



Enhancing Autonomous Language Learning Through Mobile Apps: Users' Experience of Online Classes

Mónica de Lourdes Ontaneda Rea

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Resumen

El propósito de este estudio de investigación descriptiva es determinar que los estudiantes universitarios desarrollaron autonomía en su propio tiempo y espacio mediante el uso de aplicaciones que enriquecieron las habilidades del idioma inglés. Para lograr el objetivo se desarrolló una pregunta de investigación: hasta qué medida el uso de aplicaciones móviles contribuyó al proceso del aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas. Cuyos resultados describen la experiencia de los estudiantes del nivel intermedio, a través de una encuesta en escala Likert. Mucha gente considera los dispositivos móviles como una forma de entretenimiento, sin darse cuenta de que ofrecen oportunidades para enriquecer el aprendizaje de idiomas. Además, el aprendizaje autónomo es fundamental no solo para incrementar los conocimientos; sino también una forma de experimentar por sí mismos y hacerse más responsables. Al principio, la aplicación móvil fue un desafío para los estudiantes debido a la falta de conocimiento para usarlas correctamente. Sin embargo, el 70% de ellos respondió que la aplicación móvil les dio una experiencia positiva en su aprendizaje autónomo y el 69% mencionó que las aplicaciones móviles realmente maximizan su aprendizaje en el idioma. Hoy en día, el papel de los profesores debería proporcionar todos los mecanismos para que los alumnos tengan éxito a través de la tecnología, especialmente mediante el uso de aplicaciones móviles y hacer que los alumnos sean más autónomos en el proceso de aprendizaje de inglés. Como trabajo de investigación futuro, el investigador tiene la intención de explorar e informar sobre la propia elección de los estudiantes al usar teléfonos inteligentes para adquirir y dominar el idioma inglés.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje autónomo, aplicación móvil, aprendizaje del idioma inglés.

Abstract

The purpose of this descriptive research study is to determine that university students developed autonomy on their own time and space by using apps that enriched students' English language skills. In order to achieve the goal a research question was developed: to what extent the use of mobile apps contributed to the autonomous language learning process, whose results describe students' experience through a Likert Scale Survey for students of Intermediate level. Many people consider mobile devices as a way of entertainment, without noticing that they offer opportunities to enrich language learning. Besides, autonomous learning is fundamental not only to increase students' knowledge, but also as way to experience on their own and make them more responsible. At the beginning of mobile application was a challenge for learners due to the lack of knowledge of using them properly. However, 70% of them answered that mobile-app gave them a positive experience in their autonomous learning and 69% mentioned m-apps really maximized their language learning. Nowadays teachers' role should give all the mechanisms for learners to succeed through technology especially by using mobile apps and make learners more autonomous in the language learning process. As a future research work, the researcher intends to explore and report on learners' own choice to use smartphones for acquiring and mastering English language.

Keywords: autonomous learning, mobile application, English language learning.

Enhancing Autonomous Language Learning Through Mobile Apps: Users' Experience of Online Classes

The new way of teaching classes in a virtual way due to the Pandemic disease (COVID-19) have turned teachers into e-learning ones to make classes and resources more accessible for students to enrich their learning. Making learners more autonomous and able to work in an instructional setting (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Mobile application lets learners gain positive results on language learning especially when apps are chosen and led by educators rather than on their own. However, both students and teachers do not know all the usefulness of mobile app resources to enrich language learning.

Nowadays, virtual instructional settings offer teachers the possibility to cover more contents and make learners more independent by working with different dashboards and educational platforms, making autonomous learning happens. Our culture as Ecuadorians, in which there were teacher-led lessons, have changed and now is more oriented toward independent learning. Berger (2014) said "In response to what we feel are vital 21st century skills, we are beginning to include more use of technology" (p. 311).

The use of mobile apps in language learning lies in determining the advantages of using them to improve academic performance of university students. Demonstrating that these educational resources freely available on mobile devices, can contribute significantly especially when they are led by teachers for specific purposes. In this case, the disposal of mobile applications such as BrainLang, Speaking Practice, and Using Idioms/Phrases were necessary to reinforce language learning and gain more experience as autonomous learners.

