that learners did not intentionally focus on learning vocabulary. Specifically, learners often put English labels on physical objects to memorize ( $M=2.46$ ), but they do not usually keep a vocabulary notebook everywhere they go $(M=2.46)$. In addition, the vocabulary consolidation strategies in this cognitive strategy group are only used occasionally by students. In a study [9] using the same scale as in this paper, the researchers also show that learners are interested in vocabulary, but the strategy of reinforcing vocabulary awareness is not used. In another recent study [13; p. 117], the author has shown that the student>s cognitive strategy of vocabulary learning is just average. The final group of strategies in this survey is metacognitive strategies, as shown in Table 1. Metacognitive strategies in vocabulary learning involve planning and self-assessment in the learning process. That is, the process of learning vocabulary needs to determine in advance what they need to learn and apply that knowledge to specific purposes [14, p. 88]. From this perspective, learners have completely lacked the effectiveness of learning vocabulary applied in practice when learners rarely apply the knowledge, they have learned to describe objects in English using the words they have learned ( $M=1.64$ ). The evaluation of metacognitive strategies in vocabulary learning aims to activate learners> thinking and memorization to help them apply theoretical knowledge in practice. With this metacognitive strategy, learners create for themselves a positive learning environment where learners verify and re-evaluate the effectiveness of their learning.

Table 2 reflects the different viewpoints between male and female students on vocabulary learning strategies. Regarding the data in Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, the results indicate that the Sig. values are higher than 0.05 so the results of the same variances are taken into account at the Sig. (2-tailed). In this column of values, the data show that the confidence level Sig. (2-tailed) is also higher than 0.05 , which proves that there is no difference between students in their use of vocabulary learning strategies. This basis helps teachers apply pedagogical methods of teaching common vocabulary to all students in a class.

Table 2. Differences between genders in vocabulary learning strategies

|  | F | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |  | t-test for Equality of Means |  |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  |  | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |  |
| Social Strategies | Equal variances assumed | . 310 | . 578 | 1.114 | 247 | . 266 |
|  | Equal variances not assumed |  |  | 1.120 | 196.357 | . 264 |
| Determination Strategies | Equal variances assumed | . 896 | . 345 | 1.042 | 247 | . 298 |
|  | Equal variances not assumed |  |  | 1.029 | 186.205 | . 305 |
| Memory Strategies | Equal variances assumed | . 282 | . 596 | . 546 | 247 | . 586 |
|  | Equal variances not assumed |  |  | . 544 | 191.371 | . 587 |
| Meta-cognitive Strategies | Equal variances assumed | . 964 | . 327 | -. 398 | 247 | . 691 |
|  | Equal variances not assumed |  |  | -. 405 | 204.020 | . 686 |
| Cognitive Strategies | Equal variances assumed | . 463 | . 497 | . 237 | 247 | . 813 |
|  | Equal variances not assumed |  |  | . 234 | 184.876 | . 815 |

Table 3 considers whether there are differences among students coming from different locations regarding the use of vocabulary learning strategies. The hypothesis was that geographical differences would affect learners' vocabulary bank due to learning conditions. Values in Sig. column are all higher than 0.05 , which
indicates that students from different regions use the same vocabulary learning strategies. Therefore, it is easy for teachers to apply their pedagogical methods and tactics to teach vocabulary in the most effective way to all learners

Table 3. Differences among students' residences

| ANOVA |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  |  | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Social Strategies | Between Groups | 8.523 | 2 | 4.261 | . 285 | . 752 |
|  | Within Groups | 3681.196 | 246 | 14.964 |  |  |
|  | Total | 3689.719 | 248 |  |  |  |
| Determination Strategies | Between Groups | 7.265 | 2 | 3.632 | . 290 | . 749 |
|  | Within Groups | 3086.141 | 246 | 12.545 |  |  |
|  | Total | 3093.406 | 248 |  |  |  |
| Memory Strategies | Between Groups | 1.477 | 2 | . 738 | . 018 | . 982 |
|  | Within Groups | 9957.318 | 246 | 40.477 |  |  |
|  | Total | 9958.795 | 248 |  |  |  |
| Meta-cognitive Strategies | Between Groups | 16.595 | 2 | 8.298 | . 840 | . 433 |
|  | Within Groups | 2429.630 | 246 | 9.877 |  |  |
|  | Total | 2446.225 | 248 |  |  |  |
| Cognitive Strategies | Between Groups | 2.779 | 2 | 1.390 | . 176 | . 839 |
|  | Within Groups | 1947.293 | 246 | 7.916 |  |  |
|  | Total | 1950.072 | 248 |  |  |  |

4. Some measures to improve teaching vocabulary

### 4.1. The acquired aspects of vocabulary knowledge

The concept of vocabulary can be defined in many different ways, but teachers need to be aware of and focus on three important aspects of vocabulary teaching: form, meaning, and use. Thus, the form of a word is related to the pronunciation of the word (speech form), the spelling (written form) and any parts of the word added to the root word (such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes). The meaning of a word is contained in the form of the word and changes according to the
form of the word. In addition, the use of words refers to the grammatical functions of the word or phrase, the phrases often accompany the root word. Understanding these three aspects related to vocabulary like this, the teacher will help learners to build their own knowledge of words and phrases, and helping them grasp these different components will enable them to improve their knowledge and use of English vocabulary. Nation [15] proposed a lexical analysis that would involve the following factors:

