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Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# NS-NNS relationships: A case of AET-centered team teaching

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This study investigates team teaching (TT) relationships under the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program between a JTE (Japanese Teacher of English) and an AET (Assistant English Teacher) focusing on power sharing. From the previous literature, it is assumed that different kinds of power exist between JTEs and AETs, which determines their relationships and the degree of participation or roles in TT. A naturalistic case study of a TT pair was conducted over six months through class observation and individual interviews. Supplementary data were also collected by interviewing students. Research results revealed that the AET was given full autonomy based on the "native speaker fallacy," the idea that native speakers are automatically the best teachers of the language (Phillipson, 1992). However, the native speaker fallacy caused the JTE to become a peripheral participant, which resulted in her dissatisfaction with their TT performance. That is, the JTE's identity influenced by language power inequality was deeply involved in her peripheral participation, which was supported by her belief in the native speaker fallacy.

本研究は、JET Programに携わる、日本人英語教師 (JTE)と英語指導助手 (AET) のティームティーチング(TT)における教師間関係について、力配分に焦点を置き調査する。先行研究から、両者の間には異なる種類の力が存在しており、これが教師間関係やTTへの参加の度合い・役割を決定すると推察される。1組のTTペアを対象に、半年にわたりTTの授業参観と個別インタビューによるケーススタディーが実施された。併せて、生徒へのインタビューも補足的データとして集められた。その結果、AETはネイティブスピーカー(NS)信仰、つまりNSであれば自動的によい語学教師であるとする考え(Phillipson, 1992)により、授業の自治権を完全に与えられたことが判明した。一方、この考えにより、JTEのTT参加は消極的となり、JTEは自分たちのTTに関して不満を感じていることが明らかになった。つまり、英語力の不均衡によって影響を受けたJTEのアイデンティティが、JTEの消極的TT参加と密接に関わっており、更に、NS信仰がそれを助長していることが示唆された。

**A**lthough team teaching (TT) under the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program between Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and Assistant English Teachers (AETs) has been a distinctive feature of public school education in Japan, TT has been controversial mainly because of team teachers' relationships (Mahoney, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Tajino & Walker, 1998). JTEs and AETs differ

from each other in multiple ways—in terms of status (teacher-in-charge versus assistant), linguistic proficiency (non-native versus native speaker), and cultural proficiency (cultural native versus cultural non-native). These differences are likely to involve power issues.

The main purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the teaching relationship of one TT pair focusing on power sharing in the classroom. Through studying particular phenomena, case studies emphasize the importance of *particularizability* in order to avoid simplification of complex social realities (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; van Lier, 2005). It is hoped that the result of the current research will stimulate investigation of additional cases in order to understand the dynamics of complex TT relationships, and thereby contribute to the development and improvement of TT in general.

### ***AETs' difficulties: Lack of political power and language/cultural gaps***

Researchers have pointed out that AETs in the JET Program lack political power as short-term assistants (Mahoney, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Voci-Reed, 1994). For instance, AETs' appointments are limited in terms of age (they must be younger than 35 years of age) and length of employment (a maximum of five years).<sup>1</sup> In addition, AETs are not allowed to give final grades to students because of their official status as assistants.

<sup>1</sup> The maximum length of employment for AETs used to be three years, but this was now extended to five years under the condition that they are well-qualified in regard to their contribution, experience, and motivation. In addition, recently, some cities and prefectures have hired AETs from non-JET sources including private language schools in order to cut down costs as well as the time and trouble of taking care of AETs. Age or employment term limits many not apply for those non-JETs.

Understanding the local language and culture seems to present additional difficulties. For instance, researchers have reported Japanese students' anxiety in native speakers' (NSs) English-only classes caused by the learners' lack of exposure to spoken English (Ellis, 1993) and such learners' psychological distance from NSs due to cultural and linguistic differences (Miyazato, 2003). Conversely, AETs' frustration toward one particular aspect of Japanese classroom culture, the lack of responsiveness or shyness of Japanese students, was reported (McConnell, 2000).