Wireless technology and mobile devices around the world have made big changes in social, economic and educational lifestyles in this new century. M-learning as a core of pedagogical activities in higher education is not only used as primary mode of instructional learning, but it is a new mode of delivering interactive activities to practice and enrich English Language. M-learning involves various applications really appealing to students to work any time during the day. It can give them time to interact among themselves in the virtual world and support their learning beyond conversations held in online classes (Elaish et al., 2017).

According to Maraza et al. (2018) "The success of smart mobile devices has caused a change in the lifestyle of people of all ages worldwide". Nevertheless, many people consider them as a way of entertainment, without noticing that they offer opportunities to enrich language learning. Besides, autonomous learning is fundamental not only to increase students' knowledge, but also a way to experience on their own and make them more responsible. In a language learning instructional setting, the relationship between students and teachers are very necessary to set up the autonomy (Chun, Yuk, & Jingjing, 2015).

The purpose of this research study is to determine that university students develop autonomy in their own time and space through mobile application use that enhances English language skills. In order to achieve the goal, the following research question has been developed: To what extent do the use of mobile apps contribute to students' autonomy and enhance English language learning process?

Literature Review

Rosell-Aguilar (2018), found that autonomy was fostered, whereas students work with mobile devices in different meaningful English skills such as reading, listening, speaking and writing to reinforce or gain knowledge in an interactive way by using apps. This dynamic outdoor learning takes place while learners use them on their own through several significant activities, which increase their own autonomy in informal settings. Learners are engaged in mobile learning and they recognize how useful apps are for language acquisition. The application of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) is really important in the Ecuadorian Curricular planning to make possible mobile applications be used by the students and reach the maximization of knowledge in this interactive process as an inclusion program for students after this pandemic disease (Maldonado, 2019).

BrainLang is a language teaching apps, also known as visual listening to enhance English language understanding through videos, images and subtitles. It is a way to acquire language very natural by listening and understanding different types of stories according to students' proficiency level. This app lets students measure their progress and there is a trainer in case students need. At the end of each activity, language acquisition is evaluated and measured immediately by giving a score. It was recognized in 2019 with the award for entrepreneurs the Great Pitch, whose founder is Leopoldo Cano. Besides, Cano considers a message is more effective and well-transmitted if it is through a story because it stays 90% longer in memory. So, learning video stories are not only much more engaging, but also very beneficial (Cano, 2020).

English Speaking Practice is a beginner app version with popular English Conversation Practice; in which students have the chance of recording and practice dialogues, and identify the sound of words when listening. This program offers a complete solution to obtain English fluency after each lesson. Quizzes for comprehension are also offered with some questions, involving students with fun while practicing pronunciation, basic grammar and reading tips based on intonation and speed. It is important to practice speaking what you hear, immerse yourself, surround yourself with English and study the correct material (Kim, 2017).

Idioms and Phrases Proverbs is another interesting app that students have at hand to practice their favorite English idioms and proverbs with their meaning and most common phrasal verbs. Students can try idioms quizzes, phrasal verb quizzes that is why this app is one of the easiest and suitable way to reach the purpose of gaining more vocabulary words as possible. This app is downloadable on smartphones. Be able to find and understand the necessary phrases to test students' knowledge. Liantas (2017) said learning idioms increase learners' lexical, grammar and syntax and the most incredible is their knowledge of usage. Moreover, Google Play Store provides lots of outstanding applications that can be downloaded by users to improve their English language abilities such as reading, listening, speaking, writing, spelling, grammar and vocabulary according to their proficiency level and with different learning and teaching strategies. (AL-Jarf, 2020)

The application of mobile apps in smartphone make students go beyond on their learning process. Practicing essential contents very necessary to improve communicative

abilities and understand specific topics. These tools allow them to solve the situations that appear in the teaching-learning process. They promote a great interaction of users and activate learners throughout the process. Empower their English skills and engage learners into self-directed learning. Therefore, apps have great potential as tools for teaching-learning especially when they are led by teachers (Rani & Prakash, 2016 & Maraza, Casas, Oviedo et al., 2018).

