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EFFECTS OF USING BLOGS ON WRITING PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL, KUANTAN, MALAYSIA

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By

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The present study aims at answering two research questions. The first research question is if there is a significant improvement in the writing performance of secondary school students in using weblogs in the English classroom. Students' writing performance is evaluated based on five components from the Jacob's ESL Profile (1981). These components include content, organization, sentence construction, voice as well as mechanics and proofreading. In addition, it also aims at answering the second research question which is to identify secondary school students' perception of using weblogs in their English classroom to help them write better.

The participants in this study comprised of 17 form four students from a secondary school in Kuantan, Pahang. Data was collected by comparing the scores for their first three blog entries and their last three blog entries. The evaluation was done by two external raters using the ESL Profile. A Pearson's product-moment correlation was performed to determine the coefficient of inter-rater reliability on the first three blog entries and the last three blog entries. The result showed a positively strong and significant relationship. A mean mastery score is provided for each component of the evaluation (content, organization, sentence construction, voice and mechanics and proofreading). A t-test was then conducted to see if there was a significant improvement in the scores of the students' writing performance from the first three blog entries to the last three blog entries.

To test the second research question, a survey method was utilized. Students were provided with a questionnaire adapted from a study conducted by Aljumah (2012). Cronbach's alpha analysis was conducted and the score was 0.897 which showed high reliability.

The data analysis showed a significant improvement in all aspects of writing performance except for the aspect on voice. The mean mastery score for content on the first three blog entries (M=2.29) was significantly different from the mean mastery score of the last three blog entries (M=3.00). The mean mastery score for the first three blog entries on organization was M=2.71 which is significantly different from the mean mastery score of the last three blog entries for organization (M=3.15). The mean mastery score for the first three blog entries for sentence construction was M=2.68 and the mean mastery score for the last three blog entries was M=3.06. However, there was no significant difference in the mean mastery score for the first three blog entries on voice (M=2.68) compared to the mean mastery score for the last three blog entries (M=2.91). A significant difference was found on the final aspect of writing performance on proofreading and mechanics. The mean mastery score for the first three blog entries was M=2.09 and the last three blog entries M=2.41.

On students' perception of using weblogs in writing classrooms, the secondary school students revealed that they had enjoyed using weblogs as it helped them improve their content and sentence construction. They preferred blogging to the traditional method of writing on paper as they are able to add pictures to make their articles more interesting. However, students did mention disadvantages of using the weblogs and many of them agreed that technical problems hampered their writing process.

As a conclusion, the study found that using weblogs improved students' writing performance in terms of content, organization, sentence construction and mechanics and proofreading. There was no significant improvement in terms of students' voice from the data analysis. On the second research question, students were very positive about using weblogs in their English writing classroom. Weblogs pose an informal writing environment that made students feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts and ideas.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Sarjana Sains

KESAN PENGGUNAAN BLOG KE ATAS PRESTASI PENULISAN PELAJAR-PELAJAR SEKOLAH MENENGAH, KUANTAN, MALAYSIA

Oleh

SRI SHANGARI SUBRAMANIAM

Januari 2015

Pengerusi: Nooreen Noordin, PhD
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Penyelidikan ini dilaksanakan bagi menyelesaikan dua persoalan kajian. Persoalan yang pertama adalah untuk menilai keberkesanan penggunaan blog untuk melonjakkan prestasi penulisan pelajar dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Hasil penulisan blog pelajar telah disemak berteraskan kaedah Jacob's ESL Profil (1981). Lima komponen dalam penilaian telah diukur iaitu dari aspek isi kandungan, struktur esei, binaan ayat, laras bahasa dan pengolahan suntingan serta semakan. Objektif kedua kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti persepsi pelajar terhadap penggunaan blog dalam proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran penulisan Bahasa Inggeris di bilik darjah.

