

## A Case Study of Student and Faculty Views on English in the Health Sciences

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this comparative study is to assess the current needs in English for the Health Sciences as seen by the learners who participate in the ESP program and the professors of the specialist subjects in the School of Nursing Science at the University of Extremadura in Cáceres. The research case suggests that certain trends are taking place concerning the role of English in the field, in addition to offering valuable insights as to the kinds of language skills esteemed necessary. No less important, are results which prove beneficial to the ESP practitioner regarding areas of improvement for a better interdisciplinary coordination and understanding of the purpose of ESP within the subject specialism.*

**KEY WORDS:** ESP needs, Health Sciences, interdisciplinary cooperation.

### RESUMEN

*El objetivo de este estudio comparativo es el de evaluar las necesidades actuales del uso del idioma inglés dentro de las Ciencias de la Salud, desde el punto de vista, tanto de los discentes que participan en el programa de IFE, como de los docentes especialistas en las materias específicas en la Escuela Universitaria de Enfermería de la Universidad de Extremadura en Cáceres. El caso empírico sugiere que existen tendencias concretas referentes al papel que juega el inglés dentro del campo, además de ofrecemos discernimientos valiosos respecto del tipo de capacidades lingüísticas requeridas. No menos importante, son los resultados para el profesor de IFE en determinadas áreas para facilitar una mejor coordinación interdisciplinar y entendimiento del propósito de IFE dentro de la especialidad.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** necesidades de IFE, Ciencias de la Salud, cooperación interdisciplinar.

## I. THE BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

The object of this comparative study is to analyze the current status of English language needs in Nursing Studies at the University of Extremadura in **Caceres** as **seen** by the students enrolled and the professors who prepare them, since surveying the faculty and the students of the institution can **provide** valuable insights which may not be **immediately** obvious to, or even in agreement with, the preconceived ideas of the ESP practitioner. In addition, by contrasting the views of the learners with those of the teachers as authorities on the **subject** specialism, we may encounter **conflicts** and **coincidences** which, without a doubt, should be **analyzed** and **taken** into account (Brindley 1984:103-12). Studies of this kind can **also** indicate, in a more reliable form, what the participants consider appropriate to learning from the ESP course, as well as what the institution esteems the aims of the course should be (Benwick, 1989:48-62), rather than unilateral **decision-making** on the part of the ESP course designer. Thus, the coordinated efforts of the ESP teacher, the specialist **subject** staff and the students **become** essential if ESP is to **form** an active and integrated role in the degree program, which may be otherwise doomed to possible **rejection** and/or failure. The findings, therefore, are not only **subject** to an informative analysis, but **also** an attempt to offer greater interdisciplinary cooperation between ESP and the specialized subjects, in addition to our intention to **provide** the best possible preparation for our students.

In our prototype, English is taught throughout the three years which lead to the Nursing degree, and is the only foreign language offered. Nevertheless, as is typical in several Nursing Schools throughout the world, very **little** time (1 hour per week) is assigned for its acquisition in the program. **Besides** the fact that we are allotted a **minimal** amount of scheduled time, the sessions provided for are often at awkward and inconvenient times of the day or week, due to low priority in timetabling (Johns, 1981:16-22). **Furthermore**, the groups are far too overcrowded for effective language acquisition, and there is a wide range of mixed-ability within the overwhelmingly large groups. Finally, the social setting of the study **takes** place in an underdeveloped rural area where foreign language acquisition has traditionally **been** regarded as having **minimal** importance.

## 11. METHODOLOGY

The procedures followed for data collection are basically two: firstly, a questionnaire distributed to both the **entire** teaching staff and the student body participating in the ESP program, in their L1, using rating scales of three, four

or five variables (Bachman, 1981:114); and secondly, programmed interviews held with a sampling of the faculty and students following the tabulation of the questionnaire results.

