

Use of First Language in the Classroom: Non-native EFL Teachers' Beliefs in Teaching English to Adult Learners in Bilingual Context

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the perspectives of non-native English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers across mother tongue and gender, and their male and female adult students, regarding the use of Arabic in the EFL classrooms at the university level in Saudi Arabia. The study specifically seeks to investigate the perspectives of non-native Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers as they, working in the native Arab setting, often resort to Arabic (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Machaal, 2012). However, there are glaring research gaps about non-native EFL teachers' and adult learners' beliefs on the use of first language (L1) in the classroom. For this purpose, the study used quantitative research design, and administered two questionnaires, one for the teachers and the other for the students. Students' questionnaire complemented that of the teachers. Forty teachers and sixty students were selected based on stratified random sampling. The findings of the study revealed that all camps of teachers, Arab, non-Arab, male, female, and students were in favour of judicious bilingual approach. The study finds statistically significant difference between the beliefs of Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers about the use of L1. The findings suggest that Arab EFL teachers' use of Arabic is extensive, while non-Arab EFL teachers' use of Arabic is well-timed. The study suggested practical implications for the improvement of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Saudi Arabia by recommending planned, occasional and judicious use of L1 while teaching EFL adult learners.

Keywords: adult learners, bilingual approach, L1 in classroom, non-native EFL teachers

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Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) in Saudi Arabia has a unique history which presents an ever growing ELT scenario. ELT has been introduced in the Saudi Arabian educational system since 1928 (Al-Seghayer, 2011) to furnish the students with one of the living languages, in addition to their first language (L1), to acquire knowledge and serve humanity (Al-Hajailan, 2003). Ever since, English has been growing at a fast pace in the educational institutions (Machaal, 2012), and has now become a compulsory subject at school level (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013) and the medium of instruction in most of the universities in Saudi Arabia (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). This growth in English language teaching generated demands for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, resulting in the appointment of a large number of teachers from several countries by the Saudi ministry of education (Javid, 2014).

EFL teachers can be classified according to their teaching approaches and limitations. In the Saudi Arabian educational system at the university level, there are three kinds of EFL teachers: native English speaking EFL teachers, native Arab EFL teachers and EFL teachers from India and Pakistan (Khan, 2011). According to Khan, native English speaking EFL teachers cannot use bilingual strategies to teach English, the native Arab EFL teachers are ineffective because of their traditional Grammar Translation Method (GTM), and the third group of teachers is not aware of the realities of the Saudi Arabian context.

The non-native EFL teachers are the special focus of the present study. This category of EFL teachers have been working in the Saudi Arabian context since English was inducted into its educational system. Non-native EFL teachers working in the native Arab setting often resort to Arabic (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Machaal, 2012) which needs a research probe to investigate the frequency and effectiveness of L1-use in the classroom. However, little attention has been paid to the issue of using L1 in the context of the Saudi EFL classroom (Al-Nofaie, 2010), especially at the upper secondary school level (Aljohani, 2011), and thus, few studies have been conducted regarding the beliefs of teachers in the use of Arabic in EFL classrooms (Assalahi, 2013). Hence, there is not enough research on the role of Arabic in EFL classes within native Arab setting (Althobaiti, 2017) and no study is available to inform the magnitude of L1-use by the non-native EFL teachers.

There are glaring research gaps about EFL teachers' and adult learners' beliefs on the use of L1 in the classroom. Certain studies have attempted to investigate the beliefs of teachers and students about the use of Arabic (e.g., Al-Nofaie, 2010; Al-Shammari, 2011; Machaal, 2012); however, no comprehensive study is available regarding the use of Arabic in the Saudi Arabian EFL context, involving both teachers and students across gender and mother tongue. The perspectives of Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers and their students about the use of L1 (Arabic) in the Saudi Arabian context are yet to be investigated. Thus, this study attempts to fill this gap

and holistically investigate the phenomenon. It attempts to investigate the perspectives of native Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers across gender and their mother tongue about the use of Arabic in EFL classrooms at the university level. Moreover, the study also takes into consideration students' perspective about their teachers' use of Arabic in EFL classrooms. Investigating Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers' and their students' perspectives about the use of Arabic in EFL teaching and learning will enhance our understanding of the use of Arabic in the Saudi EFL context, and hence improve the standard of ELT in the Saudi Arabian setting.

