The Impact of Feedback on Students' Autonomous ESP Learning Outcomes

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Abstract: The present paper provides the results of the feedback influence on students' autonomous ESP learning. It is aimed to study the impact of feedback on autonomous learning outcomes of first-year students, who are studying a two-year university course of "English for Specific Purposes (ESP)", the significant part of which is dedicated to self-regulated learning. The aim of the course is to improve the students' proficiency of professionally oriented English communication to the level of B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The investigation has proved the importance of teachers' support in students' autonomous ESP learning. The outcomes of those students who received the feedback regularly signify that even being self-sufficient, students strive for teachers' or peer observation and feedback in the educational process. In the article the interdependence between the level of students' autonomous ESP learning competence and students' feedback literacy is presented. The results of the study suggest that students' autonomous ESP learning outcomes are considerably influenced by supportive external written feedback if it is sought, and their feedback literacy level is at least moderate or higher. The higher level of students' feedback literacy is observed among students with more advanced level of autonomous ESP learning competence and who demonstrate better academic achievements in professionally oriented English communication. The coherence of the elaborated levels of Ukrainian students' feedback literacy and the ways of its enhancing can be significant for the educators in other countries.

Keywords: *autonomous ESP learning; feedback; proficiency of professionally oriented English communication; English for Specific Purposes; educational process.*

Introduction

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), to the end of professionally oriented English communication training at university, students should obtain the B2 level of language proficiency and, simultaneously, the competency in autonomous learning which supports lifelong learning of foreign languages.

Many educators praise feedback for promoting students' autonomous learning and influencing their outcomes in the process of professionally oriented English communication. To become autonomous learners, students must regularly monitor it, be aware of their goals, beliefs, drawbacks, and abilities, know their learning needs, and have efficient strategies to approach them. It is presumed that one of the surest ways to gain this propensity is through teachers' feedback.

The common conviction is that feedback is an important part of learners' progress in professionally oriented English communication. Efficient feedback is considered to be bound to make students reflect on their performance and help them proceed with their tasks. It is believed to possess the power to lessen the gap between a student's current proficiency level of professionally oriented English communication and the desired one. But the best learners are those who can self regulate the style of their engagement with the tasks, set and adjust their goals, make use of traditional ways for handling difficult learning problems and even create new ones.

As a part of autonomous learning, feedback is used to check whether students understand the task, to assist the learners when they are tackling the problem, to correct their mistakes, to improve the performance. Or in other words, it's primarily goal is to modify the process of autonomous learning, which may allow a learner to achieve the expected or desired outcomes. It should direct university students to strengthen their effort and promote their autonomous learning for the improvement of students' proficiency in professionally oriented English communication to the level of B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Thus, the importance of theoretical substantiation and empirical confirmation of interdependence between the level of students' autonomous ESP learning competence and their feedback literacy while improving professionally-oriented English communication proficiency is obvious and needs further research.

Literature Review

The different problems of studying discipline "English for Specific Purposes (ESP)" for university students are cleared up in educational and methodological studies of R. Bielousova, I. Budas, N. Dmitrenko, S. Nikolaeva, I. Dolia, N. Moroz, O. Hrydzhuk, T. Dyak, I. Denys, A. Petrova, O. Podzygun, O. Synekop, etc. The following aspects are highlighted there: impact of ESP assessment on students' motivation; soft skills development in ESP learning; problem-based tasks in ESP learning; ESP task-based course book development; interdisciplinary bonds in the process of learning Ukrainian and ESP; motivational aspect of student's language learning style in differentiated instruction of ESP; adapting materials for the ESP online course (Dmitrenko, & Budas, 2018; Bielousova, 2020; Dmitrenko, Petrova, & Podzygun, 2020; Dmitrenko, Dolia, & Nikolaaeva, 2020; Hrydzhuk et al., 2020; Moroz, 2020; Nikolaeva, & Synekop, 2020).

The implementation of autonomous learning while improving professionally-oriented English communication proficiency, namely, autonomous ESP learning of prospective teachers of mathematics, developing learner autonomy via choosing a person's educational pathway and blended learning, is studied by N. Dmitrenko, S. Nikolaeva, L. Melnyk, O. Voloshyna, N.Tuchina, V. Borysov, I. Podhurska, I. Kupina, N. Borysenko, I. Zadorozhna, O. Datskiv, etc (Nikolaeva et al., 2019; Tuchina et al., 2020; (Dmitrenko, Nikolaeva, Melnyk, & Voloshyna, 2020).