The questionnaire was chosen as a quick and effective way of distributing, obtaining and computing the information sought, despite the possible inconveniences of misinterpretation of the questions and/or failure of the respondents to return them (Mackay 1978:21-37), (Richterich & Chancerel, 1980) and (Smith, 1989). The questions were formulated by the ESP teacher and checked by a colleague and specialist in survey design. In order to minimize the distortions of misinterpretation, a personal programmed interview was conducted with volunteers from 50% of the staff and 30% of the students (10% from each of the three course levels). This follow-up procedure to the questionnaires, although time-consuming, enabled us to delve into the reasons for the answers we received, and, to additionally help clarify what seemed to be contradictions or doubts, as all questions were reviewed with the interviewees (Nunan, 1989:60-2).

With regard to the number of returned questionnaires, and thus reliability, a total of 225 student questionnaires were distributed and 163 were returned, which accounts for 71.5% of the student body's opinions. Out of a total of 16 specialist teachers, we tabulated 14 returned questionnaires, which render an 87.5% representation of the staff's opinions. The survey research method was motivated by the need to assess the status of ESP needs first-hand at the institution, so that the directions taken can be founded on supportive evidence rather than on heresy or observation alone. In fact, although many of our suspicions were simply confirmed, other perceptions were altered, and some new information was revealed. These findings will now be examined in the following section.

### III. RESULTS

Just how the faculty and the students evaluate the importance of English itself and its related importance to the specialist subjects studied reveals that the staff considers English acquisition to be very important or indispensable in Nursing Science (table1), while most students believe English to be only somewhat important. In addition, the majority of both faculty and students feel that English is less important than the other nursing subjects and that less time should be dedicated to it, as is currently the case. Although far from being optimum, the data shows that the current status of ESP within the field of nursing has improved in the groups studied. Formerly, it was affectionately referred to as the «maría», meaning the pushover subject, to be presently recognized as

relevant, albeit not quite yet on equal footing with the **importance** awarded to the specialist subjects.

| DO YOU CONSIDER ENGLISH TO BE IMPORTANT IN NURSING ?                 |         |        |       |       |        |    |
|--|---------|--------|-------|-------|--------|----|
|  | NO      | LITTLE | SOME  | A LOT | INDISP | NA |
| FACULTY  | -       |        | 38%   | 54%   | 8%     |    |
| STUDENTS   | 8%      | 21%    | 49%   | 20%   | 2%     |    |
| HOW IMPORTANT IS ENGLISH IN RELATION TO THE SPECIALIZED SUBJECTS ?   |         |        |       |       |        |    |
|  | MORE    | LESS   | EQUAL |       | NA     |    |
| FACULTY  | -       | 54%    | 38%   |       | 8%     |    |
| STUDENTS   | -       | 76%    | 24%   |       |        |    |
| SCHEDULING TIME IN RELATION TO THE SPECIALIZED SUBJECTS SHOULD BE... |         |        |       |       |        |    |
|  | GREATER | LESS   | EQUAL |       | NA     |    |
| FACULTY  | 8%      | 61%    | 23%   |       | 8%     |    |
| STUDENTS   | 11%     | 52%    | 37%   |       |        |    |

Table 1

With respect to the professional experience of the staff, (table 2), a fair number of them manifest that they **have** found English to be indispensable in their careers, with the vast majority esteeming it to be at least somewhat **necessary**, accounting jointly for a significantly high total. The majority of students, however, **have** not yet encountered a practical use for English thus far in relation to Nursing, and **only** a moderate number of them **have** found it to be of limited utility. This apparent contradiction between staff and student **opinion** regarding the necessity of English language competence for nurses might be attributed to the fact that the students, with little or no professional experience to date, **have** not yet had the exposure characteristic of a person who has moved in professional circles, **despite** the monitored on hands practice-nursing they undergo at the hospital. This **observation** was **later** revealed in the programmed **interviews** with the staff, and **further** probed and reiterated with the students.

| HAVE YOU NEEDED ENGLISH IN NURSING THUS FAR ? |     |        |      |       |        |    |
|---|-----|--------|------|-------|--------|----|
|   | NO  | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA |
| FACULTY                                       | 23% | -      | 54%  | -     | 3%     |    |
| STUDENTS                                      | 40% | 24%    | 28%  | 7%    | 1%     |    |

Table 2

Regarding table 3, the staff **imperatively** needs to consult bibliography written in English at least on occasion. Once again, however, there is an outstanding **contrast** between staff and student **opinion**, where pupils say that reference consultation in English is not done at all, or at best, rarely carried out.