### ***JTEs' difficulties: English language deficiency and native speaker fallacy***

According to a newspaper report ("Sensei ga chikara busoku," 2005) concerning a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, only 8.3% of JTEs in junior high schools and 16.3% of JTEs in senior high schools have a TOEIC score of 730 (equivalent to TOEFL score 550) or more. It also reported that only 3.9% of JTEs in junior high schools and 1.1% of JTEs in senior high schools conducted English classes mostly in English. These results reveal the reality of JTEs' English language deficiency.

In addition, various researchers have reported that Japanese people in general still generally support the supremacy of NS English (Butler, 2005; Kubota, 1998; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004). The authenticity of NSs' English and an elite or "exotic" image of NS teachers have been noted by Japanese EFL learners (Miyazato, 2003; Sugino, 2002). This attitude is reported to be reinforced by learners' parents, who themselves have doubts about JTEs'

English skills (Takada, 2000). Sturman (1992) commented that the presence of foreign teachers in Japanese schools is seen as living “proof” of the internationalization. Thus, Phillipson’s (1992) *native speaker fallacy*, the misperception that NSs of English are automatically the best teachers of the language, has been prevalent at the individual, societal, and educational levels.

In sum, power imbalances between JTEs and AETs appear to be caused by the different capabilities of the two parties: AETs with language superiority (language power) and JTEs with cultural knowledge in the local society and a better understanding of the language learning situation and the learners (cultural power). Although this dichotomized power structure is a simplifying assumption, this is one way to conceptualize the complex interpersonal TT relationships. We must of course remember that it is dangerous to dichotomize and emphasize differences. However, optimistic worldviews which make general claims that “we are all humans” or offer nonspecific advice such as “we should communicate more” have not improved TT relationships. Therefore, the JTE’s and AET’s values and thought will be investigated based on the belief that it is important for team teachers to recognize cultural differences rather than ignore them.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were one TT pair at a public senior high school in the North Kanto district. The class was a required Oral Communication course consisting of 40 first-year students.

The JTE was a female teacher in her mid-30s. She had 10 years of teaching experience and had been involved in TT for 10 years, including TT with “one-shot visits” by AETs.<sup>2</sup> Her overseas experiences were confined primarily to short personal trips, including one as a chaperone during a two-week summer school tour of Canada. She self-evaluated her English level as “not so good,” especially in communicative skills. However, based on my six-month observation, I found her general English abilities to be higher than she gave herself credit for and should be considered as above-average.

The AET was a white American female in her mid-20s. She taught high school for one year before coming to Japan, and was also interested in teaching ESL and getting a TESOL degree in the near future. This was her first year in the JET Program and she had just started her career and life in Japan.

### Data collection procedures

A naturalistic study using interviews and observations was conducted from September 2003 to March 2004 for six months. To begin with, classes team-taught by the pair were observed during bimonthly visits. The total amount of class observation was 15 hours and observation data were written up in fieldnotes. Individual interviews with the AET were conducted in English and those with the JTE were done in Japanese and then translated into English. The AET, who had a lighter schedule than the JTE, was usually able to devote about 40 minutes to 1 hour per interview, while the JTE was able to devote about 20 to 30 minutes per interview, due to

<sup>2</sup> “One shot visits” refer to occasional visits of AETs to “non-base schools,” schools that cannot accommodate a full-time AET mainly for financial reasons. The frequency of such visits ranges from once a week to once in a few months.

other obligations. The total interview time for the AET was about nine hours, and for the JTE was about five and a half hours. The interviews were tape-recorded with the written consent of the interviewees and transcribed for data analysis.

In order to examine learners' perspectives, group interviews with students were done during a class on February 9, 2004. I visited four groups of 5 or 6 members while they were working on making posters about Japanese cultural events and interviewed them for about seven to eight minutes each on average. The interviews were conducted in Japanese, and translated into English by me.

## Results

In this section, main results are presented in four subsections: The AET's strengths, The AET's weaknesses, The JTE's strengths, and the JTE's weaknesses. At the end, relevant information concerning job satisfaction and role-sharing in TT is introduced.