Autonomous learning can be defined as a process in which learners establish and pursue aims, check and determine their motivation and understanding regularly (Pintrich & Zucho, 2002, p. 64). Without feedback, the advancement of autonomous learning may be too slow and confusing. However, only a few surveys (Butler & Winnie, 1995; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) have been undertaken concerning the impact of feedback on students' autonomous ESP learning outcomes.

The scholars (Dickinson, 1987; Little, 2007; Nunan, 2003) agree that students may be at different levels of becoming of autonomous learners. They can be divided into non-autonomous, semi-autonomous and autonomous students. At the same time semi-autonomous students have different levels of autonomous abilities, such as motivating oneself, controlling one's feelings, recognizing one's own needs and setting goals, approaching tasks, handling learning problems and choosing strategies to overcome them successfully, reflecting, self-evaluation, structuring knowledge. According to the developed abilities, the levels of student's

autonomy can be the following: a high level (advanced, productive), a moderate level (intermediate, reproductive), a low level (beginning, receptive).

Feedback is treated as any response concerning different aspects of learners' work (Hattie, & Timperley, 2007, p.81), an important source of perceived efficacy (Gökçe, 2014), a process which helps learners decipher and get the benefit from the provided information (Carless, & Boud, 2018). Among various definitions of feedback (Sadler, 1989; Hattie & Yates, 2014), we will relate to that which stresses its possibility to assist students in their move from their current level of knowledge towards the needed ESP learning outcomes. While clarifying the term 'feedback', theoreticians use a number of different descriptors. Some scientists (Burksaitienie, 2012) stress the ambivalent nature of feedback as it is simultaneously the part of teaching and of assessment. Being a part of assessment, feedback is widely applied by educators to give their judgment about learners' progress in the language acquisition. Evaluative feedback is a teacher's, peer, or self reflection on performance which presents the outcomes or the results. This feedback is also known as outcome feedback or knowledge of results (Butler & Winnie, 1995, p. 250). It does not provide any supplementary help about the task, it only reports on its completion. Though, according to Butler, outcome feedback gives learners little advice on improvement or organizing their own self-study, it is the most frequent type of comments which students receive after the task completion.

Cognitive feedback is often juxtaposed with outcome feedback as it suggests handling the situation and recommends some ways of dealing with difficulties (Butler & Winnie, 1995; Linn & Miller, 2005). It couples instructions and achievements. Balzer et al. speak about three types of cognitive feedback such as task validity, cognitive validity, and functional validity feedback. The first one aims to focus the attention on the link between task instructions and its accomplishment (Balzer et al., 1989). The cognitive validity feedback emphasizes the degree to which the learner realizes that the task cues impact the task outcomes while the functional validity feedback connects students' evaluation of their outcomes with their performance (Butler & Winnie, 1995).

Being a part of a teaching, feedback instructs the learner about possible ways to solve some problems, reach a certain desired goal. It inspires to fulfill the challenging task and to proceed with mastering the language despite having some difficulties. This feedback suggests cooperation and students' response. Hattie and Yates (2014, p. 45) see the responsiveness to feedback as a major element of "behavioural adaptation".

Several studies (Schommer, 1993; Balzer et al., 1989) aimed to demonstrate the relationship between autonomous ESP learning outcomes and the epistemological views. Autonomous ESP learning outcomes are affected by students' beliefs through which learners judge the feedback. Butler and Winnie (1995), Chinn and Brewer (1993), and others represent the role of students' beliefs in managing feedback and signal that these beliefs may transform the intended purpose and idea of the feedback.