Responden atau peserta kajian ini terdiri daripada 17 orang pelajar tingkatan empat daripada sebuah sekolah menengah di Kuantan, Pahang. Data yang dibandingkan ialah daripada penulisan tiga blog awal dan tiga blog akhir setiap pelajar. Hasil penulisan pelajar dinilai oleh dua orang penilai luar dengan menggunakan "Jacob's ESL Profile" (1981). Korelasi Pearson telah digunakan untuk menentukan kebolehpercayaan hasil penilaian di antara kedua-dua penilai. Kedua-dua penilai menunjukkan perolehan skor yang selaras. Skor purata penguasaan disediakan bagi setiap elemen yang diuji iaitu komponen isi kandungan, struktur esei, pembinaan ayat, laras bahasa dan suntingan serta semakan. Ujian 'T' juga telah dijalankan untuk mengukur jika terdapat peningkatan yang ketara dalam skor min penguasaan antara tiga blog entri awal dan tiga blog entri akhir setiap pelajar.

Untuk mengukur objektif kedua, kaedah kajian soal selidik telah diaplikasi. Pelajar telah diberikan soalan kaji selidik berasaskan kaedah kajian yang telah dijalankan oleh Aljumah (2012). Analisis Alfa Cronbach telah dijalankan dan skor yang diperoleh ialah 0.897 yakni skor menunjukkan kadar kesahan yang tinggi.

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Analisis data yang diperoleh menunjukkan peningkatan yang ketara dalam semua aspek prestasi penulisan kecuali aspek laras bahasa. Skor purata penguasaan untuk komponen isi kandungan daripada tiga blog pertama pelajar (M=2.29) jauh berbeza berbanding skor purata penguasaan bagi tiga blog terakhir iaitu M=3.00. Manakala skor purata penguasaan bagi tiga blog awal komponen pengolahan ialah M=2.71 yang jauh berbeza dengan skor purata tiga blog penulisan terakhir iaitu M=3.15. Seterusnya untuk komponen binaan ayat, skor purata penguasaan daripada penulisan tiga blog terawal ialah M=2.68 serta M=3.06 ialah catatan skor purata penguasaan bagi penulisan tiga blog terakhir dalam komponen binaan ayat ini. Namun begitu, kajian mendapati tiada perbezaan yang ketara untuk skor purata penguasaan bagi komponen laras bahasa iaitu M=2.68 berbanding skor purata penguasaan dalam tiga blog entri yang akhir iaitu M= 2.91. Satu perbezaan yang ketara telah dikenal pasti dalam komponen terakhir iaitu komponen suntingan dan semakan. Skor purata penguasaan yang direkod pada tiga blog pertama ialah M=2.09 dan tiga blog yang terakhir ialah M=2.41.

Secara umumnya, dapatlah dirumuskan bahawa penggunaan blog telah membantu pelajar-pelajar sekolah menengah meningkatkan kemahiran penulisan Bahasa Inggeris mereka. Komponen isi kandungan dan binaan ayat telah menunjukkan peningkatan ketara. Para pelajar lebih teruja untuk menulis di dalam blog berbanding menulis menggunakan kaedah konvensional kerana mereka boleh menambah elemen-eleman lain dalam penulisan mereka seperti ilustrasi dan sebagainya. Walau bagaimanapun, pelajar bersetuju bahawa masalah teknikal seperti kadar capaian Internet dan komputer yang rosak semasa penggunaan blog menjadikan proses penulisan mereka tergendala.

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 26 January 2015 to conduct the final examination of Sri Shangari a/p Subramaniam on her thesis entitled "Effects of Using Blogs on Writing Performance of Students in a Secondary School, Kuantan, Malaysia" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Science.

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This tesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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Declaration by graduate student

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This is to confirm that:

- the research conducted and the writing of this thesis was under our supervision;
- supervision responsibilities as stated in the Universiti Putra Malaysia (Graduate Studies) Rules 2003 (Revision 2012-2013) are adhered to.

