

Effective Synchronous Virtual Classroom Techniques for EFL Teaching: A Study Based on Instructors' Perspective in Qassim University

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Abstract

The current Covid-19 pandemic situation changed the education system bringing forth the importance of virtual classrooms across the globe. The use of virtual classrooms to support and complement language teaching and learning process in several educational institutions has become a prime concern. This paper focuses on some of the synchronous techniques and strategies used by the instructors of Qassim University, English department that augment the teaching and learning process in a felicitous virtual atmosphere. This could be done in the light of EFL teachers' viewpoints regarding the promotion of a synchronous virtual classroom aided with collaborative and learner-centered teaching. An electronic survey was administered asking instructors to describe the methods and approaches used regarding teaching in the virtual environment. The responses from the participants most frequently cited making their virtual classrooms easier and a more comfortable place for their students to learn. Pre-test and posttest were also administered based on synchronous techniques. The findings indicated significant influence of virtual techniques on learning and teaching. However, instructors seemed to prefer some virtual tools over the others. Less common use of webcams and video-conferencing can be attributed to cultural values, and to the settings and protocols of the current situation of virtual home classrooms. Private chat, though, it was unlikely used by instructors, it proved to be more appealing collaborate tool to interact with shy introverted and low level learners, and to tackle online class troubles. Some virtual class constraints have been reported by some researchers, but they were less common. These findings provide meaningful data for research and instructors to enrich EFL classrooms and to promote technology-enhanced learning in the educational institutions.

Keywords: Synchronous, Virtual Classrooms, Collaborative, Learner-centered teaching, Strategies

Introduction

The extensive use of the Internet in teaching and learning assists the progress of communication among learners, teachers, and sharing resources for knowledge (Cakiroglu, 2014; Al-Qahtani, 2019; Christopher, 2020). Distance learning settings have begun to be used all over the world equipped with various types of technologies such as videoconferencing, videotape, satellite broadcast, TV broadcast, Internet virtual classes, and so on. (Sarica & Cavus, 2008). "Virtual classrooms are one of the main components of synchronous settings that share certain similarities with real classrooms" (Cakiroglu, 2014: 1). A [virtual classroom](#) is an online learning environment that allows teachers and students to communicate, interact, collaborate, and explain ideas. In many ways, an online classroom simply mirrors the physical classroom.

In a physical classroom, students can see and hear the teacher, see and hear the other students, have a good view of the whiteboard and their own learning materials. In a virtual classroom, a student can see & hear the teacher via the video/audio stream. The advanced development of Information and Communication Technology has provided excellent opportunities for teachers and students to experience English language teaching and learning activities beyond their traditional classrooms; that is, through online learning.

Virtual classroom is defined as an “electronic classroom” that can be expandable in time, space, and content” (Beatty, 2010: 171). It is called virtual because “it can relax the spatial constraints (users at different locations no matter how far about) and the temporal constraints (users interacting overtime via asynchronous communications)” (Beatty, 2010: 171). The term ‘online learning’ (also known as ‘e-learning’) is used to explain the use of the Internet as a technological tool that enables users to interact with the content, with other users; and to get support during the process of learning so that they can acquire knowledge and construct personal meaning (Ally, 2008).

Literature Review

Literature on the use of technology in EFL classrooms has suggested a number of benefits from using online learning modes, such as the Web, wikis, blogs and other online learning platforms, on the development of students’ language skills (Alshumaimeri, 2011; Jung, Kudo, & Choi, 2012; Sun & Yang, 2015). Virtual classes allow teachers and students to interact synchronously by using many features such as communicating orally, exchanging texts through typing, audio chat, upload PowerPoint presentations, transmit video, and more (Yadav, 2016). Lately, the use of virtual classrooms has become a recurrent practice and sometimes policy in several educational institutions at the same time its implementation has presented some challenges for teachers in several aspects.