Thus, the study attempts to investigate the following research questions:

1. What role do the Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers see in making use of L1 (Arabic) in EFL classrooms at the university level in Saudi Arabia?
2. What role do the male and female EFL teachers see in making use of L1 (Arabic) in EFL classrooms at the university level in Saudi Arabia?
3. What is the perspective of Saudi Arabian EFL adult learners about their teachers' use of Arabic in EFL classrooms?

Literature Review

One of the major debates that have dominated the field of second language acquisition (SLA) is the use of the first language in teaching and learning the target language (de la Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Machaal, 2012; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Tang, 2002). This controversial issue has resulted in several opposing and supporting arguments (Kavari, 2014). Macaro (2009) has categorized these various points of view about L1-use into virtual position, maximal position and the optimal position. Macaro maintains that virtual position focuses on the exclusive use of the target language and sees no pedagogical value in the use of the first language; while maximal position contends that target language can be learned only through the use of the target language, although few structured references to L1 are permitted. On the contrary, the optimal position supports judicious use of L1.

There have been many arguments against L1-use in the EFL classroom. The basic argument against L1-use rests on the assumption that using L1 may prevent learners from learning the new language (Kavari, 2014). Opponents of L1-use advocate virtual use of the target language by arguing that classroom is the only place for most learners where they are exposed to second language (L2) (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). The proponents of monolingual approach argue that L2-learning process is similar to L1-learning process and thus, attribute success in the target language to L2 input alone (de la Campa & Nassaji, 2009). Therefore, if teachers use L1, they deprive learners of the opportunity to receive input in the target language (Krashen, 1981).

However, the findings of a great amount of research conducted to date examining the effects of using L1 highlight the facilitative effect of L1 in learning L2 (Mohebbi, 2012). These studies report that the advantages of using L1 can outweigh its disadvantages, if it is applied systematically and judiciously (Al-Nofaie, 2010). Moreover, supporters of bilingual approach have forwarded cognitive and psychological reasons of L1-use. Their views rest on the assumption that the use of L1 removes psychological barriers between the brains of the learners and the language input provided to them, and thus, helps learners get rid of anxiety in learning L2 (Kavari, 2014).

The review of the literature reveals strong arguments in favour of L1-use and suggests the usefulness of the use of the first language as a cognitive and mediating tool in teaching and learning the target language (Machaal, 2012). For example, Swain and Lapkin (2000) acknowledge the use of L1 as an important cognitive tool in carrying out tasks that are cognitively and linguistically complex. Similarly, Eldridge (1996) reports that there is no empirical evidence to support the notion that restricting mother tongue use would necessarily improve learning efficiency. He argues that code-switching in the target language classroom is highly purposeful which is related to pedagogical goals.

The use of L1 in teaching and learning the target language is gaining importance (Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Teachers and learners consider using L1 as a productive mediating tool which facilitates and negotiates the teaching and learning process (Storch & Aldosari, 2010). Researchers (e.g., Auerbach, 1993; McCann, 2005; Cameron, 2001) have listed several purposeful uses of L1 in the target language classroom, including maintaining discipline in the classroom, giving feedback, explaining errors, presenting grammatical rules, to name a few.

Research has also investigated students' reasons for switching to L1 in the target language classroom. For example, in Kharma and Hajjaj's (1989) study, majority of the Arab students were in favour of using L1, especially when they could not express their ideas in L2. A similar position is taken by Cameron (2001), who mentions that learners prefer using L1 when seeking help from peers and teachers. Similarly, in a study by Swain and Lapkin (2000), learners' purposes for using L1 were for interpersonal interaction and focused attention on grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, Nation (2003) also investigated learners' intention of using L1, and found that learners tended to apply L1 either because they were not proficient, or were unmotivated to communicate in the target language.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 40 native Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers. The teachers were symmetrically distributed into male and female teachers, thus, there were 10 native Arab male EFL teachers, 10 native Arab female EFL teachers, 10 non-Arab male EFL teachers and 10 non-Arab

female EFL teachers. The non-Arab EFL teachers, who participated in this study, could communicate with their students in Arabic. Moreover, 60 of their students also participated in the study, out of the 60 students, 30 were male and 30 were female students. The students' sample was taken from under graduate students. Teachers' and students' sample was based on stratified random sampling.