It seems obvious that the results obtained in both points are **highly related**. The overwhelming **majority** of teachers do not suggest **references** in English, and as to be expected, the students **faithfully** reflect the statistic. In the scheduled interviews held ensuing the tabulation of the **questionnaire** results, we tried to clarify why the staff **does** not recommend bibliography in English to the students, when they need to consult this reference material themselves. In the follow-up interviews, the teachers explained that they consult bibliography in English, at least on occasion, **because** the L1 version is either unavailable or non-existent. They admit to the **linguistic** difficulties the English texts pose for them, and consequently, out of sympathy, do not recommend them to the students. Moreover, they recognize, as nursing professionals, that they **have** the advantage of expert knowledge overlap in deciphering specialized texts in English, skills which the students, as inexperienced learners at this stage, do not yet **have** to aid them.

| DO YOU NEED TO CONSULT NURSING REFERENCES IN ENGLISH ? |     |        |      |       |        |    |
|--|-----|--------|------|-------|--------|----|
|  | NO  | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA |
| FACULTY  | 15% | -      | 62%  | -     | 23%    |    |
| STUDENTS   | 42% | 16%    | 21%  | 14%   | 7%     |    |

  

| FACULTY: DO YOU RECOMMEND REFERENCES IN ENGLISH TO YOUR STUDENTS ?  |     |        |      |       |    |
|---|-----|--------|------|-------|----|
| STUDENTS: DO YOUR TEACHERS RECOMMEND REFERENCES IN ENGLISH TO YOU ? |     |        |      |       |    |
|   | NO  | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | NA |
| FACULTY   | 76% | 8%     | 8%   |       |    |
| STUDENTS  | 66% | 10%    | 17%  | 3%    | 4% |

Table 3

Furthermore, the fact that the staff **does** not recommend **reference** material in English to the students most probably effects the results received from the latter regarding their need to use English **thus** far in Nursing Science. Immersed for the time being in a **learning** environment, the students' need for English language use is basically restricted to academia, where we **have seen** that English language media are not required or even encouraged, except in English class, ergo, presumably accounting for differing **student/staff** evaluations on the need for linguistic **competence** in the **field** under study.

Still and all, almost half of the staff grades personal knowledge of the English language under the **catch-all** of intermediate (table 4), with the rest admitting to **having little** or none. The enormous discrepancy between the teachers' self-evaluated knowledge of English and their need to consult bibliography written in the language confirms the research done by authors in this area (Nuttall,1982), (Alderson & Urquhart,1983:121-7; 1985:192-204), (Uljin, 1984:66-81), (Koh, 1985:375-80) and (Mohammed & Swales, 1984:206-17), regarding readers of ESP, who are quite competent in their specialized fields, and, therefore, greatly aided by the **concurrence** of related knowledge between what they read and what they already know. Clearly, this phenomenon puts the ESP reader in a privileged position to understand written discourse. Students, on the other hand, grade their knowledge of English **pretty** much equally in terms of none, little and **some**, with a **mere** sampling considering their **level** to be high. Precisely, the heterogeneous composition of linguistic knowledge within one single group of learners has **been** a driving force behind this initial study in order to obtain information on the question of language needs and the challenges it presents.

| HOW DO YOU EVALUATE YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH ? |      |        |            |           |
|---|------|--------|------------|-----------|
|   | NONE | LITTLE | SOME A LOT | BILINGUAL |
| FACULTY   | 38%  | 15%    | 47%        | -         |
| STUDENTS  | 28%  | 30%    | 37%        | 5%        |

Table 4

The majority of the teachers, in varying degrees, consider English to be relevant to their specialization (table 5), whereas a third of them did **not**. We found this puzzling when we recall that **all** of the teachers said they thought English to be at least somewhat important. To clarify this **confusion** on our part, **some** teachers, in the **interviews**, expressed the opinion that English can be more related to **certain** subjects, but not to others, due to the very nature of their

content material. As examples, the Behavioral Sciences, as well as **Medical and Surgical Nursing** have a great deal of historical correlation, in addition to current available research from **Anglo-American** sources. On the other hand, the Spanish **Public Health System**, being of exclusively nationalistic character, **does not**. Therefore, **English will have** little to do with those areas of Nursing Science which are of a national nature, and this is both a logical and acceptable clarification which had not occurred to us prior to the interviews.