Collaborative learning is broadly defined as “a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together,” and more specifically as joint problem solving (Dillenbourg, 1999: 1). Roschelle and Teasley define collaboration more specifically as “mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve a problem together,” (as cited in Dillenbourg et al., 1996: 2). There are a variety of ways to structure collaborative learning techniques. Synchronous virtual classrooms are commonly known as web-conferencing or e-conferencing systems (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Walker, 2009). Adobe Connect, Blackboard Collaborate, WebEx, and Saba Centra are synchronous virtual classrooms prevalent in higher education. Elluminate Live! and Horizon Wimba Classrooms were commonly used in higher education before they were purchased by Blackboard. These systems allow real time communications in which multiple users can simultaneously interact with each other via the Internet to conduct meetings and seminars, lead discussions, make presentations and demonstrations, and perform other functions. Finkelstein (2006) listed five functions that are served by real-time synchronous interaction in a learning environment: instruction, support, and informal exchange, and extended outreach, socialization, and collaboration. Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz (2003) found interacting with students by using collaborative learning strategies, enable instructors to structure and improve online courses to ‘support the growth of a learning community’. Synchronous virtual classrooms are therefore used in a variety of ways by instructors throughout the world. The features available in a synchronous virtual classroom help the instructor in maintaining interaction during a synchronous session. Martyn (2005) suggests that successfully fostering interaction in online courses requires incorporating both instructional and social types of interaction.

Interactive Synchronous Classroom Tools

Effectively designed courses should impact students in such a way that there is an increased and spontaneous use of opportunities for interaction within the courses. Therefore, the focus of this study is on the strategies and techniques to maintain learner-centered teaching. In this respect, most virtual classroom technologies have a content frame to share the instructor's files, employing various tools.

LaPointe, Greysen, and Barrett (2004), found that audio and visual components in synchronous systems help to bridge cultural differences and create communities of practice. The digital /interactive whiteboard not only does it allow teachers to explain ideas visually and work through exercises collaboratively, but it also aids all classroom participants to respond to and capture ‘ideas/information’ using a variety of available tools, where they can write draw, highlight and type. (Christopher, 2020). Breakout rooms for group activities, instant polling, text chat to interact using words and emoticons, and audio chat to talk via a microphone or telephone with the instructor and other students. Christopher, (2020), and Cook, Annetta, Dickerson, and Minogue (2011) vigorously supported the use of synchronous audio chat and text chat in their study. In particular, chat texting in lectures is found to be a useful ‘pedagogical strategy’ (Vu & Fadde, 2013: 41). It, moreover, provides instant learners’ responses and fairly inclusion of all learners in

time zone. (Coetzee, Marti, Hartmann, 2014:128). Instructors can administer student polls, share their desktop, or have the students share their own desktops through application sharing.

Websites can be displayed for students, and, with stable Internet bandwidth, webcams can be used so students and instructors can see each other. The entire virtual classroom session can be archived for later use. In recent versions, students can also download archived class sessions. In some cases, students with audio difficulties can dial in using pre-established telephone numbers. Instructors can even call on students to activate these the electronic/interactive whiteboard, share their webcam, or speak via the microphone.

Al-Qahtani (2019) conducted a study on virtual classes' effectiveness in communication skills and found that virtual classes significantly upgrade communication skills learning. However, this study investigates the effect of virtual techniques from a teacher points of views. Therefore, the participants of this study are university teachers, but Al-Qahtani participants' study were university students and teachers. In both studies the questionnaire was used to collect data. The findings of both studies support using virtual classrooms in language learning. Based their study on students' perspectives, Alahmadi and Alraddadi (2020) persuasively supported the tendency towards virtual class EFL learning, as it enhanced communication and interaction. Similar finding reported by Hamouda (2020) who examined the effect of the virtual classes on learning speaking skill.

However, unfortunately, some studies reported some ineffectiveness of online virtual classes due to "poor internet connection and misunderstanding of task became the challenge". (Rinekso, and Muslim)." The lack of direct interaction with learners and the sudden change of setting were among those that most strongly affected the participants' own learning process." (Paulina & Astrid, 2020). A similar complaint reported by Nuzhath (2020).

