

## THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ASSESSMENTS ON YOUNG ESL LEARNERS IN UAE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper elaborates a performed case-study on the applied assessments and evaluations in three public schools in Al Ain, UAE. The purpose of schools is to seek for innovative ways to educate young ESL learners with a low English proficiency and how to apply English Language Teaching in other major subjects taught in English. In a mere observation, it has been substantiated that an intense focus on the student's academic and cultural values play a major role in acquiring the language by implementing different means of teaching strategies to serve the student's needs.

The study also mentions the dilemmas encountered when teaching and interchangeably assessing or evaluating the students, and what are the procedures and instruments needed to reduce any further declines in the student's learning abilities. Last but not least, accurate, pragmatic applications involve sincere teaching, evaluation and assessment, followed by recovery or developmental plans to elevate and match the student's learning standards as they proceed throughout the academic year, as well as helping the teachers to design their teaching strategies accordingly for more adequate and achievable outcomes.

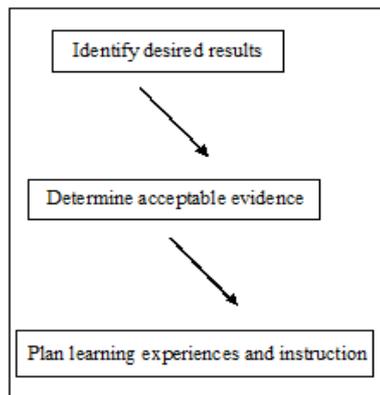
**KEYWORDS:** Evaluation, Assessment, Students, Teachers, Teaching Strategies, UAE, English, Math

### INTRODUCTION

The terms assessment and evaluation are commonly disheveled in many educational institutions with an undermining of the crucial differences between the two. Assessment is a concept of grading after a series of subjective tests, whereas an evaluation is a mental process involves both personal judgment and a demand to shared norms and values. When evaluating a student, the steps undertaken are rather subjective, a personal conclusion from the point of view of the evaluator, and it is favorable conducted by a teacher who is well acquainted with the student's cultural and academic backgrounds. Whereas, an assessment requires grading and it is not significantly conducted by the same subject teacher or evaluator, for it is a compilation of what has been obtained throughout the learning process demonstrating a student's knowledge and performance on paper. Whether assessing or evaluating a student, both terms are based on multi techniques of testing in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of a student in a specific subject area and to come up with adequate resolutions to the interchangeable results by displaying a list of rubrics that best fit a student's learning criteria. In other words, the main key is to amend the teaching process and the evaluative operations in accordance with the general levels of the student's comprehensions, cultural backgrounds and needs before assessing them to ensure the development of their learning growth.

This paper elaborates a performed case-study on assessments in three public schools in Al Ain, UAE. The study endorses on teaching Math to pre-intermediate YESL, furthermore, it mentions the dilemmas encountered when teaching and interchangeably assessing or evaluating the students, and what are the procedures and instruments needed to reduce any further declines in the student's learning abilities.

It is important to point out that the views of assessments and evaluations can change with broad learning outcomes by allowing the students to play major roles in creating their own educational concepts from what they can perceive during the learning processes followed by teacher's planning, which is Wiggins and McTighe (1998) identified the process as the 'backward approach' as illustrated in Figure 1. Last but not least, such an accurate, pragmatic application involves accurate teaching, evaluation and assessment, followed by supporting and developmental plans (for students and teachers) to elevate and match the student's learning standards as they proceed throughout the academic year, as well as helping the teachers to design their teaching strategies accordingly for more achievable outcomes.



**Figure 1: Stages in the Backward Design Process**

Each stage represents the teaching strategies suggested to develop the student's learning abilities. The teacher in stage one sets the objectives of the lessons based on the student's cultural and educational backgrounds to plan a teaching process that best serves their needs. Stage two involves the drawbacks and forthcoming of the evaluations to either design recovery plans or to move on to the next teaching stage. Finally, in stage three, depending on the student's performances in their evaluations, the teacher either design recovery plans for the taught materials or advances to the next teaching stage.