Table 1. *The demographic data of respondent teachers*

Respondents	No
Male Arab	10
Female Arab	10
Male non-Arab	10
Female non-Arab	10
Total	40

Research Instruments and Procedures

This study attempted to approach the research questions using quantitative paradigm. Thus, the study used two five-point Likert scale questionnaires, one for the teachers and the other for the students. The questionnaires were developed on the basis of existing recent literature about the use of L1 in teaching and learning the target language. The questionnaire items were designed focusing on teaching the target language grammar which is a major teachable content for EFL teachers and learners. Both questionnaires consisted of two sections. Section A consisted of demographic part and section B consisted of ten statements about the use of L1. Students' questionnaire served to complement teachers' questionnaire to triangulate the study mainly with a view to capturing a comprehensive picture. Both questionnaires were administered simultaneously.

The questionnaires focused on the ineffectiveness of English-only approach and the usefulness of restricted and purposeful use of L1 (Arabic) in English grammar classes in an EFL context. Since Arabic is the language used by the Saudi students for all of their affairs in all areas of life, they tend to find everything easy and relaxing that is presented to them in Arabic. Since grammar teaching/learning is a technical and difficult job, students may be relaxed and supported by the restricted use of Arabic during the class. The focus of the present study is on using Arabic for the following purposes:

- Contrastive analysis of the structures of English and Arabic to make students focus on the points of differences and be conscious about these differences while using the English grammar.
- Relaxing students so that they may be able to concentrate better while learning English grammar.

- Saving time by translating necessary explanations of difficult English grammatical items in Arabic.
- Maintaining discipline in class so that the students may focus on learning grammar.
- Giving instructions so that the students may understand better what they are supposed to do while solving an exercise.
- Developing better and closer relationship between the teacher and the students so that the students build the much-desired trust on their teachers and discuss their confusions about specific problems they face in learning English grammar.
- Getting feedback from students; this may not only give confidence to the students to participate in the feedback discussions/sessions but also make them more confident to talk about their problem areas in English grammar.
- Making language input more comprehensible for the students so that they understand every bit of knowledge and information conveyed to them in the class.

The validity of the questionnaires was checked by a group of three PhDs in applied linguistics. The internal consistency reliability of the teacher questionnaire was found to be .741, while that of students' questionnaire .751. Teachers' and students' data were entered into SPSS ver. 21. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to answer the research questions. In order to find differences in the beliefs of Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers across mother tongue and gender, t-tests were applied. Similarly, the means of male and female students' responses, and teachers' and students' responses were compared to know the differences in their perspectives regarding the use of L1 (Arabic) in EFL class.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Inferentially, independent samples t-tests were calculated comparing the means scores of EFL teachers across gender and mother tongue. The result of t-test reveals no statistically significant difference in the beliefs of EFL teachers across gender. However, the result of t-test reveals statistically significant difference in the beliefs of EFL teachers across mother tongue, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of independent samples t-tests across gender and mother tongue

	t	df	sig (2-tailed)	mean difference
Gender	-.064	38	.949	-.010
Mother tongue	6.488	38	.000	.700

In order to find the magnitude of difference in the beliefs of teachers about the use of L1 across mother tongue, *eta squared* was calculated following Pallant's (2011) formula. According to this formula, the magnitude of difference is $(6.488)^2 / (6.488)^2 + 20 + 20 - 2 = 0.25$. According to

Pallant, the usual interpretation of *eta squared* is that .01 = small effect, .06 moderate effect, and .14 = large effect, which means that the magnitude of difference in the beliefs of EFL teachers about the use of L1 (Arabic) across mother tongue in the Saudi Arabian context is very large. The result indicates that Arab EFL teachers believe in the extensive use of Arabic, while non-Arab EFL teachers believe in the limited use of Arabic while teaching English to adult learners.