Method Context and participants

A descriptive method is a type of study to be applied to deduce if a fact or circumstance is carried out properly by analyzing the instruments and criteria to explore the main problem. In descriptive studies, the researcher measures the presence or characteristics of a phenomenon within a population at a certain time about any factor. Always in regard to a specific moment, having limitations to describe one or several phenomenon without an intention to set up casual relationships among other factors. (Rus, 2021)

This research was conducted at a large public university in Loja city, during the pandemic period, where teachers and students used TICs as a useful way of teaching and learning method. Although the university encourages and supports the use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) called EVA, where teachers set up assignments, didactic materials and tests, among others. This descriptive research involved 209 undergraduate students, who were in module 3 of B1 as Independent Users of the English language. The one that is now a law requirement before graduating.

The participants' average age was approximately from 20 to 28 years old. The majority of the participants were in their last year of university study. Some of them live nearby Loja or in other regions such as the coast and the Amazon There were a total of 126 women and 83 men, as it is visible there are a lot of students in each level most of them were women.

Due to its descriptive nature, this study used a survey as an instrument of validation for students of intermediate level. There were 7 questions that were evaluating the use of mobile apps in order to enhance autonomous learning as an experience in online classes. They had the chance of filling out an online survey.

Ankur, Saket, Satish, et al. (2015) said a Likert scale is applied as a fundamental psychometric tool in educational sciences research to analyze the points on a scale through coherent scientific thinking. In this case a survey to measure their reaction towards this study. Therefore, learners were recruited to share their perceptions of issues related to their use of technology by using mobile apps outside the classroom for language learning.

Most of students were from different careers such as Economy, Law, Psych pedagogy, Computing, Finance, Social Communication, Psychology, Public Administration, Nursing, among others. They used to receive 3 synchronous classes and 1 day of asynchronous activities where they experienced the language on their own with different types of performance. However, they had to improve fluency, pronunciation grammar and vocabulary with the help of mobile apps like BrainLang, Speaking Practice Conversation and English Idioms and Phrases that were introduced in each respective unit in the EVA.

At the end of the module, they had to show all evidence done on each one to reinforce their fluency, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, and be ready for the Final Speaking Test.

On the other hand, in unit 1, students worked on BrainLang whose main purpose was to learn English in an easy and fast way without studying. Its components were listening through practical videos with real situation in UK and USA; a trainer advice based on pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, an easy grammar guide, including speaking sessions with native speakers.

In unit 2, students worked on English Speaking Practice where they had videos and some different kinds of conversation based on daily activities, including business conversations. By recording their practice on vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency in that app. Therefore, asynchronous online learning let learners access to materials anytime and anywhere by using apps, too. Alkan's (2020) study considered that promoting participation, enhancing their own autonomy based on their needs to choose as many exercises from apps at their own pace by receiving their own feedback and using their self-reflection, are multidirectional ways of communication.

The last unit 3 seen in the English module, they had the opportunity to use English Idioms and Phrases that were included in EVA (Virtual Learning Environment) through a word bank with lots of idiomatic definitions, and examples for them to learn more from each other and enrich their vocabulary knowledge. All of this reinforce, was very necessary so that learners can make their own English conversation dialogues, improve their fluency and pronunciation by applying idioms and useful language covered in class.

Data Analysis

In order to achieve the goal of this study, a research question about to what extent the use of mobile apps contributes to students' autonomy and enhance English language learning process. This descriptive research study was done to determine if university students developed autonomy at their own pace through BrainLang, English Speaking Practice and Idioms apps, which really enhanced their English language. The seven questions given to students are based on using m-apps as a positive experience in their autonomous learning and at the same time intensifying their English Language Knowledge.

There are people who think that mobile devices are seen only as way of entertainment, but they also offer ways of enriching English language and increasing their autonomy and making themselves more responsible by working on their own. The opinion of learners are shown through figures. The distribution of figures are based on percentages according to strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree.

Distribution of the criteria according to everybody's' respond.