Problem Statement

The essential integration of virtual teaching in higher education has created a parallel dire need to virtually adapt teaching strategies in accordance with virtual class techniques to maintain learner centered teaching approach. An online environment provides opportunities for students to participate in collaborative learning. Effective collaboration involves a set of essential skills, which need to be learned and cultivated, particularly in the online learning environment. There has been a significant amount of research on online education from different disciplines, yet, the inadequacy of implementing the process to the maximum was undeniable challenge for teachers and students, as well. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to investigate Qassim University instructors' views of executing and performing online teaching using synchronic techniques appropriately in order to build a learning structure that mirrors the real world and to obtain constructive feedback that could be used as remedial recommendation to contribute in addressing this issue. Virtual collaborative learning, or perceived collaborative learning, is an instructional approach in which a number of learners interact together and share knowledge and skills to reach a specific learning goal. It is significant that the success of online learning environment is assessed by the proportion of virtual collaboration of instructors-learners and learner-learner, using various virtual classroom tools. Therefore, the study states that the aim of virtual language instruction is to enable dynamic synchronic interaction that excels traditional face-to-face learning in quality and quantity, if employed well, in a motivating social climate among class room participants. This justifies the present-day growing interest in virtual classes. This is confirmed by many such as, Christopher (2020), Alshumaimeri, (2011); Jung, Kudo, & Choi, (2012); and Sun & Yang, (2015). Therefore, the following question guided this investigation: What is the effective use of virtual classroom tools and techniques that enhance and ensure an effective collaborative virtual classroom? The answer to such question and the like, lies in the practitioners' perspectives.

Purpose of this study

Virtual classrooms allow instructors and students to interact online synchronously. This study aims to improve the effectiveness of using virtual classroom for ELT teaching and in enhancing the techniques to support collaborative and learner-centered teaching. The research questions that are answered are as follows:

- 1. To what extent do virtual techniques enhance learning?**
- 2. What strategies and tools can an instructor use to enhance learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-interface interaction in the virtual classroom?**
- 3. Which virtual techniques that are less preferable to EFL instructors?**

Methods of the study

Participants and procedure

Participant:

Thirty members in the Department of English and Translation, College of Sciences & Arts, Qassim University completed the survey. They belonged to different nationalities, but they were all EFL instructors, whose main major is English language. Their majors were subdivided into linguistics, literature, English language teaching. They were teaching a variety of courses at the university, using black board collaborate for the last two semesters. All their teaching, as well as assessment were done via black board. They received training of using black board before starting black board sessions, besides, receiving in- the job training. Participants occupied different academic positions ranging from associate professors to teaching assistants. About half of participants (51 %) had more than 10 years of teaching experience, 20% of them had from 7 to 10 years of experience, and the rest (29%) had five years of experience or less. Their academic ranks included teaching assistant (20 %), lecturer (45%), assistant professor (34%), and associate professor (1 %).

Instrument of data collection

After reviewing the literature of virtual classroom techniques, an electronic survey instrument was created. Items were developed on the basis of findings drawn from short oral interviews with some faculty members from different universities. This served the validity of the instrument. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items assessing the methods and attitudes faculty members have towards teaching in the virtual environment. Respondents used a 5-point Likert scale to respond to all questions, using the following options: Never (1), rarely (2), Sometimes (3), Often (4), Always (5). Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude toward or greater use of a specific virtual teaching technique. In order to gain knowledge of which virtual techniques used and preferred most by teachers and which ones are used less, a link of the electronic survey was distributed among the faculty members. They were encouraged to participate and complete the survey. A reminder message was sent later for more encouragement.

Materials

In order to conduct this study, the following steps were followed in the course of 'Translation in the Field of Science' Sessions. 22 students studying Translation in the Field of Science course, were subjected to a pre-test and post-test text translation to investigate the effect of using some synchronous classroom techniques on learning language.

Step 1, Pre-test: The test was a short paragraph text on 'Diabetes'. The test was a two folded aim: To check technical issues encountered by the learners and to prepare them through synchronous techniques in advance to solve translation problems in a virtual classroom, in accordance to Antonacci & Modarress (2005:4), that "This approach to learning is more consistent with constructivist learning, where knowledge is constructed by the learners as they are actively problem solving in an authentic context, than with traditional instruction".