Researchers also differentiate internal and external feedback and speak about their significant role in autonomous learning and learning outcomes. Internal feedback is invoked by students' monitoring of themselves and links their past outcomes with the expected. It triggers conditional knowledge which provides reasonable ground for another action (Butler & Winnie, 1995). Hattie and Timperley name six features of feedback about self-regulation among which there is an aptitude for internal feedback, desire to find feedback information and spend one's time and energy while managing it, self-evaluation skills, feeling sure that the received feedback is reliable, the knowledge of success criteria, and the level of skills necessary to search for the assistance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Students get external feedback from numerous sources. It can be spontaneous or conscious and intended. Some findings suggest that for students to be satisfied with the external feedback, it should be legible, written, timely, informative, and reassuring (Robinson et al., 2013). Researchers report that some students are dissatisfied with hand-written feedback as they find it difficult to read.

To employ feedback in order to make the gap between the desired outcomes and the present results smaller, it is important to stress that not only a teacher must deploy a number of techniques, strategies, and methods but a student ought to get involved and respond to the teacher's efforts. Together with other scientists (Carless & Boud, 2018; Robinson et al., 2013; Sutton, 2012) we want to highlight the importance of students' role in using teachers' remarks. As Carless and Boud (2018) stress, the basic obstacle is mainly low student feedback literacy. They offer four important factors of student feedback literacy among which they name understanding the nature of feedback; forming opinions; controlling emotions; and responding (Carless & Boud, 2018). To make a point of benefiting from feedback, students should understand its value and their involvement in the process.

Thus, with different aspects of feedback and its implementation in the ESP learning having already been highlighted, the idea of the close relationship between external feedback and students' autonomous ESP learning outcomes needs further support. We strive to display the possibility

of student feedback literacy to impact self-regulated learners' ESP learning outcomes.

Research Question

The study aims to consider how the level of autonomous learning corresponds to students' feedback literacy, to define the feedback types which self-regulated learners find the most efficient for their autonomous learning, to elaborate on some ways student feedback literacy can be developed.

Research Method

At the pre-stage of realisation of students' autonomous ESP learning in the educational process of the university, information about the current students' autonomous learning competence was collected, analysed (Dmitrenko, Nikolaeva, Melnyk, & Voloshyna, 2020) and based on the questionnaire "English Students' Autonomy Competence" (Xu, 2009).

Simultaneously, we assessed the level of student feedback literacy, as one of the main components of autonomous learning. The study method is based on the survey of "Main features of student feedback literacy", which are distinguished by Carless and Boud (Carless & Boud, 2018). The scholars cleared out four main groups of features: understanding the nature of feedback; forming opinions; controlling emotions; and responding. The level of student feedback literacy is measured by the questionnaire which was designed on the base of distinguished features.

Then we compared the obtained results of students' levels of feedback literacy and autonomous ESP learning competence in order to find interdependence between these two categories.

At the same time, the control test, taken from Preliminary English Test (Cambridge Assessment English) to determine the level of academic achievement in professionally oriented English communication, was conducted in order to study the interrelation between the level of autonomous learning and the level of academic achievement. The total maximum practice test score is 170 (170-160 – a very high level, 159-153 – a high level, 152-140 – a moderate level, 139-120 – a low level, 119-102 – a very low level).

Also, students were asked to answer some open-ended questions about the feedback process to elucidate the feedback types they found the most helpful and reflect on students' satisfaction with the feedback. Among these clarifying queries there were: "How does feedback help you improve

your ESP learning outcomes?", "How well can you understand the teacher's comments and instructions?", "What forms would you prefer to receive the feedback in?", "How do you feel when you get the teacher's feedback about your assignment?", "What does the teacher's feedback suggest doing?".

The collected data is the basis for the development of an experimental training program for the implementation of autonomous ESP learning.

Participants

In order to reveal the relationship between levels of student feedback literacy and autonomous ESP learning competence we have carried out a survey among the students who are doing the course of ESP as the second language at Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University while majoring in Mathematics and Informatics. The research was previously approved by ethics committee of the university. The questionnaires concerning students' autonomous ESP learning competence and their feedback literacy were completed on condition of anonymity in 2019 by 50 respondents. The questionnaires were held in the classroom under teachers' supervision. The respondents spent about 20 minutes answering the questions. The participants knew about the purpose and the structures of the investigation, gave their informed consent for participating in the study and were assured that their names would not be used in the study result reports.