### *The AET's strengths*

#### *Authenticity of NSs' English*

Both the JTE and students appreciated the authentic English of the AET. From a teaching perspective, the JTE pointed out AETs' special abilities in general—quick recognition of learners' mistakes, lenient attitude toward learners' mistakes, exposure to the target language for students, all of which she thinks come from NSs' high level of grammaticality. The JTE also emphasized students' desire to understand "authentic" English. In fact, one student described his special feeling when he received stickers as a prize from the AET:

AETs' praise is special for us. If we got the same stickers from a JTE, we would feel weird. The fact that foreigners acknowledge our English makes us happy, because it really shows that we are good at English. Besides, American stickers are cool! (2/9/04)

### *Popularity of the AET*

In addition to authenticity of NSs' English, their friendliness seems to be another reason for their popularity among students in general. The JTE explained,

Students feel close to AETs. Some students ask for consultation with AETs about something that they would never consult with Japanese teachers about. Students must feel AETs are friends. (11/10/03)

In fact, the AET herself acknowledged students' special admiration and attention. Because of their over-admiration, the AET worried about JTEs' envy:

My supervisor told me when I first got here, "Oh, you will be the students' favorite teacher" and all of that. I felt bad for the other JTEs. Well, what do they think? How does that make them feel? Would they resent me because of that? I mean, I haven't experienced any of that here luckily, but I think some of the other AETs might experience that. (1/15/04)

Although the AET's approachable image may come from her age factor, students specified her relaxing teaching style, especially activity-based instruction, as the main reason for their positive impression of the AET:

It's just fun. There are activities all the time. We don't just keep sitting in the chair, which we do in Japanese teachers' classes.

Another student explained some positive effects of group activities:

I like TT classes, because even if I don't understand something, other members can teach me. We help each other. I don't feel embarrassed even when we make mistakes. We share the shame with group members.

Surely, their classes had plenty of group activities. For example, word games, such as one called the "whisper down the alley game" and English *shiritori* (a game using the last letter of the previous word as the first letter of a new word) were always done as a starter. Textbooks were seldom used, and major activities included writing Christmas cards, making posters of Japanese cultural events, and so on. Thus, the AET's activity-based instruction with non-threatening teaching style seemed to contribute to her positive image.

### ***The AET's weaknesses***

#### ***Politically weak as a foreign assistant***

In spite of the AET's popularity, she was regarded mostly as only a "guest" by the students. The AET admitted that students did not behave well without the JTE's presence. I actually observed an incident in which a male student went missing from the TT class and was thereafter scolded by the JTE. The JTE explained,

The boy cut the class and walked around outside, because I assume the AET doesn't scold students. AETs are only guests for students, because they never give them grades. Students just regard AETs as someone that speaks "live" English. In contrast, JTEs give them grades and get involved in student discipline in their daily lives, so students see us as some kind of authority. (10/27/03)

Thus, the AET's position as an assistant, who is not entitled to evaluate students formally, seems to affect students' perceptions of the AET.

#### ***Linguistic and cultural barriers***

The language barrier caused by the students' lack of English aural skills or not being conversant in Japanese affected the AET's teaching significantly, causing frequent confusion in class. For example, even simple instructions for new games and activities by the AET were often not understood well by students and the JTE ultimately translated them, since the instructions were crucial to making the activity successful.

Furthermore, the AET revealed her solitude and isolation from other teachers blaming her lack of Japanese language abilities:

Every once in a while, when I hear all the other JTEs talking in Japanese and you know, I wish I knew what they were saying, I feel sometimes left out. I don't really know what is going on all the time, or in the staff meetings I am just kind of doing my own thing. When the other teachers are talking and laughing, I don't know what they are

saying, just little things like that...I mean, that is just part of being a non-native here. So, being a foreigner. (11/10/03)

As for cultural barriers, the AET especially revealed the difficulty in understanding Japanese students' silence and passive attitude toward learning:

I can basically count on them not volunteering even though I ask for a volunteer. I would like to try just in case a student will raise their hand, but I expect to have to call on the students because I know they are not going to volunteer.... I mean, in America, you know, any student is going to get shy or embarrassed by standing in front of their peers, but here it seems a little more extreme. (10/6/03)

Actually, in one of their TT classes, students had to choose someone to be blindfolded in a game of *Fukuwarai*, the Japanese version of "Pin the tail on the donkey." Most of the students refused to be blindfolded and did a series of *janken* (rock, paper, and scissors) to choose the blindfolded contestants, who only agreed to play the role reluctantly. The AET assumed that their reluctance was to avoid being conspicuous or noticeable in class.