### **The Importance of Evaluation in Prior to Assessments**

The detailed identifications of the two concepts, assessment and evaluation, would give a more profound understanding of why most educational institutions should conduct the evaluations upon students before assessing them:

- Assessment focuses on learning, teaching and outcomes. It provides information for improving learning and teaching. Assessment is an interactive process between students and faculty that informs faculty how well their students are learning what they are teaching. The information is used by faculty to make changes in the learning environment, and is shared with students to assist them in improving their learning and study habits. This information is learner-centered, a course based, frequently anonymous, and not graded.
- Evaluation focuses on grades and may reflect classroom components other than course content and mastery level. These could include discussion, cooperation, attendance, and verbal ability. (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 427)

The quality of any teaching methodology is, directly or indirectly, displayed in the use of assessments and evaluations. Any successfully administered school is aware of the applications of different kinds of assessments in classrooms to scrutinize the student's weaknesses and strengths, and based on the outcomes of these assessments, the teachers or the assessors would categorize the students into different levels to obtain suitable learning environments.

Nevertheless, it is vital to conceive the concept that evaluations are more necessary to occur continuously before assessing the students. In accordance with these evaluations, the teachers decide what types of assessments do best fit the student's levels, furthermore, both, the teaching system and the materials taught are to be familiarized to the students first to conduct proper assessments during an academic year.

The main reason why the students are not in full comprehension with the required materials is due to their English Language and the vocabulary. The best and quickest treatment to assist them in overcoming the main problem is to familiarize them to the language's culture such as exposing them to children's stories because "Children new to a language find in a story context for understanding. It is not word lists that command their attention, but the lives of characters that fill the tales they read or listen to,...in the literary stories they meet. How painful it must be for those children alien to a language to sit day after day without feeling connected to what is happening in the classroom. And yet, through storying, how quickly they enter the activity, making sense of what is happening, building their own versions, listening, telling, retelling; talking about, reflecting upon – responding." (Barton & Booth, 1990, p. 38)

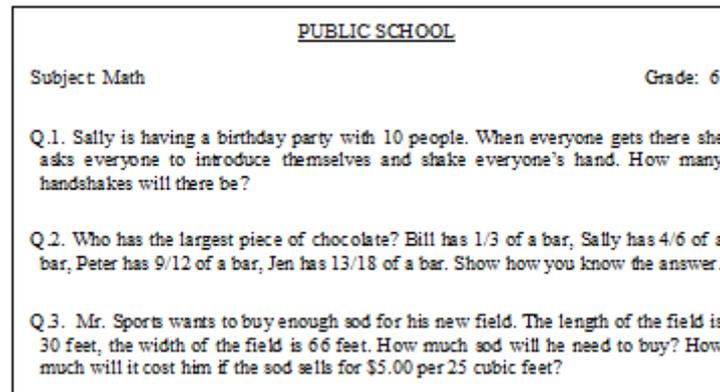
However and unfortunately, there has been an overuse of assessments in the three public schools as if the students are well-familiar with the language, moreover, the test papers are not to be kept by the students after checking them in class as part of the administration's policy. These assessments focus on the quantity rather than the quality of learning and the achievement lies in the progress of some student's familiarity with the system, not on what they have learned out of this new testing system. In conclusion, these assessments do not reflect the genuine learning achievements; for they are not only beyond their learning abilities, but also the students have not been evaluated properly in order to come up with valid assessments. The assessments practiced in these schools are meant for students whose English levels are above average; so many teachers who are working under great pressure in applying the new system, refer to the re-writing of their tests to match their student's understandings.

It is commonly known that a teacher instructs, guides, explains and adapts the curricula provided by the school or an authorized educational organization, but in the cases of these three schools, some teachers are not satisfied with the results obtained from their students after a maximum of five years of practice. The reason behind this rebuff is being a traditional teacher by not adapting the 'synthetic' approach. Wilkins (1976) argues "different parts of the language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up" (p. 2). In other words, a traditional teacher does his/her job accurately, but the students show weedy attention when acquiring a language without gripping its foundations. Also, as the language requirements accumulate, they would feel astray and their performances would not be as expected.