Step 2: Based on the syntactic, grammatical, and writing conventions translation errors were detected in pre-test, the researchers focused on some synchronous techniques for instance, chat box publicly and privately to boost interactions and monitor progress, with Q&A (question and answer) responses in real-time. "Real-time chatrooms (chat) and private messaging make online learning more effective." (Wang & Newlin, 2001; Cook, Annetta, Dickerson, and Minogue, 2011). This was intervened by tremendous peer correction & self-correction via messaging and instructors' use of white boards for explanation and feedback discussion, private messages for low-attaining learners. Christopher (2020:14) reports "Whiteboard: A feature that allows for capturing of ideas/information by typing, highlighting, and drawing tools on a digital whiteboard".

Step 3, Post-test: Making use of chat box messaging and feedback discussion, the learners were asked to translate a text on 'the solar system' from English into Arabic.

Step 4: To measure the possible discrepancies in the learners' achievement, the scores of Pre-test and Post-test were corrected using a scale ranging from 5 to zero. The mean has been calculated.

4. Analysis & Discussion of Results**RQ 1. To what extent do virtual techniques enhance learning?**

To answer RQ 1 the mean of Pre-test and Post-test has been calculated as follows:

Table (4.1) Pre-test and Post test

Text	No of Participants	No of Scores	Percentage	Mean
Pre-test	22	81	44.76%	3.681818
Post test	22	100	55.24%	4.545455

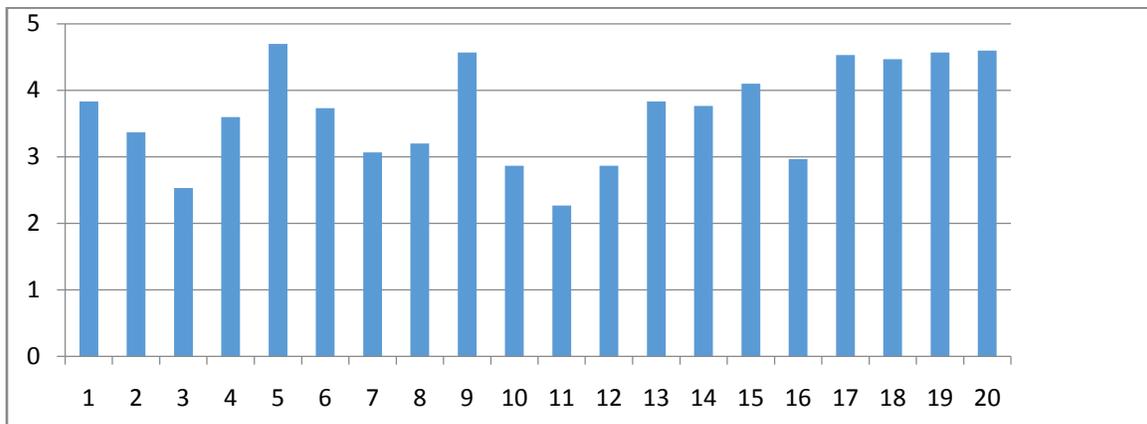
Table (4.1) shows that the mean score of pre-test is (M=3.681818), whereas, the mean score of post-test is (M=4.545455). This difference indicates that learners' translation abilities have been developed. The result of the study indicated that synchronous techniques significantly influenced participants' scores and improved their translation skills, therefore, they significantly relate to enhancing language learning.

This result supports the findings of Alshumaimeri, 2011; Jung, Kudo, & Choi, 2012; Sun & Yang, 2015; Hamouda (2020), Al-Qahtani, 2019. Their findings advocate the effectiveness of virtual tools in developing various language skills.

	N	Mean	SD	SE
V3	30	3.467	1.279	0.234
R3	30	2.533	1.279	0.234
V1	30	3.833	1.147	0.209
V2	30	3.367	1.474	0.269
V4	30	3.600	1.522	0.278
V5	30	4.700	0.877	0.160
V6	30	3.733	0.868	0.159
V7	30	3.067	1.311	0.239
V8	30	3.200	1.095	0.200
V9	30	4.567	0.817	0.149
V10	30	2.867	0.973	0.178
V11	30	2.267	1.258	0.230
V12	30	2.867	1.279	0.234
V13	30	3.833	0.950	0.173
V14	30	3.767	0.898	0.164
V15	30	4.100	0.712	0.130
V16	30	2.967	1.245	0.227
V17	30	4.533	0.571	0.104
V18	30	4.467	0.730	0.133
V19	30	4.567	0.898	0.164
V20	30	4.600	0.724	0.132