Paradoxically, however, the names of the students who scored higher points on the midterm exam were announced in class. Namely, teachers acknowledging the better performance of some students in public was accepted and even promoted probably because of the increased peer pressure. This was a surprise to the AET, because the act did not seem to violate the group norm as other "singling out" activities did:

[In the States], maybe I would announce top scores, but I don't think I would say the names and I think that maybe it is a Japanese cultural thing, too...I don't know, but to me, it feels like, I am kind of singling those students out and saying, "Look, these students are better than the rest of you".... Um, maybe they think that will somehow motivate the other students.... In America, I think that probably most teachers feel that's kind of like personal information. To me, I would think it kind of makes the students feel worse, so they feel like "Oh, why should I even try? I am not going to be that good." Maybe that is just the way American students would think...because I think that most students already know who the best students in class are, so they can probably guess that the student got a good grade on a test. (12/8/04)

Another difference found between the AET and JTE was about perceptions of good student models. For example, the JTE regards obedience as one of the important qualities of good students. She explained as follows:

I know this is a Japanese way of thinking, but obedient students are easy to teach.... Obedience here, I mean, is students' cooperative attitude in class...I like students who can enjoy a fun atmosphere without rebelling in life. (12/15/03)

In contrast, the AET had questions about students' obedient qualities:

I definitely think that a good student is one that cooperates and does what is expected of him, I guess. But I think that a good student is one that

is thinking for themselves and maybe questioning. You know, a curious student. (12/15/03)

She further commented as follows:

I do think that is something that is a little bit lacking here, is the teaching style with the critical thinking skills.... I think critical thinking skills are important, because students are able to discover the answers on their own and they are only going to do that by questioning and finding out, just questioning until they find the answer. (11/10/03)

The AET further commented on an incident where every student obeyed the JTE's directions to underline important expressions with a red pen:

I guess I will give them directions, but not that specifically.... And maybe that's the only way students are going to respond, so they need those specific directions. But the thing is, if, you know, they don't think to do that on their own unless somebody tells them exactly what to do. (11/10/03)

Thus, although Japanese students' passive learning attitude such as shyness and obedience was perceived as the result of Japanese cultural norm by the AET, she still had difficulties dealing with it.

### *The JTE's strengths*

#### *Knowledge of the local language and students' lives*

The AET and students clearly admitted that JTEs' language support was indispensable to avoid confusion. Moreover, one student added that the JTE provided psychological relief:

I can speak with the AET without worrying because we have the JTE. She fills cultural gaps between us and gives us psychological relief. You know, JTEs help us when troubles arise. For example, AETs sometimes misunderstand Japanese students' silence. We may be silent because we are extremely nervous or embarrassed. It's hard for AETs to understand that. JTEs understand Japanese students' feelings better. (2/9/04)

Based on her knowledge of Japanese students' study history, for example, the JTE had a better grasp of students' vocabulary. While the AET chose "awful" and "horrible" as synonyms of "bad" in a vocabulary-building exercise, assuming that students knew these words, the JTE, knowing the students were not familiar with them, introduced the exact meaning in Japanese and wrote the spelling and repeated the pronunciation of the two words.

The JTE was also a major enforcer of student discipline and she constantly engaged in correcting students' misbehavior in class. In addition, the JTE was able to change or adapt lesson plans in case they ran a risk of not working, and the AET appreciated the JTE's role as a teaching consultant.

Thus, the JTE's knowledge of the students' lives as well as the local language seemed to contribute to her roles as language/psychological mediator for a better teaching and learning environment, which contributed to gaining trust from the students and AET.

### *The JTE's weaknesses*

#### *Inferiority complex regarding English abilities and native speaker fallacy*

From my observation, the JTE had no problem listening to and speaking English, but she self-evaluated her English skills as low:

I majored in English literature in college, but I have never studied abroad. In fact, I have an inferiority complex about my communicative English abilities. (9/22/03)

In the classes, the AET was the main teacher, standing in the center of the classroom, while the JTE took the roles of assisting, translating, disciplining students, and engaging in off-stage chores such as writing on the blackboard and distributing handouts, while standing to the side.