Nevertheless, different types of testing need to be applied such as multiple-choice, fill in the spaces, matching, short and long answered critical tests. In general, these tests are more or less expected in any educational institution, but nowadays the contents and strategies for the teaching and the testing standards are being molded according to the student's needs and levels. To accomplish this challenge, Littlewood (1981) believes that teachers must make good use of the evaluation processes during their teaching by being "facilitators, overseers, classroom managers, consultants, advisors or co-communicators" with their students instead of being plain "instructors" (p.92) and assessors.

The Math exercise on the next page is from the link: <http://math.about.com/od/arithmetic/a/mwp5.htm>, and is designed for students of grade 5. Nevertheless, this sample has been tried out among sixth graders in one of the schools.

It would have been expected from them to be able to grasp some of the question's contents, but due to the lack of their English Language foundations, they are not able to comprehend the question and this applies to other subjects taught in English.



**Figure 2: A Sample Test given to 6<sup>th</sup> Graders**

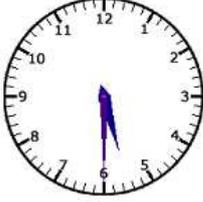
Moreover, it is expected from a student to at least write something on the test paper, especially after a year or more in this learning system. This presumed sample is an outcome from an interview with some teachers and a local headmistress. This is considered as an Explorative Test that students should take before sitting for the end of year exams. This kind of test is designed to test if such a sample would be adequate for the students. Furthermore, the marks are distributed according to certain points such as neatness, clearness, correct method of problem solving and writing the correct answer. The whole procedure is complicated enough for an experienced native English speaking teacher, how would it be then to YESL with no or nil background of the language?

From further observations and interviews with seven students from grades four and five, I assume that the exemplified multiple-choice questions on the next page from [www.mytestbook.com](http://www.mytestbook.com) would be a good start to train the students in math since most of them find this kind of test easy with the account of using basic English, for the point of the test is to know how good or weak a student is in math and what steps should be applied when upgrading from one skill to another.

The following sample test has been given out to a class of twenty students, and the outcomes are pleased, however, I have rephrased the questions to make it easier for the students to answer. In conclusion, after a few years of experimenting with the new system, it is recommended to start using one Math skill in simple language by breaking down the contents into smaller parts and then present them in an elevated manner with the growth of the instructional language. It is useless to experiment the student's learning abilities and assessing them according to a running syllabus. The assessment would be considered invalid. The language must be first learnt in a constructive manner, and then the other subjects will also be taught constructively. Finally, comes the assessment procedure once the students are language educated because

The language wall is erected one linguistic "brick" at a time. The easy grammatical bricks are laid at the bottom of the wall, and they provide a foundation for the more difficult ones. The task for the learner is to get the linguistic bricks in the right order: first the word bricks, and then the sentence bricks. If the bricks are not in the correct order, the wall will collapse under its own ungrammaticality. (Nunan, 1996, p. 65)

Q.1. What time does the clock show?



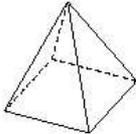
A.	5:30 pm	B.	5:10 pm
C.	5:20 pm	D.	5:40 pm

Q.2. See the table below to answer the following question. Who is the tallest person?

Name	Height
Jim	170 cm
Karl	175 cm
John	167 cm
Steve	173 cm

A.	Jim	B.	John
C.	Karl	D.	Steve

Q.3. How many edges does this shape have?



A.	4	B.	6
C.	8	D.	10

Figure 3: A Second Sample given to 5<sup>th</sup> Graders

Therefore, the administration has not only not considered the student's understanding levels, but also jammed them with continuous tough assessment techniques. Moreover, there has been a lack of evaluation among the students and follow up upon the evaluations to come up with recovery plans and to develop the student's learning skills. Soto (1991) claims, "Graded assessments should be built upon ongoing evaluations as practice" (p. 33) and the assessments should be fairly mended to suit the students academically and emotionally. Acquiring a second language needs time, so it is a waste of time to indulge them with English instructed subjects without solving the foundational problem first.