Table 4. What is involved in knowing a word? (Source: Adapted from Nation (2020, p. 16)

| Aspect | Component | Receptive knowledge | Productive knowledge |
| :---: | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Form | Spoken | What does the word sound like? | How is the word pronounced? |
|  | Written | What does the word look like? | How is the word written and spelled? |
|  | Word parts | What parts are recognizable in this <br> word? | What word parts are needed to express <br> the meaning? |
|  | Form and meaning | What meaning does this word form <br> signal? | What word form can be used to express <br> this meaning? |
|  | Concepts and referents | What is included in the concept? | What items can the concept refer to? |
|  | Associations | What other words does this make us <br> think of? | What other words could be used instead <br> of this one? |
|  | Collocations | In what patterns does the word <br> occur? | In what patterns must this word be used? |
|  | What words or types of words occur <br> with this one? | What words or types of words must be <br> used with this one? |  |
|  | Constraints on use <br> (register, frequency . . .) | Where, when, and how often would <br> we expect to meet this word? | Where, when, and how often can this <br> word be used? |

### 4.2. Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary learning strategies require learners to spend time and keep patient to turn new vocabulary into wording mastery. In this aspect, four essential factors have to be taken serious consideration to help learners to acquaint themselves with new vocabulary.

## The first stage. Repetition

It seems to be very difficult to learn by heart a new word without regular repetition. Thus, repeated exposure to the target word is considered of great importance for vocabulary learning. There is a lot to learn about a single word, so the learners need to meet it several times to gain the required information. Besides, learners should decide on the active and passive words to learn. Webb (2007) explains that for each repetition of a word, at least one piece of word knowledge is learned; as such a typical learner should meet a word about 8 to 10 times to obtain full word knowledge. What is worth mentioning here is the intervals between the repetitions. In addition, Nation [15] refers to the conducted studies on memory and reports that "Most forgetting takes
place immediately after the first encounter with new information. That is, the older the piece of knowledge, the more slowly it will be forgotten. This suggests that the first several encounters should be close together, with later encounters spaced farther apart" (p. 24).

The second stage. Focus on meaning and form
It should be noted that learners are given opportunities to focus both on form and meaning. Previously, Nation (2008) introduces the idea of "the four strands" which proposes a balance between form and meaning:

## - Strengthening meaning-focused input <br> - Strengthening meaning-focused output <br> - Strengthening language-focused learning <br> - Strengthening fluency development

In this aspect, Nation [15] states that it is necessary to provide the learners with opportunities to focus on these four strands so that they can produce a word and concentrate on its form and meaning.

The third stage: Engagement
When learners reflect on words and their use, which denotes that they thoughtfully analyze the words, this action is technically referred to as engagement. For example, when learners pay careful attention to a task and have to successfully fulfill it, it means that they learn or do the task more effectively and this is somewhat similar to word learning. Stirling (2003) as cited in Rasouli \& Jafari [12] finds out that "learners who used target words in a writing task remembered them better than those who saw them only in a reading task, partly because they needed to understand a linguistic aspect of the word to complete the task and they were required to search for the information" (p. 4).

The fourth stage: Interaction and negotiation
The most important goal of learning vocabulary is to apply vocabulary in actual communication to complete a certain task. Word learning is a consequence of exposure, attention, time, and manipulation. So, learning vocabulary is the result of approaching, paying attention, taking the time, and using the vocabulary correctly. For example, in communication, the above 4 factors are cultivated and improved in the process of experience. In previous research [1], the author asserts that learners have a basic understanding of vocabulary commonly used in communication and there tends to be no improvement in the words that learners see in texts only.

Overall, during the process of teaching vocabulary in class, teachers should instruct learners to familiarize themselves with and master the four aspects of vocabulary that need to be achieved.

## 5. Conclusion

Vocabulary plays an important role in conveying information in terms of communication. Although there is a section dedicated to vocabulary development in current textbooks, the basic language micro-skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing are practically emphasized compared with other language entities. Vocabulary language entails three elements which are form, meaning, and usage of words, so in the teaching process, teachers should focus on helping learners develop the above elements, as well as determine the type of vocabulary needed to strengthen; that is, the frequently used word and the less used word. Teaching vocabulary is one of the most important ways to develop learners' vocabulary knowledge. However,
teaching vocabulary is not only about teaching words but also has other aspects. A deeper understanding of different aspects of vocabulary allows both teachers and learners to acquire it effectively and practically. In other words, vocabulary is more than just memorizing one or two equivalent words for each new word; instead, it requires a cohesive set of information including, spelling, pronunciation, or context of occurrence. In pedagogical practices, there are many other vocabulary learning strategies so learners should apply the strategy that works best for them.

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