1. Do you consider that the use of mobile apps was a positive experience in your autonomous learning?

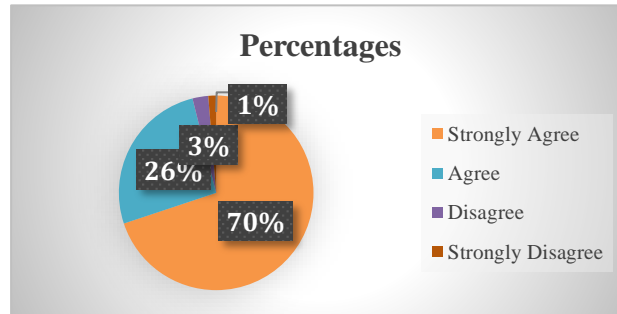


Figure 1

As shown in figure 1, 70% of the students strongly agree that mobile application was a positive experience in their autonomous learning and 26% of the students agree in the same question. Only 3% of them disagree and 1% of them are strongly disagree.

2. Do you consider that BrainLang activities (listening + writing, gaining more new words from the bag of words) maximize your language learning?

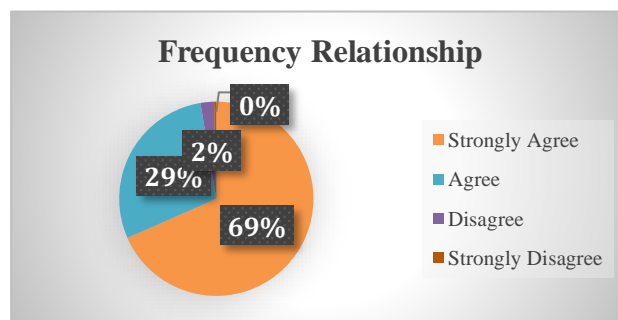


Figure 2

Figure 2 points at 69% of the students think that BrainLang activities (listening+writing, gaining more new words from the bad of words) really maximize their language learning comprehension, 29% of them, said they agree and 2% of them disagree at all.

3. Do the activities from English Speaking Practice (listening, quiz practice & record) helped themselves to improve pronunciation?

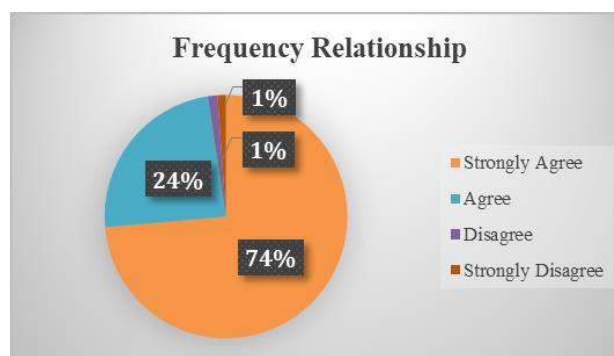


Figure 2

Referring to figure 3, 74% of the students are strongly agree that English Speaking Practice (listening, quiz practice & record) helped themselves to improve pronunciation. 24% of the students agree and only 1% of them disagree and 1% are strongly disagree.

4. Do activities from English Speaking Practice (listening, quiz, practice & record) let you improve your fluency?

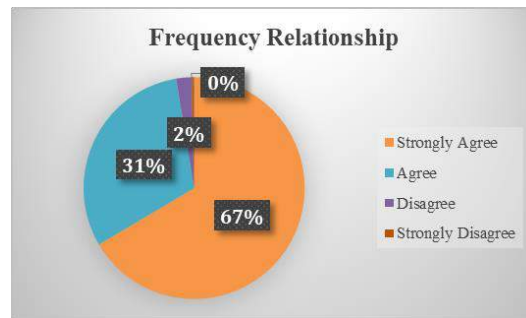


Figure 3

In figure 4, 67% of the students are strongly agree that English Speaking Practice really improved their fluency, and 31% of them agreed and only 2% of them disagree.

5. Do you consider that the word bank in EVA for idioms and phrases, including your speaking practice let you get good results in your speaking production?

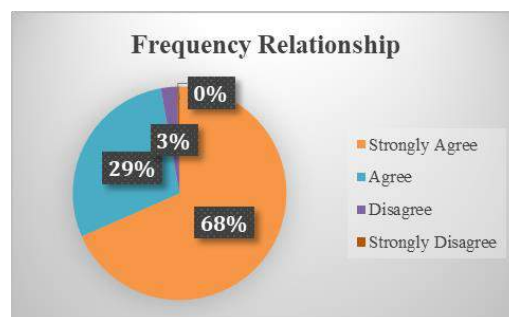


Figure 4

In figure 5, 68% of them said they are strongly agree that the work bank in the virtual learning environment (EVA) for idioms and phrases, including their speaking practice let them get good results in their speaking production, 29% of them agreed. Only 3% of them disagree.