Table (4.2) illustrates 'Descriptives' The questionnaire data were examined and analyzed quantitatively to investigate faculty members' preferences of virtual classroom techniques. The mean score was calculated for all items on the questionnaire (M= 3.67, SD= 0.36). This mean score was used as the test value for a one-sample t-test to see whether individual statements on the questionnaire differed significantly from (3.67). Descriptives are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Mean for each Question



Note. X-axis is the Question and Y-axis is the Scale (1 to 5)

Since this involved conducting 20 t-tests (Table 4), a Bonferoni correction for alpha inflation was applied protect against Type I errors. The value for significance was therefore set to $(.05/20 = .0025)$. 1.

Table (4.3) One Sample T-Test

	T	df	P
V3	-0.871	29	0.391
R3	-4.866	29	< .001
V1	0.780	29	0.442
V2	-1.128	29	0.269
V4	-0.252	29	0.803
V5	6.433	29	< .001
V6	0.399	29	0.692
V7	-2.520	29	0.017
V8	-2.350	29	0.026
V9	6.010	29	< .001
V10	-4.521	29	< .001
V11	-6.112	29	< .001
V12	-3.439	29	0.002
V13	0.942	29	0.354
V14	0.590	29	0.560
V15	3.308	29	0.003
V16	-3.094	29	0.004
V17	8.276	29	< .001
V18	5.975	29	< .001
V19	5.471	29	< .001
V20	7.036	29	< .001

Note. For the Instructors' t-test, the alternative hypothesis specifies that the mean is different from 3.67.

The result of One Sample T-test in Table (4.3) indicates that the mean of all items differ significantly from the test value of 3.67. The scores of some items appear to be significantly greater than (3.67), whereas, others seem to be lower than (3.67).

RQ2. 'What strategies and tools can an instructor use to enhance learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-interface interaction in the virtual classroom?'

To answer the above research question the mean and the standard deviation have been calculated, using One Sample T-Test

Table (4.4) Items that faculty members were most supportive to use (compared to the Grand Mean of 3.67)

Statements	Mean (SD)	t-value	Sig
Students can talk to me directly.	4.70 (0.88)	6.43	<i>p</i> <.001
Building a strong sense of community in the virtual classroom is a high priority for me.	4.57 (0.82)	6.01	<i>p</i> <.001
I provide a lot of lead time to allow students to become more familiar and comfortable with me, the instructor, and the material.	4.53 (0.57)	8.28	<i>p</i> <.001
I provide students with feedback in a thorough, complete, and timely manner.	4.47 (0.73)	5.98	<i>p</i> <.001
I seek feedback from my students to help me improve and grow as a virtual instructor.	4.57 (0.90)	5.47	<i>p</i> <.001
Teaching material must be adapted and reconfigured for use in the virtual classroom.	4.60 (0.72)	7.04	<i>p</i> <.001

Table (4.4) shows Items in which faculty members scored higher mean compared to Grand Mean (3.67). Talking to students directly and adapting and reconfiguring learning material for use in the virtual classroom scored the highest mean (M=4.70, M=4.60), respectively.

Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz (2003) found that instructors can use the outcome of the interaction with the learners for structuring and improving the courses. Building a strong sense of community in the virtual classroomscored higher mean (M=4.57). This result agrees with Dillenbourg (1999), Yadav (2016),Alahmadi&Alraddadi (2020).Seeking feedback from students to improve and grow as a virtual instructor scored higher mean (M=4.57).Likewise, providing a lot of lead time to allow students to become more familiar and comfortable scored high mean (M=4.53). Providing students with feedback in a thorough, complete, and timely manner gained (M=4.47).

Faculty members appeared to encourage social interaction and participation. They particularly, concerned reciprocallywith feedback; tobe received from studentsandprovided them. On the other hand, some authorsreported virtual class constrains encountered by some learners and teachers. (Paulina&Astrid, 2020; Rinekso, & Muslim, 2020; Nuzhath, 2020). These are ' radical change of setting, lack of direct interaction, misunderstanding of tasks and poor internet connection'. These, however, were rare and can be tackled. Admittedly, at the beginning of the pandemic virtual classes were troubling, but soon they became good alternatives for traditional classrooms. Moreover, with some instructors' efforts and use of virtual tools appropriately, learners can understand and interact well. Technical problems faced by some can be solved by the administrators and families.