Signature:	
Name of Chairman of Supervisory Committee:	NOOREEN NOORDIN

Signature:	
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the background of the study, the statement of the problem, research objectives, the research questions, the significance of the study, definitions of terms as well as the limitations of the study.

Writing is a skill taught during the early years of learning and is brought along throughout one's life. Writing in a second language is a skill acquired during school years as it is found to be important in helping children develop. A good writer is a writer who is able to communicate his/her thoughts in paper which is comprehensible to the readers.

Using weblogs as writing tools have emerged to be a popular selection among the teachers and educators in universities and schools. Teachers acknowledge the importance of good writers in helping them learn and develop maturely through second language learning.

In Malaysia, English is considered a second language and taught in schools based on the syllabus provided by the Ministry of Education. Great importance is given to the English language as competence in the language is considered to be important in helping Malaysia achieve its goal as a developed nation. Writing in English among students is a common problem in Malaysia as Malaysians find it difficult to grasp this particular skill.

1.1 Background of the Study

The English Language has existed in the Malaysian Curriculum since the British colonization. The British had introduced the English Language as a medium of

instruction in the primary and secondary schools in Malaysia (Foo & Richards, 2004). Although English was only a second language, post-independence, the Third Malaysian Plan (1976-1980) recognized the role of English in international trade and commerce as well as the language used in Science and Technology (Foo & Richards, 2004). Thus, the Malaysian Curriculum Development Center (CDC) formulated the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) syllabus which was at par with the rest of the English Language Teaching world that was moving towards the communicative approach. The aim of teaching English in schools is to provide a strong foundation for students to enable them to function appropriately in their daily lives as well as the business and commercial sectors when they leave school. Communicating in English has become essential in our country especially with the outsourcing of manpower in call centres for foreign companies.

In the national syllabus, the four skills required in language learning are emphasized. Students are taught from primary year one on how to speak, listen, read and write in English. However, this research focuses specifically on the writing skill. The researcher observes that students have difficulties in expressing themselves through writing (Nepomuceno, 2011;Majid, Zainol Abidin, & Cheong, 2012). This is not surprising, as writing is a demanding task. It involves a high degree of self-regulation, cognitive effort and attentional control (Lienemann, Graham, Reid, & Janssen, 2006). However difficult the writing task, it is essential that students learn and master this skill as it is considered an important and essential skill in one's daily life. This is obvious in a study conducted on the Use of English by Malaysian Business Executives in the Commercial Sector in which the writing skill is deemed the second most important skill in the commercial sector (Goh & Swee Heng, 1996).

According to the National Writing Commission (2003), writing is a complex intellectual activity that requires students to broaden their perspectives, think analytically and make valid and accurate distinctions. Writing, helps students to understand what they already know as writing is part of learning a language. In its suggestion on improving the writing standards for students, The National Writing Commission (2003) suggests the use of technology in English Language classrooms.

It is hoped that using unconventional methods in teaching writing may encourage the students to perform better in writing and master the skill. With recent developments in information and communications technology or ICT, many students are now exposed to the use of technology in their daily lives. One such method that can and has been used in the teaching of writing classes is the use of web-logs or commonly known as weblogs. Weblogs provide students with various options and possibilities compared to the traditional writing method of using pen and paper. Various studies conducted on the use of weblogs in classrooms has shown a positive impact on the students' writing as students' claim they enjoy the untraditional method of writing (Nepomuceno, 2011; Simsek, 2009; Sun, 2010).

In his article Campbell (2003), defines weblogs as an online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her own words, ideas, thoughts through software that enables one to easily do so. A weblog is interactional as

its content is open to public. The readers can respond to any entry with a comment and even threaded discussion can take place depending on the software chosen (Campbell, 2003). Weblogs also promote media literacy as a blogger has to read numerous articles before giving an account on his/her topic of discussion (Blood, 2002).