6. Do general contents based on English Speaking Practice contributed in a successful way to make statements and questions?

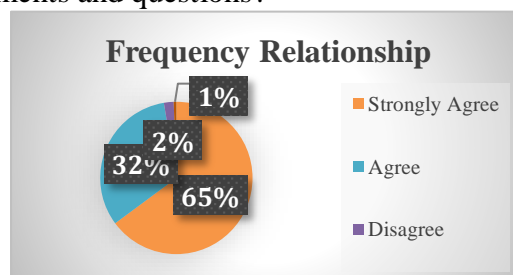


Figure 5

In figure 6, 65% of them are strongly agree that general contents based on English Speaking Practice contributed in a successful way to make statements and questions. 32% of them are also agree and only 2% of them disagree and 1% of them are strongly disagree.

7. Do you consider that English idioms and phrases app was helpful to test your knowledge on idioms, phrasal verbs into different contexts, and increase your vocabulary comprehension?

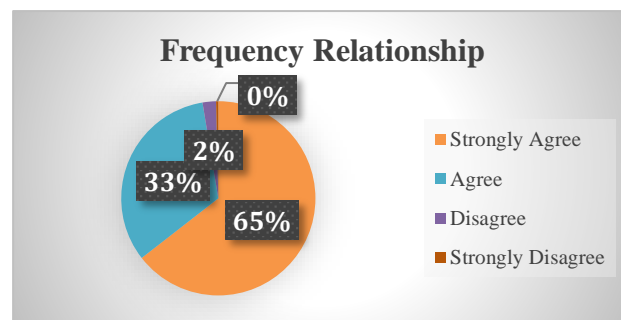


Figure 7

Figure 7 showed that 65% of them are strongly agree that idioms and phrases within an interactive contexts, increased their vocabulary comprehension. 33% of them agree and 2% of them disagree.

In addition, it is necessary to know that application of mobile apps was a challenge for students at the beginning of each English module due to the lack of experience on using them correctly. However, the teacher's guidance and control let them be successful in increasing English Language on their own and intensify their autonomy.

Ethical Considerations

Olaniran & Baruwa (2020) considered almost all organizations and research educational institutes have ways to ensure compliance with ethical standards and procedures to value moral principles and participants' names and data collection to manage them according to the best global practices.

Discussion

This study is focused on enhancing autonomous language learning through mobile apps by taking in consideration learners' experience; in this case, undergraduate students of upper levels from a public university as a way to help them reach their learning outcome of each unit according to the English Curriculum in this case B1 (Independent User). Mobile applications let learners gain positive results on language learning especially when apps are chosen and led by educators rather than on their own. However, both students and teachers do not know all the usefulness of mobile app resources to enrich language learning.

In terms of usefulness of applying mobile apps for language learning improving, 70% of them strongly agree that mobile applications were a positive experience for their autonomy in the English Language Learning. The use of mobile applications in language education has shown to be very effective enhancing students' experience. If apps are very friendly make learners be comfortable and able to use them at any time without limitations. This pattern of results is consistent with (Kim, 2017 & Maraza, Casas, Oviedo et al., 2018).