## THE NEEDS OF GOOD QUALITY ASSESSMENTS

Needless to say, the problems that the teachers see in the word problem sample test are:

- Languages

CLAS Early Childhood Research Institute (2000) and Santos and Reese (1999) point out, "Whether assessments are classroom based or part of a larger assessment system, planning for assessment of young learners should begin with gathering information about the child's and family's history with the language first" Such information should include the language the family primarily speaks at home and in the community (the Arabic Language) and the child's age at first exposure to English. Unfortunately, the assessments conducted are not formed accordingly, the contents of the tests are out

of the student's league and some of these Explorative Tests do not abide by the lessons taught, so the achievements are usually low. For this reason, the schools have applied the dual-language approach in all subjects, but most of the English teachers are native speakers, whereas, other subject teachers are bilingual, so the results in subjects instructed and assessed, as a start, in both languages are better than the results in the English subject.

"To get an accurate picture of progress in the language domain, it is therefore useful to monitor progress in both English and the child's home language. Also, young children perform better when the language of the assessment matches the language of instruction." (Abedi, Leong & Bodrova, 2004; Gonzales, Baurele & Felix-Holt, 1996, pp. 99-100)

Celious and Oyserman (2001) unanimously agree, "Applying such an approach would promote the student's language knowledge and learning skills by demonstrating their efforts to "successfully navigate multiple cultural markers, norms and values in order to communicate effectively" (pp. 161-162).

- **Cultural Background**

The locations of these schools are on the outskirts of a conservative city, Al Ain, where the challenges in education are still booming. In addition, some worrying parents have believed for some time that this system would build up their children's education. Therefore, it is out of question to partially depend on the parents or even on the students to catch up or to re-check any lesson taught or class work at home.

In this case, Soto (1991) argues that teachers "involved in conducting and interpreting such assessments must be aware of how cultural values may affect young children's behavior and performance on assessments" (p. 32). Once a teacher acknowledges the student's way of behaving, dressing, thinking, customs and traditions, Bruns & Corso (2001); Santos & Reese (1991) view that the assessments will be "compatible with the child's interaction and communication style."

It is uncontroversial that education and culture are in an intertwined relationship, therefore, the enriched running educational system urgently needs to be amended to a more simplified system, and all kinds of evaluations and assessments, formal and informal must be written by the subject teachers themselves, which are then circulated to the academic coordinators before loading the students with an abundant amount of exhausting tests and tries that mount up to more emotional and behavior problems among the teachers and the students.

However, the assessments could be implemented after a set of evaluations leveled to the standards of the students and to provide international and local professional training to the teachers to ensure a safe educational environment for better classe's productions.

- **Sufficient Time**

Time is an important factor in any test around the world, and Díaz-Rico (2004); Weber & Longhi-Chirlin (2001) discuss in the academic settings, students who are conversationally weedy in English "need more exposure to and practice with academic language in order to function successfully at school", so how about the rest of the learners?

In the sample test on page 5, there are only three word problems, but there are many concerns of *time* to consider here such as time for thinking, calculating, expressing and answering, especially that this type of evaluation should not

cover more than a class duration, which is 45 minutes long. This type of test has been distributed to eight 6<sup>th</sup> graders and not one student has answered correctly in 45 minutes. Their justifications are their poor English language and that the style of the test requires long training in critical thinking, analyses and problem solving. The techniques of acquiring these miscellaneous skills are totally alienated to them and it would be quite impossible to coordinate their thinking abilities with the time given to answer, moreover, their language skills are average or below average.

### Language Assessment in Math

According to Echevarria and Graves (2003), it is recommended to implement "an academic psychological teaching strategy with direct questions promoted for better clarification" since the student's language skills are not well developed. So "while instructional talk should be engaging, there is a place to use direct questions and then facilitate the elaboration of the student's responses as a means to develop academic language use and motivate them as learners" in order to succeed in Mathematics, Social Studies and other subjects instructed in the English Language." For example, when teaching Math, it is efficient to provide an accurate language teaching method to assess the student's language growth in English before assessing their language proficiency in Math. Hereby, the teacher presents the language with limited vocabulary, speaking and reading with basic terms.