Weblogs pose an informal environment whereby the student may find it easier to relate to his thoughts. In her pilot study, Rochford (2003) found that learning styles affect one's academic performance in the learning of English as a second language. One such learning style is the environmental stimulus which stresses that some students prefer a room with either a formal or informal design. That being said, weblogs also encourages participation as readers are encouraged by the posts they read and start producing their own writing (Blood, 2002).

Weblogs provide students with the opportunity to add pictures and videos to their writing which stimulates the mind to be more creative in their production. This is something which is not applicable in the traditional method in which students write their assignments in exercise books. Blogging is also considered to be interactive as others can comment on the posts found on weblogs and this offers room for discussion and collaboration.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The teaching of the writing skill is one of the most difficult tasks in the teaching of a second language. Writing involves the intelligent use of a variety of mental operations and skills to satisfy the writer's goals and meet the needs of the reader (Lienemann, Graham, Reid, & Janssen, 2006).   Second language students, especially secondary school students lack the right skills in producing a good piece of writing that is legible to the general reader.

In a study conducted by Tan (2008) on writing needs and writing support in Universiti Putra Malaysia, she found that among the common problems found in students' writing were lack of writing strategies, direct translation from Malay to English, inability to elaborate (poor vocabulary) and lack of cohesion. This problem stems from the primary and secondary education.

Writing strategies used by students tend to differ. One of the earliest study conducted by Arndt (1987) found that the strategies used by the Chinese students in her study are planning, global planning, rehearsing, repeating, re-reading, questioning, revising and editing. However, Maarof & Murat (2013) in a study conducted on writing strategies of secondary school students in Selangor, Malaysia, found that the overall use of writing strategies used by the students were only at the medium level. Most of the students start with the introduction as the initial strategy instead of planning or brainstorming on their essay. Another commonly used strategy is "Reread what is written to get idea to continue" and this does not help them in producing a good essay (Maarof & Murat, 2013, p.50).

Bahasa Melayu being the first language for many of the students especially in the school where the research was conducted, the interference of the language is apparent in the students' written product. Translation, also known as

interference of the L1 prevents students from learning the correct use of the second language in this case, the English language (Ellis, 2003). Students tend to fall back on their first language especially when they are unable to coin an idea in the second language. The idea is then translated into the second language and thus direct translation from the first language occurs. This is when the grammatical structure of the second language is not taken into consideration and students make mistakes in their sentence structure.

This is supported by a study conducted by Maros, Tan, & Salehuddin (2007) on Form 1 students from six schools in Malaysia. They found that despite going through six years of primary education, students found it difficult to learn English grammar. In their study, they found that omission and wrong forms used are the two most common types of errors and a large number of errors identified are due to the interference of the Malay grammar (Maros, Tan, & Salehuddin, 2007).

Another common problem found among students is the lack of cohesion of the writing task. A study conducted by Saddler & Graham (2007) found that knowledge serves as a medium for writing development. They found that skilled writers had better knowledge of the writing topic, intended audience, genre, task as well as linguistic elements. Unskilled writers lack the knowledge in these areas and this affects their writing task.

Lack of knowledge may also be due to the lack of reading habit among most Malaysian students which affects their ability to write. Students are unable to produce an essay because they do not have the necessary vocabulary to elaborate on their ideas or the content of the essay. According to Krashen's Reading hypothesis, comprehensible input in the form of reading also stimulates language acquisition (Krashen, 1991). This in turn helps the writer in producing a better script when they are encouraged to write freely (Krashen, 1991).

Weblogs being an encouraging tool for readers to post their comment and pen down their thoughts will be able to help students overcome some of these writing problems. Students who lack knowledge on a certain topic will read up beforehand and exposure to other well written sentences will enable them to have a stronger grammar foundation and help them organize their essays better. Thus, this study on using weblogs to improve students' writing skills needs to be conducted to help students improve their writing skills as the students' writing will be evaluated on five aspects of writing according to the ESL Profile by Jacobs (1981).