Table(4.5.)

RQ2.Which virtual class techniques that are less preferable for EFL instructors?

Items that are less preferable by faculty members (relative to the Grand Mean of 3.67)

Statements	Mean (SD)	t-value	Sig
I avoid using a private chat with my virtual class.	2.53 (1.28)	-4.87	<i>p</i> <.001
I divide students into virtual breakout rooms for group work.	2.87 (0.97)	-4.52	<i>p</i> <.001
The webcam should be used to monitor student groups.	2.27 (1.26)	-6.11	<i>p</i> <.001
Video conferencing should be used to motivate students to share opinions.	2.87 (1.23)	-3.44	<i>p</i> = .002

Table (5.2) shows Items in which faculty members scored lower mean. It appeared that faculty members are not very enthusiastic to use methods that involve monitoring with a webcam (M=2.87), private chat rooms (M=2.53), video conferencing (M=2.87), and dividing students into virtual breakout rooms (M=2.87). Avoiding webcam and video conferencing, this is perhaps, due to cultural issues. It can, moreover, be attributed to the settings and protocols of the current virtual classes of the participants, as most of them use their private rooms at home.

However, web-conferencing and webcam were acknowledged in the virtual class. (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Walker, 2009; Parker & Martin, 2010).

It is astonishing that instructors deny using private chat or breakout rooms.Private chat is one of the fundamental requirementof a virtual class room, the researchers opine. Many class room problems and difficulties can be handled and sorted out self-reliantly.

It is particularly effective to interact with shy and weak learners. Likewise, using breakout rooms creates a feeling of communion among virtual class room participants as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.

Findings

1. Finding of discussion of pre-test, post-test, the questionnaire, in addition to the reviewed literature indicated that synchronous techniques significantly influenced participants learning and improved their abilities and skills.
2. Synchronic interaction enhanced instructors' capacity to observe and reflect on teaching.
3. The favor of instructors:
 - a. To modify learning material to fit virtual class teaching in warm social atmosphere.
 - b. To use feedback as a two-way purpose:
 - Using instructors' prompt feedback for learning improvement and students' feedback for teaching improvement.
4. Some practical constraints reported by some researchers, these, however, are less common and can be tackled by instructors, administrators, and families.
5. Video conferencing and webcams are less preferable virtual classroom techniques, this perhaps, due to cultural notions, and to the protocols and settings of the current situation of virtual class that are attended at home.
6. Private chat, though undesired by instructors, it seems to be more fascinating tool to solve class problems and interact with students who need special intervention.

Conclusion

The main theme of the present study taps on the techniques used by EFL university instructors in the language virtual classroom. Participants expressed, as in the benchmarks, the importance of active learning and timely feedback with a special emphasis on personal interaction. The focus groups data led to this personal interaction as the central focus for high teaching effectiveness with quality outcomes to occur. Since the 1990s, the paradigm shifted from instruction to learning as a collaborative process with learning outcomes as described by Barr and Tagg (1995) and applications are most evident in online education. The result is a shift in the role of the instructor to a skilled facilitator and partner in the process and production of learning. Several of the instructional strategies portrayed the importance of connecting, adapting, directing, and feedback that needs to occur in the online platform between the instructor and students qualify students to construct knowledge and skills that lead to successful virtual EFL language learning and future involvement.

Implications

The study suggests that virtual techniques are useful for both teaching and learning, as they enable instructors to voice their experiences and they develop learners' potentials. Therefore, the findings provide empirical evidence that virtual collaborative techniques serve as effective teaching tools in ELF language learning programs. Instructors as well as students benefit from collaborative techniques. They encourage students to exchange information as well as provide opportunities for social and interactive learning. However, the challenges of this transformation in education are great, not only for administrators, but also for instructors and students. Such challenges need to be researched and more highlighted. In addition, the interrelationship in the virtual class community needs to be further focused. Moreover, analyzing learners' needs of appropriate virtual approaches for a collaborative problem-solving learning atmosphere where students become intrinsically motivated to lead their own learning.

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