In an assessment, the teacher uses the same methods practiced in classrooms and should vary the question types. These question types also intend to assess the student's language skills:

- **Reading Skill:** To answer multiple choice questions with pictures as exemplified on page 4
- **Vocabulary:** To match vocabulary terms with the correct pictures
 

x	subtract
+	divide
-	add
÷	multiply
- **Speaking:** To describe a concept orally as the concept of addition, angles, height, ones and tens and so on.
- **Writing:** To label a picture of a clock or a shape. Students can also number of items presented in a picture.
- **Listening:** To hear a concept or an item said by the teacher such as 'square', 'tall girl and short boy' and students can draw what they've heard.

The students in this stage are usually challenging to reach and it is recommended only to grade them on basic comprehension. More time may be given for some, depending on an individual's comprehension level, and it is expected that a teacher would translate some terms during an assessment.

The purpose is to educate the students with knowledge in English, and that cannot be achieved without regarding their learning abilities as basic language learners. Furthermore, the teacher does not have to digress from the assigned syllabus, s/he can only modify the teaching techniques by simplifying them in teaching and assessments by planning before conducting a class or assessment.

## REDEFINING EXAM RUBRICS

- **Technical Faults in Exams**

Besides using advanced language in word problems with beginners, the exams printed back-to-back would also add a burden to the student's disabilities in understanding and answering the questions. The core of an exam is to assess the student's knowledge, and not to challenge them. As part of time management, the typed questions must be clear for reading and printed on one side of a paper. By looking at the test samples illustrated, questions 2 and 4 in Figures 4 and 5, are, respectively, parted on the two sides of a paper. So, a student must keep on turning back and forth of the same paper to think, analyze the question and to come up with a solution. Whereas, Figures 6 and 7 show all complete questions in complete on a page. If the second formatting strategy has been applied using simpler assessing questions, the student's performances would be productive in order to develop to the next learning stage rather than just building up different teaching strategies on the same word problem.

PUBLIC SCHOOL	
Subject: Math Grade: Primary Stage	
Q.1. Sally is having a birthday party with 10 people. When everyone gets there she asks everyone to introduce themselves and shake everyone's hand. How many handshakes will there be?	
_____	_____
_____	_____
Q.2. Who has the largest piece of chocolate? Bill has $\frac{1}{3}$ of a bar, Sally has $\frac{4}{6}$ of a bar, Peter has $\frac{9}{12}$ of a bar, Jen has $\frac{13}{18}$ of a bar. Show how you know the answer.	
_____	_____
_____	_____
Q.3. Mr. Sports wants to buy enough sod for his new field. The length of the field is 30 feet, the width of the field is 66 feet. How much sod will he need to buy? How much will it cost him if the sod sells for \$5.00 per 25 cubic feet?	
_____	_____
_____	_____
Q.4. There are 30 students in your class, including 12 boys and 18	

Figure 4: Test A (Front Page)

girls. The teacher asks you to get into groups of 3.
How many groups are there?
_____
_____
_____
a. Add, then multiply
b. Divide, then divide
c. Divide only
d. Subtract only

Figure 5: Test A (Back Page of the Same Paper)

<p>PUBLIC SCHOOL</p> <p>Subject: Math Grade: Primary Stage</p> <p>Q.1. Sally is having a birthday party with 10 people. When everyone gets there she asks everyone to introduce themselves and shake everyone's hand. How many handshakes will there be?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Q.2. Who has the largest piece of chocolate? Bill has <math>\frac{1}{3}</math> of a bar, Sally has <math>\frac{4}{6}</math> of a bar, Peter has <math>\frac{9}{12}</math> of a bar, Jen has <math>\frac{13}{18}</math> of a bar. Show how you know the answer.</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
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Figure 6: Test B (Front Page/ Paper 1)

<p>Q.3. Mr. Sports wants to buy enough sod for his new field. The length of the field is 30 feet, the width of the field is 66 feet. How much sod will he need to buy? How much will it cost him if the sod sells for \$5.00 per 25 cubic feet?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Q.4. There are 30 students in your class, including 12 boys and 18 girls. The teacher asks you to get into groups of 3.</p> <p>How many groups are there?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>a. Add, then multiply b. Divide, then divide c. Divide only d. Subtract only</p>
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Figure 7: Test B (Next Page/ Paper 2)

- **Choosing Assessments**

There should be a strong focus on formative teaching and assessments as well as teacher support to ensure the growth of the student's learning. The summative assessments can be only performed when the students achieve well from the formative assessments. Moreover, it is necessary to support the teachers culturally, psychologically and academically and to hire entitled teachers with experience in running the assessing strategies, or to train new teachers accordingly.