| IS ENGLISH RELATED TO THE SPECIALIZED NURSING SUBJECTS ? |     |        |      |       |        |    |
|--|-----|--------|------|-------|--------|----|
|  | NO  | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA |
| FACULTY  |     | 31%    | 31%  | 22%   | 8%     | 8% |
| STUDENTS   | 42% | 26%    | 29%  | 3%    |        |    |

Table 5

By comparison, the students' response to the relationship of English to their specialized subjects is far more negative and reiterates once again that the general lack of exposure to specialist reference material in English as a probable deciding factor.

At the present time, nurses are in short supply, and therefore in great demand on a very tight Spanish job market. This state of affairs tends to lower merit standards in order to cover vacant posts. When asked if English was considered relevant in order to get a nursing job (table 6), we find that a moderate percentage of the staff believe this to be very much the case, and, to a greater extent, the opinion that English is somewhat important. Surprisingly, slightly more than a third of the students attach major importance to English language competence when applying for a nursing position, and, to a lesser degree, the belief that this is somewhat so. For all practical purposes they are the reverse results manifested by the teachers. On the contrary, with regard to performance on the job, the overall responses of the faculty render more favorable results than those of the students. Finally, with regard to getting promoted in the field, the staff most clearly indicate the need for English language competence above and beyond the students' perception of the same.

| IS ENGLISH IMPORTANT TO GET A NURSING JOB ?       |     |        |      |       |        |    |
|---|-----|--------|------|-------|--------|----|
|   | NO  | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA |
| FACULTY   | 31% | 8%     | 38%  | 23%   |        |    |
| STUDENTS  | 26% | 17%    | 20%  | 33%   | 4%     |    |
| IS ENGLISH IMPORTANT TO PERFORM ON THE JOB ?      |     |        |      |       |        |    |
|   | NO  | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA |
| FACULTY   | 15% | 23%    | 23%  | 31%   | 8%     |    |
| STUDENTS  | 16% | 14%    | 43%  | 24%   | 1%     | 2% |
| IS ENGLISH IMPORTANT TO GET PROMOTED IN NURSING ? |     |        |      |       |        |    |
|   | NO  | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA |
| FACULTY   |     | 15%    | 23%  | 54%   | 8%     |    |
| STUDENTS  | 19% | 13%    | 22%  | 40%   | 6%     |    |

Table 6

These **three** points, obtaining and doing the job, as well as getting promoted, were discussed **in the interviews**, where both teachers and students expressed the opinion that English is useful and even desirable for a nurse in order to get and **perform** the job well, but manifest that it is not considered imperative. On the other hand, when examining the question of promotions, foreign languages in general, especially European Community languages due to Spain's relatively recent membership, are counted on the merit scale, and, therefore, **recommendable** for the nurse who would **like** to aspire to a higher position, or work abroad. Nevertheless, the fact that the teachers evaluated a knowledge of English in the performance and promotion aspects more positively than the student body, may be attributable to the individual perspectives they respectively hold at this point in time. That is, for **some** student nurses, the prospects of working abroad or even contemplating promotion before **receiving** their degrees may be too far removed in the **future**, while for the teachers, such a step could be a professional potential.

In the four language skills, traditionally divided into **reading**, writing, speaking, and listening, it **becomes** apparent that the staff and the students regard **all four skills** as being of equal major **importance**, with the exception of writing for the teachers, who awarded it a majority grading of somewhat (table 7). By examining the figures, we can see that the number of students who consider the skills either very important or indispensable, greater still than the number of teachers who do, with the listening skill obtaining the most salient results of all.