Moreover, the JTE showed her hesitation to be the main teacher:

Our students really look forward to classes with AETs. They only have the AET once a week, so I hesitate to become the main teacher. I don't want to disturb AETs' classes, so I take the assisting role. I also take the role of student disciplinarian so that the AET can concentrate on teaching and students have a good image of her. Hopefully, this helps to create a fun class atmosphere. (11/10/03)

In fact, the JTE supported the idea of NS teachers' superiority:

I know it is a prejudice, but if I have formal English education myself, to be honest, I prefer NSs as my

teachers. For example, if I learn English myself and pay for a language school such as AEON or NOVA, I would choose American or British teachers.... Well, because they speak correct English. They never make mistakes with articles. On top of their high level of grammaticality, NSs have rich vocabulary and expressions. NSs' English has high quality and quantity. We can be exposed to English, and the more input we get, the more content we feel.... Of course I know Indian English and Singaporean English are both World Englishes. I have stayed with a Singaporean family in the study abroad program in Canada, where I chaperoned our students in the summer, and it was good training for me to try my English. But if I learn English from them, I cannot help questioning their accent and grammaticality. (3/22/04)

The JTE thus recognized "correct" pronunciation and high grammaticality as native linguistic ability. Although the AET, who had teaching experience in the U.S., neither mentioned problems with the JTE's English abilities nor voiced her view of responsibility-sharing in TT, she welcomed their AET-centered TT style simply because of the joy of having a certain level of autonomy:

Even every once in a while, I sometimes feel like it is frustrating to always have to just defer to someone else in the classroom, you know, that it is just not me in there. For any teacher who has taught before, you know, it is hard to go into a TT setting because you are used to teaching on your own. It's just nice to be able to run the class the way you want. (1/19/04)



In sum, in addition to the JTE's lack of confidence in her English communicative abilities, her belief in the native speaker fallacy, which was supported by the students' high expectation of NS teachers, influenced her decision of role-sharing in TT settings.

### *Heavy workload*

There was a clear disparity in workload between the JTE and AET. The JTE, for instance, had a heavy workload of 20 teaching hours per week as well as various administrative tasks, such as organizing school events, doing paperwork, counseling students and parents, developing the school curriculum, promoting international understanding in school, and planning and implementing English-related programs and events in the district and so on. She also took care of extracurricular activities and needed to take students to sport competitions on some weekends. In addition, this year, she had to attend the 30-hour-JTE seminar called "*Jyuunen-me kensyu*" (The 10<sup>th</sup> Year Seminar), mandatory teacher training for all JTEs with 10 years teaching experience. She described her life as follows:

I stay at school from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Right now I have to help with the English speech contest, so I stay at school until 8 or 9. We take turns on *nicchoku*, or day duty on weekends, too. I just don't have enough time to sleep. I have two small children and I feel that I'm sacrificing my family life with this heavy workload. Needless to say, I don't have time to discuss our TT classes with the AET. I feel bad for her. (10/28/03)

The JTE further explained that some JTEs show reluctance towards TT:

Having a full-time AET increases JTEs' workloads. JTEs need to take care of AETs' life inside and outside the school. For example, we sometimes need to do things such as taking them to the hospital when they are sick, cleaning their apartment before and after they move, going shopping with them, etc. That's too much for JTEs. They already have an overwhelming workload. They think it's not fair for only us to have the additional duty of taking care of AETs. (3/22/04)

The JTE also mentioned that the three-year contract with AETs creates an additional workload, because JTEs have to train the AET again from the very beginning. Thus, it seems that JTEs' busy schedules in general could be one of the reasons for preventing them from communicating with AETs, which might lead to lack of preparation and collaboration for TT classes.