Instruments

Based on the characteristics of the student feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 5) we composed a four-section questionnaire of 12 items. In the instruction, the students were asked to estimate the degree of their agreement with the items, assessing them from one to five points (a five-point Likert scale): 5 – means completely true (strongly positive); 4 – means usually true (positive); 3 – means sometimes true (uncertain/neutral); 2 – means not usually true (negative); 1 – means never true (strongly negative). The score range of the questionnaire is the following: 5.00-4.51 means that the level of student feedback literacy is very high, 4.50-3.51 – high, 3.50-2.51 – moderate, 2.50-1.51 – low, 1.50-1.00 – very low. In our study the reliability coefficient (Cronbach Alpha) value for a four-section questionnaire was calculated to estimate the internal consistency. It was found to be quite high: 0.84.

Results

The most significant mean value among the twelve items is that the students agree that feedback is delivered to them in various ways and from multiple sources (M=3.16). The lowest mean value is that students initiate a responsible attitude to the desire of permanent improvement employing feedback (M=2.34). The data on the categories do not vary substantially. The mean scores, standard deviation and the results of a four-section questionnaire which was completed by 50 students are presented in table 1.

As it is clear from table 1, most values of standard deviation (SD) lie in the range 0.62-0.88. It signifies that the data points tend to be close to the mean of the set, i.e. the answers are more or less homogeneous.

Table 1. Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of a four-section questionnaire "Student Feedback Literacy"

Description	M	S	Interpretation
Section 1: Appreciating Feedback			
I understand and appreciate the role of feedback over my learning outcomes	3.14	0.86	moderate
I recognise that feedback can be delivered in different ways and from various sources	3.16	0.88	moderate
I use technology to access, store and revisit feedback	2.94	0.84	moderate
Average	*3.08*	*0.86*	*moderate*
Section2: Forming opinions			
I develop capacities to make sound academic judgments about their own work and the work of others	2.76	0.82	moderate
I participate productively in peer feedback processes	2.64	0.76	moderate
I try to improve my self-examination skills to be able to appraise my learning correctly	2.52	0.72	moderate
Average	*2.64*	*0.77*	*moderate*
Section 3: Controlling emotions			
I maintain emotional equilibrium and avoid defensiveness when my tutor and/or my peers express any critical ideas concerning my studying	2.63	0.75	moderate
I have rational approach to peers or teachers' recommendations and I am open for any discussion	2.58	0.74	moderate

I try to assume a responsible attitude to permanent improvement employing feedback	2.34	0.62	low
Average	*2.52*	*0.70*	*moderate*
Section 4: Tackling Problems			
I recognize my obligation to tackle feedback challenge	2.67	0.78	moderate
I review feedback information for continuous improvement	2.56	0.73	moderate
I learn how to react to feedback appropriately	2.41	0.66	low
Average	*2.55*	*0.72*	*moderate*

Table 2 juxtaposes the average results of the level of autonomous ESP learning competence and the level of student feedback literacy.

Table 2. Components and Levels of student feedback literacy and autonomous ESP learning competence

Components of student feedback literacy	M SD	level of student feedback literacy	Components of autonomous ESP learning competence	M SD	level of autonomous ESP learning competence
Appreciating Feedback	3.08 0.86	moderate	Beliefs in autonomous learning	2.85 0.88	moderate
Making Judgments	2.64 0.77	moderate	Determining language learning objectives	2.94 0.79	moderate
Managing Affect	2.52 0.70	moderate	Implementing appropriate language learning strategies	2.75 0.69	moderate
Taking Action	2.55 0.72	moderate	Monitoring the process of autonomous learning	2.79 0.71	moderate
			Evaluating the efficacy of autonomous language learning	0.80 0.74	moderate
Average	*2.70 0.76*	*moderate*	*Average*	*2.85 0.76*	*moderate*

Table 2 shows that both levels are approximately equal. As demonstrated in table 2, the mean scores of all categories were at the below part of the moderate level. The data on the categories do not vary substantially. The analysis of individual students' results showed that students with higher level of autonomous ESP learning competence demonstrate higher high level of student feedback literacy as well.

The control English test (PET) results showed that the students of 4 subgroups had achieved a moderate level (M=143.75, SD=5.23) of ESP communicative skills. The best results were obtained by students with a high level of autonomous ESP learning competence and the lowest points in professionally oriented English communication were got by students with a low level of autonomous ESP learning competence.