Descriptively, the means and standard deviations of the teachers were analyzed for the ten variables across mother tongue and gender, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Comparative analysis of EFL teachers' beliefs across mother tongue and gender*

	Arab		Non-Arab		Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Ineffectiveness of English-only approach in EFL classroom.	4.05	.51	3.80	.61	3.85	.48	4.00	.64
Limited use of Arabic in EFL class not minimizing exposure to English.	4.20	.61	4.20	.69	4.20	.61	4.20	.69
Use of Arabic to explain structural differences.	3.90	.78	3.65	.74	3.65	.74	3.90	.78
Use of Arabic to get students relaxed.	3.85	.87	4.10	.96	3.90	.91	4.05	.94
Use of Arabic to save time.	3.95	.68	3.85	.58	3.85	.74	3.90	.51
Use of Arabic for giving instructions in EFL class.	4.10	.71	4.05	.68	4.05	.68	4.10	.71
Use of Arabic to discipline the class.	4.35	.58	2.10	.64	3.30	1.3	4	3.15
Use of Arabic to build better relationship between teachers and students.	4.15	.58	1.75	.55	2.90	1.3	7	3.00
Use of Arabic to get feedback from students.	3.85	.74	2.15	.58	3.25	1.1	6	2.75
Limited use of Arabic to make language input more comprehensible for the students.	4.40	.50	4.15	.48	4.30	.47	4.25	.55

The results in Table 3 reveal that there is no difference in the beliefs of male and female EFL teachers about the use of L1 (Arabic) in teaching English grammar in the Saudi Arabian setting. However, there is a mild difference in their perspectives about using Arabic for getting feedback from students. More male teachers than female teachers believe in using Arabic for feedback purposes. The findings of the study about using L1 for giving instructions and for maintaining discipline in the classrooms are consistent with the findings by Assalahi (2013), where

teachers maintained that they used L1 (Arabic) for such purposes because of the low proficiency level of the students in English. Moreover, the result of the study about the use of Arabic to make language input more comprehensible for the students is consistent with the findings of Al-Shammari (2011) and Al-Nofaie (2010) where teachers used Arabic to clarify difficult items and to enhance comprehension for the weak students so that they did not lag behind their peers. However, the findings of the study regarding the use of Arabic for giving instructions and for explaining L1-L2 structural differences are inconsistent with the findings of Al-Shammari (2011) and Al-Nofaie (2010), where teachers avoided using Arabic for such purposes in order to provide students with sufficient opportunities to practice English. Furthermore, the findings of the study about the productivity of the limited use of Arabic and using Arabic for saving time are consistent with the findings of Al-Shammari (2011) where teachers believed that the use of Arabic could save them precious time and that the limited use of L1 was more efficient for achieving rapid understanding of the target language.

The beliefs of the respondent teachers in the present study echo Miles' (2004) advocacy for bilingual approach. Miles discredits monolingual approach for three obvious reasons, that is, it is not practical; native teachers are not necessarily the best teachers, and exposure alone to the target language is not sufficient for learning it. This perception is similar to the stance taken by Atkinson (1987) in favour of bilingual approach and the proposed 'judicious use theory' maintaining that use of L1 is a vital source for the teachers and the students. Along similar lines, Machaal (2012) argues that English-only approach could be useful in ESL contexts; however, it is not useful in EFL contexts, like Saudi Arabia, where 'Arabic is a key learning strategy [for EFL students] that has been ingrained in their learning culture and experience' (p. 215). Machaal develops the claim that 'local problems require local solutions, and opting for what works in the classroom could prove more rewarding for the students as it would maximize their learning outcomes' (p. 216).