### *Satisfaction and role-sharing in TT*

The pair was asked to give an evaluation of their own performance based on a 100-point scale. The impressionistic question did not have the purpose of rating TT performances statistically. Such measures cannot be used as valid statistics for various reasons, including individual and cultural differences in interpretation of evaluation scales.<sup>3</sup> However,

<sup>3</sup> For example, Japanese tend to emphasize self-criticism rather than self-enhancement to fit into the group norm (Kitayama et al., 1997), and therefore they may give lower points in evaluating their TT satisfaction than Americans. It is also expected that the JTE felt reluctant to give a high score on their own performance out of modesty or politeness in front of me, a Japanese university EFL teacher. Moreover the JTE, an experienced teacher, might have stricter standards and higher expectations for their teaching performance compared to the AET, a novice teacher.

investigating specific reasons for their self-evaluations may reveal their honest feelings about their TT relationships.

The AET gave a higher score of 95 points to her team's performance, saying the rest is for the lack of preparation or possible future improvement. She added that the high score came from the fact that she was given autonomy and had a good TT relationship with the JTE. On the other hand, the JTE, who gave 60 points to their performance, regretted her passive involvement in TT:

Our students seemed to enjoy our classes because they had many activities and games, which was meaningful and good for the first-year students in terms of experiencing a native speaker's class. But I don't know how much they improved their English. I should have at least gotten involved actively in setting goals and objectives of the course and planning teaching procedures. (3/22/04)

Thus, in contrast to the AET, the JTE did not show full satisfaction in their teaching. She described their TT classes as fun times, but she questioned the validity of such classes because actual improvement in students' English abilities was not observable. In other words, though the JTE deferred to the AET in terms of teaching itself, which was caused mainly by her lack of confidence in her English abilities and her belief in the native speaker fallacy, she seemed to preserve her professional duties and pride as an English teacher by regretting that she did not involve herself in lesson planning and goal setting more actively. Thus, her passive involvement in TT might have led to her low satisfaction in their TT performance.

## Discussion

The JTE clearly revealed her lack of confidence in her communicative English abilities and the AET was a total novice about teaching and living in Japan. Thus, it can be said that the JTE was a linguistic novice in the target language, while the AET was a cultural novice in the local society. In other words, both teachers lacked in one of two forms of power—either language or cultural power.

However, the classes were AET-centered even though the AET, a first-year AET, was a total novice in the Japanese school lacking political, linguistic, and cultural power in the local society. This may imply that the target language power could be more significant than any other power in terms of power-sharing in the TT setting. Moreover, the AET's language superiority was empowered by the native speaker fallacy of the JTE, who insisted that NSs are better qualified to teach English communication. Thus, the JTE's passive involvement in TT, which was caused mainly by her lack of confidence in her English competence and her belief in the native speaker fallacy, presumably led to her low satisfaction in their TT performance.

In summary, the results of this study show that the JTE's identity, influenced by language power inequality, was deeply involved in her peripheral participation, which seems to be supported by her belief in the native speaker fallacy at educational and individual levels.

## Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this study, which dealt with one particular TT relationship, turned out to be deeply involved with social

complexities of power relations. The professional world of the JTE and AET extended far beyond the classroom and the power issues between NSs and NNSs became apparent in particular ways that seems to prominently concern English language proficiency.

As for implications, I have suggestions for building more equal TT relationships. First of all, it is strongly recommended that JTEs be provided English language training opportunities for establishing self-confidence in their English skills and given a lighter workload. Nonetheless, the central government has increased tasks and pressured them to improve their English abilities, which is not required for teachers of other subjects, without paying much attention to problems with the working conditions for JTEs. Based on my own experience as a high school teacher, I know that most JTEs are tired from their heavy workload and they have no time or energy left to study English or teaching methods. Therefore, the government should consider this and reduce JTEs' overwhelming workload in order to improve their English abilities and TT relationships.

Another important issue is to lessen the power of the native speaker fallacy in the minds of teachers and students. It would be impossible to share role/power equally between AETs and JTEs without discarding the native speaker fallacy. First, team teachers themselves should recognize the significance of NNS teachers in EFL settings, who play the crucial role of filling cultural and linguistic gaps between students and NSs. This problem, however, is ultimately not one that teachers themselves can solve. It is a global problem having to do with the balance of power between *Center* and *Periphery speakers of English* (Kachru, 1986).

Thus, we should carefully consider power issues of English language teaching and learning. In this sense, it is important for TESOL educators to put more emphasis on NS-NNS relationships in teacher education and to make others aware of NNSs' contributions in foreign language teaching.

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