It is even more interesting to note that the skills of reading and writing, conventionally thought of as the principal ESP tools for the future professional and the professional, are no longer exclusive of the speaking and listening skills (Christison & Krahnke, 1986:61-81). These results break away from the idea that technical and scientific English-users are mainly interested in reading, writing and translation skills to the exclusion of the others. Certainly, nursing professionals will need aural and oral competence in order to properly credit the affective factor and the explicative nature of their jobs, when treating patients whose only means of communication is English. This does not mean that reading and writing lose their usefulness. What this does reflect is that oral expression and listening comprehension come forward, in order to rightfully occupy a position of at least equal importance, and decidedly much more than they have been formerly given, particularly in ESP.

| ARE ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS IMPORTANT FOR NURSING ?  |      |        |      |       |        |     |
|--|------|--------|------|-------|--------|-----|
|  | NO   | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA  |
| FACULTY  |      | 38%    |      | 62%   |        |     |
| STUDENTS   | 2%   | 6%     | 23%  | 57%   | 12%    |     |
| ARE ENGLISH READING SKILLS IMPORTANT FOR NURSING ?   |      |        |      |       |        |     |
|  | NO   | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA  |
| FACULTY  |      | 31%    |      | 69%   |        |     |
| STUDENTS   | 2%   | 8%     | 17%  | 58%   | 14%    | 1%  |
| ARE ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS IMPORTANT FOR NURSING ?   |      |        |      |       |        |     |
|  | NO   | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA  |
| FACULTY  |      | 23%    | 46%  | 31%   |        |     |
| STUDENTS   | 3%   | 9%     | 22%  | 55%   | 11%    |     |
| ARE ENGLISH LISTENING SKILLS IMPORTANT FOR NURSING ? |      |        |      |       |        |     |
|  | NO   | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA  |
| FACULTY  |      | 23%    |      | 77%   |        | -   |
| STUDENTS   | 0.5% | 3%     | 11%  | 65%   | 20%    | 0.5 |

Table 7

Additionally, the prevailing data on the skills supports recognition of them as being interdependent, rather than isolated and self-sufficient. In other

words, the activity surrounding one of them, generally produces an activity involving another one.

If we recall the natural cycle of communication, we **recognize** that if we speak, we are spoken to, so we **listen**. The more we speak, the more we are probably spoken to, thus, the more we **listen** and vice-versa. With the **skill** of reading, there are countless consequent activities as well, **like**: writing a response, making a phone call, or even a comment to a colleague about the contents of what we **have** read. We could **also** consult additional information in other sources (Micheau & Billmeyer, 1987:87-97). Therefore, the skills do not normally occur in isolation and both the students and staff's **desire** for holistic language acquisition reforms our preconception that **this** was not of interest to them.

As expected, translation from English to L1 (table 8) continues to occupy the number one position with regard to importance. The teachers consolidate their view by claiming that translation is of prime importance for the professional who needs to be up to date in the **latest** scientific and technical advances, as do the students to a **lesser** degree. The translation from L1 to English however, **does** not receive the same amount of attention for the staff. With regard to this difference, the teachers interviewed claim that translating from L1 to English is **significant** for **all** kinds of correspondence and most assuredly for international publication, which are activities less frequently carried out than those needed for translation from English to L1. The students, however, maintain their point of view on translation in general by **virtually** the **same** percentages.

Nevertheless, we found it contradictory that the teachers did not give as much importance to reading and writing as they did to translation. Evidently, for those of us who are language professionals, it seems tremendously difficult, if not an impossible task, to translate without knowing how to read and write both languages well. However, the teachers claim that translation can be done without an extensive working knowledge in these two skills, and that they do so, although the process is rather laborious and possibly somewhat inexact **in** comparison to the original version.

| IS TRANSLATION FROM ENGLISH TO SPANISH IMPORTANT FOR NURSES?  |    |        |      |       |        |    |
|---|----|--------|------|-------|--------|----|
|   | NO | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA |
| FACULTY   |    | 8%     |      | 92%   |        |    |
| STUDENTS  | 2% | 8%     | 22%  | 54%   | 14%    |    |
| IS TRANSLATION FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH IMPORTANT FOR NURSES ? |    |        |      |       |        |    |
|   | NO | LITTLE | SOME | A LOT | INDISP | NA |
| FACULTY   |    | 15%    | 38%  | 47%   |        |    |
| STUDENTS  | 3% | 8%     | 22%  | 55%   | 12%    |    |

Table 8

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions we draw from the compiled information in Nursing Studies suggest that a series of current trends are presently taking place concerning the role of ESP needs in the Health Sciences in the research model:

-Both faculty and student views on the importance of English in their profession prove to be favorably increasing, although it is admittedly still considered less important than the specialized subjects of expertise.