Table 3 also reveals that Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers have almost similar beliefs about the use of L1 for seven out of the ten variables. However, for the three variables, that is, using L1 for discipline purposes, for building better relationship between teachers and students, and for getting feedback from students, the two camps have sharp differences in their beliefs. The findings of these three variables reveal that overwhelming majority of Arab EFL teachers favour the use of Arabic for these purposes. However, the non-Arab EFL teachers overwhelmingly disapprove the use of Arabic for these purposes. The findings display that Arab EFL teachers' beliefs are more in line with GTM, as Celce-Murcia (1991) claims that the use of target language is little in this method and teaching is mostly carried on in students' native language. Thus, there is more emphasis on translation. This seems to be one of the reasons that Saudi students' proficiency level

is very low in English (Grami, 2010). These results confirm the evidence that the situation of ELT in Saudi Arabian universities is beyond satisfaction (Shah et al., 2013).

Table 4. *Comparative analysis of male and female students' beliefs about their Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers' use of L1*

	Male Students				Female Students			
	Arab		Non-Arab		Arab		Non-Arab	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Ineffectiveness of English-only approach in EFL classroom.	4.46	.51	4.33	.48	4.26	.45	4.40	.50
Limited use of Arabic in EFL class not minimizing exposure to English.	4.46	.51	4.53	.51	4.53	.51	4.46	.51
Use of Arabic to explain structural differences.	4.33	.48	4.00	.65	4.13	.35	3.73	.59
Use of Arabic to get students relaxed.	3.93	.88	4.06	1.03	4.13	.91	4.26	.88
Use of Arabic to save time.	4.20	.56	4.06	.45	3.93	.70	4.06	.70
Use of Arabic for giving instructions in EFL class.	4.13	.74	4.00	.53	3.93	.88	4.00	.53
Use of Arabic to discipline the class.	2.26	1.03	2.06	.45	2.00	.75	2.00	.53
Use of Arabic to build better relationship between teachers and students.	2.20	.86	1.73	.59	2.00	.92	1.73	.59
Use of Arabic to get feedback from students.	3.93	.70	3.80	.56	3.40	.98	3.86	.51
Limited use of Arabic to make language input more comprehensible for the students.	4.40	.50	4.06	.59	4.26	.45	4.06	.59

The results in Table 4 demonstrate that there is no difference in the beliefs of male and female students about their Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers' use of L1, and hence, male and female teachers. The results demonstrate that male and female students agree with their Arab and non-Arab EFL teachers' use of Arabic for the given purposes, except two. Both groups of students do not agree with their teachers that the use of Arabic by teachers to discipline the class makes them more focused. Similarly, they disagree with their teachers that the use of Arabic helps build better relationship between students and teachers.

Moreover, the results obtained from the questionnaire survey, comparing the perspectives of teachers and students, reflect a mixed picture. Table 5 shows that there are many instances where

the calculated t-value is greater than the tabulated t-value, that is, there are differences between students and teachers in their opinion about the effectiveness of the use of Arabic in the English grammar classes.

Table 5. *Comparative analysis of teachers' and students' beliefs about the use of L1*

	Teachers		Students		Calculate d t-value	Tabulate d t-value	D f
	M	SD	M	SD			
Ineffectiveness of English-only approach in EFL classroom.	3.92	.57	4.36	.48	4.14	1.98	9 8
Limited use of Arabic in EFL class not minimizing exposure to English.	4.20	.64	4.50	.50	2.47	1.98	9 8
Use of Arabic to explain structural differences.	3.77	.76	4.05	.56	2.06	1.98	9 8
Use of Arabic to get students relaxed.	3.97	.91	4.26	.76	1.37	1.98	9 8
Use of Arabic to save time.	3.90	.63	4.06	.60	1.31	1.98	9 8
Use of Arabic for giving instructions in EFL class.	4.07	.69	4.01	.67	.41	1.98	9 8
Use of Arabic to discipline the class.	3.22	1.29	3.88	.64	3.38	1.98	9 8
Use of Arabic to build better relationship between teachers and students.	2.95	1.33	3.86	.56	4.71	1.98	9 8
Use of Arabic to get feedback from students.	3.00	1.08	3.88	.45	5.61	1.98	9 8
Limited use of Arabic to make language input more comprehensible for the students.	4.27	.50	4.20	.54	.70	1.98	9 8