To ascertain whether the obtained results are obvious statistically and how variables (level of autonomous ESP learning competence and scores of a four-section questionnaire of the student feedback literacy) are correlated, we applied Pearson's correlation coefficient: $r = 0.8934$. The positive correlation shows a strong relationship between the two variables. The p-value is 0.397 that signifies a noticeable correlation between variables. The results suggest that a high level of student feedback literacy could be helpful in predicting a high level of autonomous ESP learning competence.

Discussions

We ascribe to the idea that cultivating students' feedback literacy will guide them in the maze of the information about their own work, redeem their learning, improve proficiency in professionally oriented English communication, and their ESP outcomes which will definitely impact their capacity to study independently. Four elements of student feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018) have been revisited: understanding feedback proceedings; equipping students with necessary skills for forming opinions about their learning outcomes; overcoming emotional reactions; and pursuing suggested feedback strategy. These elements enable students to shape their responses to feedback, and further the investigation into feedback practice.

The students' average moderate level of feedback literacy demonstrates that they hardly appreciate their own role in the feedback during the autonomous ESP learning; occasionally develop their capacities in making sound judgment, from time to time manage affect in positive way, and only sometimes use appropriate strategies for acting on feedback. The responses to the open-ended questions also demonstrated students' low level

of awareness and understanding of subject and procedural aspects of feedback.

The process of appreciating feedback is observed as students' awareness of feedback value and understanding of student's active role in it. Feedback literacy requires the knowledge of the academic language without which learners experience difficulties in interpreting teachers' ideas (Sutton, 2012), and different forms of feedback presentation (Carless & Boud, 2018). Still, even though students value feedback, they report that they may fail to react to it because teachers' comments are difficult to comprehend which suggests that they do not understand the lexical set and instructions to be engaged with the feedback process, and often this is the main reason why feedback is inefficient. Therefore, we consider educating undergraduates to follow teachers' advice and training the feedback decoding skills as key elements of developing student feedback literacy.

The scientists (Tai et al., 2017) treat evaluating judgement as competence to determine whether the quality of work is satisfying and meets the requirements. As Boud, Lawson, and Thompson mentioned, for improving students' judgment it is needed to extend their opportunities for self-evaluation to develop accuracy in dealing with the standards of their own performance (Boud, Lawson, & Thompson 2013; 2015). Our findings also coincide with those of other researchers (Carless & Boud, 2018; Hattie & Yates, 2014; Robinson et al., 2013) which stress the need to encourage students to take control over their autonomous studying and develop self-regulating habits, among which self-monitoring and feedback possess an essential place.

For using feedback, students should be taught how to react to feedback appropriately and what to do with teachers' comments. If learners do not view themselves as active participants of the process or feel any responsibility for undergoing changes, then they will scarcely respond to the feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Learners' beliefs significantly affect students' internal feedback, their respond to external feedback. After internal speed monitoring of their progress, low-level autonomous learners, who believe in getting fast outcomes, may often feel dissatisfied with it, and instead of making greater efforts tend to alter their goals, or even abandon or backtrack on the task.

The data collected allowed us to examine the interaction between students' autonomous ESP learning competence and their feedback literacy. Our results prove Butler and Winne's (1995, p. 261) suggestion that self-regulated learners often fail to monitor their learning outcomes decently. If students work autonomously, they frequently have some problems with

monitoring their learning. It happens because students misunderstand the task and therefore set unsuitable goals that prevent them from using appropriate strategies to complete the task successfully. High level autonomous learners realize their responsibility for the outcomes, know how to decode teachers' messages, and actively respond to the feedback. They are able to monitor their process of learning; evaluate their outcomes with the desired.

Our survey revealed that high-level autonomous learners develop adequate internal feedback more frequently. They are more experienced at self-assessment and therefore their internal feedback is often reasonable. The more effective learners are, the better they are at reviewing their goals and performance. We found that high-level autonomous learners value external feedback, feel more comfortable when appealing to teachers for different kinds of assistance, though they do it only occasionally, when they really need extra help. They also pointed to the feeling of reassurance which they found especially necessary while working autonomously.