Furthermore, it is vital to select mathematics tasks that are of the student's interests and level of comprehension. Once the students excel in the pre-intermediate stage as explained on pages 10 and 11, the teacher can add to the core of the vocabulary and advance the mathematical problems. Therefore, it is essentially recommended to conduct several formative assessments in prior to summative assessments for grading. For example, when students excel in simple adding and subtracting concepts in different forms and have been assessed, they can be upgraded to the next stage, such as adding and subtracting in simple and presentable word problems using interesting contents to attract the student's attention such as the word problem by Sumara (2009), "Four large butterflies are around. Flying quietly, not making a sound. Look, five more are flying this way. How many butterflies are about to play?" (p. C)

The students do not only learn how to add and to subtract, but also they talk and write Math. Such a word problem from the Harcourt book is accompanied with colorful pictures of nine butterflies flying to demonstrate what they are reading, and the teaching methods gradually advance within an academic year through intensive formative assessments, and monthly summative assessments in coordination with language assessment guidelines discussed earlier in this paper.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of all schools is to educate students by developing their thinking skills and helping them to learn new things. The teaching strategies in these schools are still undergoing the transformation of the testing strategies as supported by Burstein and Winters (1994), "(changing) the question from 'What students know and can do as a result of their educational experiences' Moreover, from studies by Alton-Lee & Nuthall (1992); Breitsprecher (1991); Gamoran, Porter, Smithson & White (1997) it has been observed that "*what* students are taught is more important than *how* they are taught" (pp. 1-2; 325-338).

In order to scrutinize what should be taught to the students, it is essential to gather as much information as possible about student's prior knowledge and experiences to connect it to what materials and strategies they need in order to learn. For instance, in the case of teaching Math, the teachers should first be concerned with what the students possess of knowledge, and then what they have learnt previously. Moreover, they must choose the teaching methodologies that best suit the student's needs as they progress in acquiring the language and some mathematical terms, hereafter, the teacher evaluates the student's learning abilities and design assessments after realizing that the instructional strategies used in teaching and assessing have developed the student's learning abilities. The proof that can be taken into account in verifying the improvement of the teaching and the testing methods is by adapting Carroll's model of school learning (1963):

- If the amount of learning that takes place in a class increases, all things being equal, then one might reasonably infer that instruction has improved.
- If Students increase their time on task within a lesson or a unit of study, all things being equal, then one might reasonably infer that instruction has improved.
- If the time students need to learn the objectives of the lesson or unit is reduced because of teaching interventions (e.g., scaffolding), all things being equal, then one might reasonably infer that instruction has improved.
- If the complexity of the objectives addressed increases across lessons or units, all things being equal, then one might infer that instruction has improved.

- If the activities assigned to students and the assessments given to students are more closely aligned with a lesson's or a unit's objective(s), all things being equal, then one might reasonably infer that instruction has improved. (Carroll, 1963, pp. 723-733)

At the point when students feel that they are ready in using the language, they can simply accept other subjects taught in English, otherwise a complete opposite reaction will be resulted from feeling estranged to the language:

"When a student experiences a learning situation, the brain responds with the release of the chemical noradrenaline. Students, who feel intimidated and rejected because their level of readiness is over-challenged, experience an overproduction of noradrenaline, causing the brain to be over-stimulated. Attention is diverted from learning and focused on self-protection, resulting in misbehavior or withdrawal, with more time being spent on learning to cope rather than learning concepts." (Kapusnick and Hauslein, 2001, p. 156)

Finally, when assessing students, a teacher must use familiar mathematical tools and terms as taught in classrooms, as well as using different question types and assessment strategies such as oral questions, drawing, labeling, presentations and so on to ensure that all students have been assessed fairly. In parallel to this assumption Baratz-Snowden (1993) claims, "if students are to be held accountable for their learning, then schools must be held accountable as well by demonstrating that they provide students with opportunities to learn to meet the standards that have been set" (p.317).

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