The shaded cells in Table 5 reflect a difference in the means of the responses of the two groups, students and teachers. There are six variables for which there are differences in the means of the responses of the groups: the ineffectiveness of English only approach in EFL classroom, limited use of Arabic in EFL class not minimizing exposure to English, use of Arabic to explain structural differences, use of Arabic to discipline the class, use of Arabic to build better relationship between teachers and students, and use of Arabic to get feedback from students. A closer look at the means of the responses for these variables reflects that overall teachers and students consider English-only approach not very effective, and find a limited and purposeful use of Arabic in the English grammar classes beneficial, especially in the explanation of structural rules, and for

maintaining discipline in the class. However, students, like their teachers, are unsure about the usefulness of Arabic for creating better relationships between teachers and students as well as for getting feedback from students.

The findings of the study about students favoring L1-use are in line with Schweers' (1999) findings, where students supported using L1 in EFL classes. They believed that use of L1 could lead to better comprehension of L2 which made the students relaxed. Hence, the students are encouraged to learn more English. Similarly, the results of the two variables, use of Arabic does not minimize exposure to English and use of Arabic saves time, are consistent with the findings by Tang (2002), where students argued that limited use of L1 did not reduce their exposure to English, and also, it was less time-consuming. Table 5 shows that a great majority of both teachers and students favour using Arabic for explaining structural differences; however, this finding is inconsistent with the findings of Al-Nofaie (2010) where teachers avoided using Arabic for contrastive analysis, while students favoured learning English by contrasting it with Arabic. The results of the study about the use of L1 for giving instructions, relaxation, and comprehension are consistent with the findings by Burden (2001), where both teachers and students believed in the importance of L1 for these purposes.

Conclusion

The study sought to fill the research gap by providing a snapshot of the current status of non-native EFL teachers' beliefs across mother tongue and gender, as well as their students' perspective, about the use of L1 (Arabic) in the Saudi Arabian context. The findings of the study displayed that the use of Arabic by both teachers and students in EFL classrooms was an unavoidable phenomenon. An overwhelming majority of all groups of teachers and students agreed on the productivity of limited, judicious and systematic use of Arabic for several purposes in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia. The results of the study are in line with that of Al-Nofaie (2010), Al-Shammari (2011), Kim Anh (2010) and Tang (2002) where teachers and students responded positively towards the use of L1, maintaining that judicious and balanced use of L1 by teachers and students could be helpful in the EFL teaching and learning process. However, the findings of the study also suggested that Arab speaking EFL teachers did not make the best use of Arabic for some purposes.

The present study contributes quantitatively to the existing body of knowledge about a major debate in SLA whether or not to use students' mother tongue in teaching and learning the target language. The findings of the study favour a well-planned use of the mother tongue. However, the study argues that extensive use of the mother tongue is counter-productive to both teaching and learning the target language.

The study presents certain implications for the stakeholders. Teachers will be better informed about the validity of the judicious and limited use of Arabic, and the detrimental effect of extensive use of Arabic. Harmony between teachers and students are recommended so that teachers use Arabic for the required purposes, and not for every purpose. Judicious bilingual approach may enhance the motivational level of EFL students, specifically students with low proficiency level in English. The use of L1 needs to be supplemented at the earlier stages of EFL teaching and learning process, and later on, gradually decrease its amount. Bilingual approach may be applied as a pedagogical tool to facilitate the teaching and learning process, and thus, make the L2 learning process easy and meaningful. Moreover, continuous classroom observations are suggested to avoid the overuse of Arabic.

The study was conducted with certain limitations. The study used only belief questionnaires to know the perspectives of teachers and students. However, the addition of classroom observations and interviews could better illuminate the findings about the stated beliefs and actual classroom practices of EFL teachers and students regarding the use of L1 (Arabic). Further studies are suggested about the use of L1 with the administration of mixed methods approach to capture a multi-dimensional picture of the phenomenon. Similarly, an experimental study is also recommended to investigate the impact of the use of Arabic on Saudi EFL students' learning outcomes.

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