-Most students have not yet experienced the need to use English in relation to their future profession, whereas the majority of the faculty members have come across this need, especially in bibliographical consultation, which is not required of the students. By probing this contradiction, we hope to have provided an element for reflection on the incongruency created by neglecting the encouragement of reference material in English for a field which produces most of its international publications in this language.

-Neither the students nor the faculty's self-evaluation of their English language competence is high. Nonetheless, mixed-ability within the beginner to intermediate range is a common denominator for both.

-It is imperative for the ESP instructor to become familiarized with those aspects of the specialized subject areas where bonds of union exist in order to assure the relevancy and appropriacy of the ESP content and consequently facilitate its integration in the training for this specialized field.

-The current job mobility factor, expected to increase in the near future within the European Common Market, is helping to promote the importance of

English (and to a lesser degree other EU languages) in order to get and do the job well, and most certainly regarding promotions. These factors are more readily perceived by the faculty than by the student body, whose immediate outlooks obviously differ and should be taken into account for the purposes of needs analysis.

-Faculty and students believe all the traditional language skills to be very important, but esteem the listening skill to be the most relevant, breaking away from the myth that ESP learners are basically only interested in reading, writing and translating. This particular affirmation further obliges the ESP practitioner to make a conscious effort to capitalize on oral/aural skill development despite the complications of the adverse conditions created by overcrowded, mixed-ability groups.

-Both the faculty and the staff consider translation to be a major need but tend to divorce this skill from reading and writing. Thus, the promotion of translation techniques is a priority which should be undertaken in such a way as to facilitate the task and stimulate striving for correction, in order to avoid haphazard interpretations which may cause serious repercussions on human health and well-being.

-In addition, the teaching staff makes a distinction between translation from English to L1 and vice-versa, the former being given higher priority. This research has indicated that the most immediate necessities lie in translation from English to L1 due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of the latest up-to-date, bio-medical information is available in English and requires translation to L1 for widespread and rapid access at local levels.

The findings from this comparative study based on the questionnaire and follow-up interview which, in itself, is a mere reduction of the greater reality involved in needs assessment for ESP, remains subject to corroboration by other context-adaptable situations of comparable specifications, as well as a continuing effort on our own part through additional data collection methods. In its simplest form, direct observation provides the practitioner with valuable perceptions indicating immediate and variable needs which may be recorded periodically.

There are other informational sources at the disposal of the ESP practitioner in order to broaden specialized needs erudition, some of which envelop certain difficulties, but should nonetheless be utilized as far as is possible. A language audit (Pilbeam, 1979), carried out in the workplace (hospitals and related health centers in this particular case), could prove equally enlightening when compared and contrasted to the evaluations offered by the students and the professors of the specific study area. Another research device involving regular contact with the working world of the specific area is Present Situation Analysis

(Richterich et. al., 1980), where the 'user institution', i.e. place of work, is considered one of the three basic sources of information, in addition to the learners themselves and the teaching-learning site.

Finally, as a crowning element to the data-gathering process, case studies of former program participants once they have entered the work force, a research procedure known as ultimate evaluation, would provide detailed data on the terminal surrender value practically applied in the target situation (Swan, 1986). All of them applied respective and/or collectively, supply reliable information which aids the practitioner in avoiding misconceptions based on erroneous presumptions and confusing misjudgements.

In the final analysis, however, the expansion of English as a communicative tool in the Health Sciences, as well as in most other disciplines, brings to light the increasing need for active collaborate research which will enable the ESP practitioner to promote the feedback conditions of this special relationship which may be termed as symbiotic, reciprocal and of mutual respect, as well as to better serve the professionals requiring English language acquisition as a part and parcel of the global resources needed in their specialized fields.

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