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the writing performance of Form 4 students by comparing their last three blog entries to their first three blog entries. This method was used in a study by Sun (2010) where she investigated if writing extensively on a blog affects the writing performance of the students. This study also aims to investigate the students' perception on the use of weblogs in helping them write. This question complies with the survey method. The questionnaire is adapted from the study conducted by Aljumah (2012).

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1.4 Research Questions

This study seeks to investigate two research questions which are:
i. To what extent does writing weblogs affect the ESL secondary school students' writing performance?
ii. What are the students' perceptions of using blog?

1.5 Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the study are as below.
1) H_O: There is no significant difference in the mean mastery score on content for the first three entries and the last three entries.

2) H_O : There is no significant difference in the mean mastery score on organization for the first three entries and the last three entries.

3) H_O : There is no significant difference in the mean mastery score on sentence construction for the first three entries and the last three entries.

4) H_O : There is no significant difference in the mean mastery score on voice for the first three and the last three entries.

5) H_O : There is no significant difference in the mean mastery score on mechanics and proofreading for the first three and the last three entries.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study aims to gather and analyse relevant data which will provide necessary information, so that a description on the writing performance of Form 4 school students can be obtained. This study looks into using weblogs in writing English as a second language among the school students. It also investigates the students' perceptions on blogging as a writing tool. The significance of this study lies on the data collection regarding the writing performance of the students when using weblogs and their perceptions on using weblogs as a learning tool in second language writing.

Writing is an integral aspect in the learning of the second language. The reason second language ability is important is to help students achieve greater heights when they leave the school. Thus, it is essential that students master this skill to help them when they step into the working world. It is also important to ensure that students are able to produce legible writing products that will help promote their abilities.

Blogging as mentioned is a tool to help invoke the students' interest in writing as it provides an informal environment for the students and does not bog them down into writing something uninteresting. Weblogs feature the characteristics of shared interests and of shared support, which are rarely possible in traditional

classrooms (Sun, 2010). It is an alternative platform for the students to express their thoughts and opinions and at the same time receive feedback from their peers. Students will be able to work on their piece of work and put in much time and effort in producing a good piece of writing as their blog will be viewed by everyone. Although, blogging is used in this research

Weblogs also help students in the sense that they can spend time writing whenever they feel like it and not like when they are constraint in classrooms. They will have ample time to structure their thoughts and make them publicly available (Sun, 2010).

The data collected from this study will be a stepping stone for teachers to use creative instructional methods in classrooms to help students improve their writing skills. If blogging is found to have a positive impact on the students' writing skills, teachers will be more tolerant of the idea of using ICT in teaching and learning classrooms and they will have a valid reason for going through the hassle of booking the ICT lab for academic purposes. As most studies on using weblogs in Malaysia are mostly conducted at the university level, this study will help teachers in secondary schools to have a clearer picture on the writing performance of the students when using weblogs in the classrooms as well as how the students perceive weblogs as a learning tool in the classrooms. The data obtained will help teachers decide if using weblogs in classrooms is a healthy method in encouraging secondary school students to write.

The data collected from the study will also ensure if the students not only enjoy their writing lessons but also help them improve and make them understand the importance of writing. Students tend to write only to satisfy their teachers but they fail to understand that writing is an integral part of a lifelong process of learning. By exposing them to other written materials on the web, students will gain an insight to the importance of writing and will make an attempt to write not only to please the teacher but to share their knowledge and ideas to the rest of the world.

This study will also help curriculum planners such as the Ministry of Education to ensure that schools have the basic necessities required for students to enjoy the teaching learning activities in school. If it is proven that blogging can help improve students writing skills, curriculum planners need to think seriously about making sure students are able to access the internet for self-learning purposes. It is hoped that this study will provide them with an insight on the importance of ICT to the development of the writing skill among the students.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted among 17 Form Four students in a secondary school in Kuantan, Pahang. The students were conveniently selected for the study. As the number of students is of a smaller percentage, the study may not reflect upon the overall secondary school students in Malaysia.