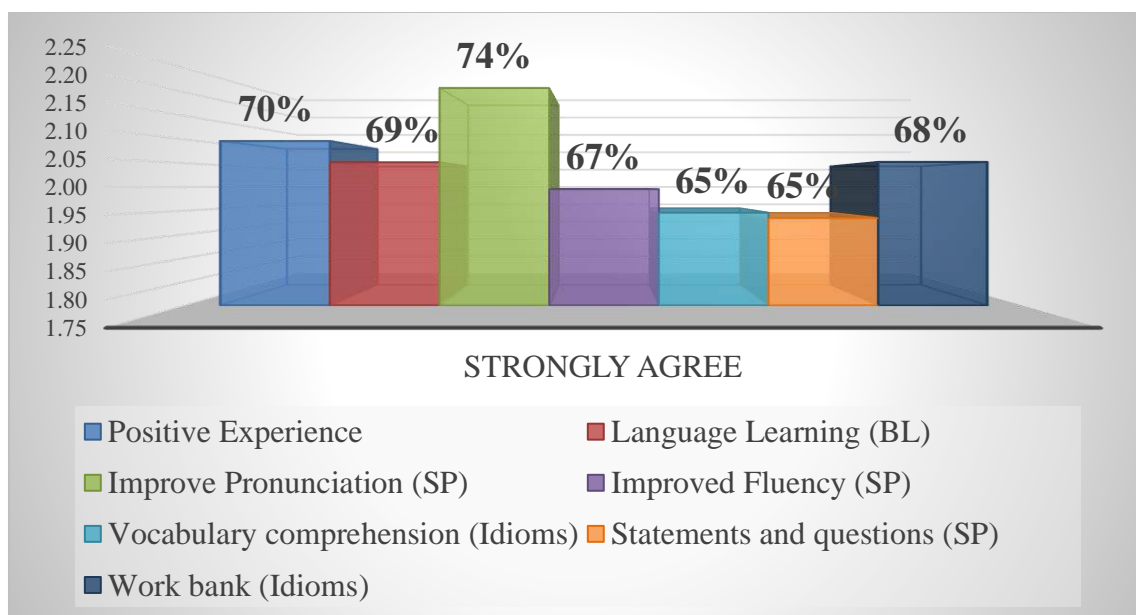


Figure 6

Furthermore, 69% of the students thought that BrainLang activities (listening+writing, gaining more new words from the bad of words) really maximize their language learning comprehension. This visual listening offers a schedule to practice for a week; it also measures students' level by means of lots of interesting stories. This results of the present study provides supporting evidence from Cano (2020).

Our finding highlighted that 74% of the students were strongly agreed that English Speaking Practice (listening, quiz practice & record) helped themselves to improve pronunciation. Students did not only practice on daily conversation, but also including business conversation in an independent and collaborative ways, in which they made their own dialogues and add useful language learnt in class. Besides, 67% of them were strongly agree that English Speaking Practice really improved their fluency. However, 65% of them were strongly agree that general contents based on English Speaking Practice contributed in a successful way to make statements and questions.

Taken together, with Idioms & Phrases, Proverbs app that obtained 65% of respondents were strongly agree that idioms and phrases within an interactive contexts, increased their vocabulary comprehension; and 68% said they were strongly agree that the work bank in the virtual learning environment (EVA) for idioms and phrases, including their speaking practice let them get good results in their speaking production.

Finally, Figure 8 describes all of the highest results found in the Likert Scale that was considered to measure the students' attitudes towards this way of language learning by using mobile apps.

Conclusions and implications

The results of this survey have shown that most of the undergraduate learners in English Language as intermediate users at a public university had the opportunity to enrich their knowledge and English abilities by reinforcing them through three different apps such as BrainLang, English Speaking Practice and Idioms & Phrases, Proverbs by means of their smartphones. The learners were using them in the three different units given in the virtual leaning environment (EVA) through a link that was activated in their smartphones. It is proven that the usage of the mobile apps helped them for many different purposes like improving fluency, pronunciation, making statement and question, among others.

The findings in this study have also shown that autonomy was increased by using these apps in their asynchronous sessions, and also showed the use of mobile applications really enhanced English language. However, not all local teachers have applied m-apps as part of their students' learning process for different language purposes. Besides, these apps provide them flexibility and independence to become in autonomous learners. Interactive applications can be really attractive to learners and get positive results as shown in figure 1. The same apps showed their scores as feedback and they also had to post evidence of their practice and final results in their portfolio. Individuals had the chance of learning at any time and at any location according to the language apps.

The findings from this study has also corresponded that learning a language is becoming easier and much more convenient with language apps available for users through mobile phones such as Android and iPhone users. This study as many others done around the world focuses on language learning by mobile apps. They were created to engage learners in an interactive way and at the same time to enrich English language on mobility.

Nowadays teachers' role should give all the mechanisms for learners to succeed through technology especially by using mobile apps and become them more autonomous in the language learning process. A major aim in virtual classes today is to produce autonomous learners who are able to set their own learning goals and can develop their own learning strategies to achieve the learning outcomes according to the respective level of proficiency. As a future research work, the researcher intends to explore and report on learners' own choice to use smartphones for acquiring and mastering English language.

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