Internal feedback of low-level self-regulated learners can hardly be considered to be constructive as it depends on their skills of self-monitoring which are often inadequate. They are less efficient at cultivating autonomous learning strategies and self monitoring and thus ought to rely more on external advice. Surprisingly, a considerable part of these students often feels reluctant and apprehensive to turn to the teacher for advice. Some of them appear to underestimate the significant effect of feedback on their performance, and therefore they usually neglect teachers' comments. Consequently, students should be taught how to monitor their autonomous learning outcomes in order to develop internal feedback. At the same time, they ought to recognize the possibilities of feedback to improve their ESP learning outcomes, request it wherever they feel its necessity, and speak freely about the problems with the feedback they experience. It could be done if teachers try to develop a friendly rapport with their students, give them opportunities to reflect on their goals, performance, and outcomes.

The respectful and inspirational rapport between learners and their teacher triggers an emotional response (Esterhazy & Damsa, 2017). If a teacher succeeds in creating a trusting atmosphere for the autonomous ESP learning, it is more possible for students to share their doubts or misunderstanding (Carless, 2013). Students' positive feelings, emotions and attitude to the obtained feedback help to adopt new perspectives and facilitate progress in autonomous ESP learning. Being asked "How do you feel when you get the teacher's feedback about your assignment?" students shared different emotional aspects. Though some of them felt rather

satisfied and motivated with the teachers' comments, a significant part of undergraduates mentioned apprehensive and upset feelings while getting their work back. A few students wrote that they were disappointed with the feedback because they had expected to get higher grades. Only a limited number of learners desired to have additional explanation about their mistakes and wanted to know how they could improve the grades. These results highlight the importance of the positive psychological relationship between teachers and students. Providing feedback, teachers should remember that for some learners it is a form of reassurance that they are proceeding with their language mastering. So, for feedback to be useful and motivating, teachers have to be careful about their students' emotions and frame their comments as approvingly as possible. We consider further study of students' emotional response to feedback as necessary to conduct, as it can demotivate self-regulated students and discourage them to seek any teachers' assistance.

The data collected allowed us to define the feedback types which self-regulated learners consider the most efficient for their autonomous learning. The answers demonstrated that students value timely written teachers' comments which provide practical and precise information about what can be done to improve the outcomes. Some students also mentioned that they would like more explicit teachers' oral advice because the conversation gives them the possibility to ask questions if they have any. These findings support other researchers' investigation (Butler & Winne, 1995; Robinson et al., 2013) about the most satisfying feedback types. We believe that new technologies such as private comments in google classes, or podcasts can assist teachers in addressing the problem of providing timely comprehensive feedback and clarifying the moments in which the students are still doubtful. These new informative methods can also help to deal with the problem of student feedback literacy as this creates opportunities for students to ask the teacher personally and directly, and so better comprehend the meaning of his suggestions.

As the size of the sample is rather small, the survey results cannot be generalized as the sample (n=50) selected cannot exemplify the entire population at large. So, this investigation should be regarded as probing that attempts to offer some trends for further research.

Conclusions

The study revealed that the development of student feedback literacy is meaningful for the improvement of students' autonomous ESP learning.

Students are often dissatisfied with teachers' feedback because they prefer it to be timely and written. They appreciate teachers' oral advice because then teachers can clarify what is expected to be done. As we found, the level of students' autonomy in learning is closely connected with their capacities and skills to react to teachers' feedback. Though students with a high level of autonomy are able to cope with tasks independently and achieve their goals with little teachers' assistance, they are more likely to turn to teachers for external feedback as they appreciate their help, know what to do with teachers' comments, avoid the feeling of offense and understand the necessity of reaction and their personal responsibility for responding to the received feedback. So, the higher a level of student autonomy is the better they can manage teachers' feedback. Simultaneously, a high level of autonomous ESP learning competence is observed in students with a high level of proficiency in professionally oriented English communication. Educating students about the main features of feedback and polishing their skills of responding to it prove to be important tasks of developing student feedback literacy. Mastering a responsible attitude to feedback and obtaining major skills of responding to it will guide learners in the future. Thus, studying the basic skills of feedback literacy and ways of their development seem to be necessary to pay more attention to in future research.

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