The participants in the study are from a boarding school and many do not have internet access at homes. They are only allowed to return home two weeks once

and sometimes 3 weeks once. Thus, the blogging activities had to take place during class periods and this too posed a problem as the Form 4 students were reshuffled to different classes after their first test. The blogging group had to meet up in the afternoons after school hours in between co-curriculum activities. Due to time constraint and internet connection problems at school, the number of blog entries were only limited to seven entries per student. Thus the data collected may not be significant for a larger population of students.

Another significant limitation of the study is the topics provided to the students. Even though, weblogs were used to create an informal environment, students had to be given topics related to their Form 4 syllabus as requested by the principal of the school involved in the research. This restricted students in writing more creative free essays which would have been more interesting and provided them with a platform to write on topics that interested them personally.

1.8 Definition of Terms

The following definitions were used in this study.
 Weblogs are defined as online journals in which the students can update and express their thoughts and publishing them on the internet with a click of a button (Campbell, 2003). A weblog is also considered interactive as the students can respond to any given entry with a comment.

Weblogs can also easily be defined as "online diaries or logs of thoughts, reflections: a space for individuals to write what they choose with an option for the readers to comment on what they have read" (Eastment, 2005, p.358).

Weblogs are also helpful in writing classrooms as they allow students to write on a wide range of topics, at their own pace, for various audiences and free from teachers' corrections and judgment (Sun, 2010).

 In this study, weblogs refer to the blogger website at www.doodleinenglish.weblogspot.com. The weblog was given the title Paradise Lost as it is believed to be a loss to the nation if students are unable to express their thoughts and ideas in writing. The blog is a class blog where the students from the same class are writers that contribute to the blog. The teacher is the sole administrator of the blog to ensure the safety of the students involved.

Writing Performance in this study can be defined as the evaluation of the written product of the student based on holistic scores that include five component skills as in the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, 1981).

The profile which is widely used for holistic representation of a students' written task contains five component skills focusing on content (30 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points) and mechanics (5 points) (Astika, 1993).

Writing performance of a student is influenced by the writing strategies such as planning, translating and revising their written task as well as the approaches

used by the students in their compositions (Majid, Zainol Abidin, & Cheong, 2012).

In this study, the writing performance of the students was tested by comparing their first three blog entries and their last three blog entries. The first three blog entries were when they were beginning the process of writing using weblogs. When all the tasks provided were completed, the students' writing performance towards the end of the blogging process was measured to see if there was a significant difference in the writing performance. The students were given topics related to their Form Four syllabus and the topics chosen represent the chapters found in their text book. Thus, students were able relate to the topics and the teacher followed the syllabus designed by the Ministry of Education for the Form Four students.

Perceptions of blogging is the perceived usefulness in using weblogs in writing tasks. Students perceived learning can be taken as an adequate alternative to standardized tests as the students can estimate accurately on the amount they have learnt in class (Halic, Lee, Paulus, & Spence, 2010).

In this study, students' perception was measured on several aspects. They were questioned on their perception towards using weblogs in learning to write, their perception towards using weblogs for learning grammar and vocabulary, weblogs as a useful tool for writing, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of using weblogs in learning English. A questionnaire developed for the study by Simsek (2009) was adapted for this study as the scope tested was similar to the study conducted on primary school students.

1.9 Summary

Writing is a vital part of the learning process especially in developing a second language. However, it is not an easy task for the teachers to cultivate this skill among the students. Thus, teachers have to come up with creative methods to help students write. Writing instructions are important in helping the students identify their writing task and give them a general idea of what is expected of them. One writing instruction that has become popular among the teachers now is the use of weblogs (Eastment, 2005). Weblogs can be used to get students to reflect on their learning, for creative writing tasks or just to turn them on to the process of writing (Eastment, 2005).

This study aims to investigate the significance of using weblogs in writing classes as well as students' perceptions in using weblogs as a tool to help them write better.

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