

English acquisition of reading and writing skills on learners at fourth grade at Jesus School

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Resumen

Adquisición de la lectura y escritura del inglés en cuarto grado de la Escuela Jesús

Uno de los propósitos de la enseñanza del inglés en las escuelas públicas de Costa Rica es la integración e interrelación de las cuatro destrezas básicas en el proceso de comunicación. El artículo *Adquisición de la lectura y escritura del inglés en cuarto grado de La Escuela Jesús* es una síntesis de un estudio investigativo desarrollado en el año 2013. El propósito del estudio fue indagar sobre las estrategias de aprendizaje que estimulan la adquisición de la lectura y escritura del idioma inglés en cuarto grado en la Escuela Jesús de Atenas, localizada en Atenas. El estudio implementó estrategias didácticas que estimularan la adquisición de las habilidades de lectura y escritura en inglés. La recolección de la información se realizó utilizando una propuesta cualitativa donde se aplicaron cuatro instrumentos, a saber: tres observaciones realizadas en el aula, la aplicación de dos artefactos que evidencian el desempeño de los estudiantes en lectura y escritura, un grupo focal y una entrevista al Asesor Regional de Inglés en Alajuela. Los resultados obtenidos a través del proceso de recolección de información indicaron que los alumnos mejoraron sus competencias en la lectura y escritura después de realizar varias actividades en las que se emplearon las estrategias: palabras en la pared, escritura en grupo y ambiente rico en impresiones. Los resultados analizados en este estudio afirman que las estrategias aplicadas estimulan la adquisición de habilidades en la lectura y la escritura del inglés en alumnos de cuarto grado de la escuela pública.

Palabras claves: Estrategias para la lectura, estrategias para la escritura, inglés como idioma extranjero, la enseñanza del inglés en Costa Rica, enfoque cualitativo.

Abstract

Teaching English in II Cycle at public primary schools in Costa Rica relies on integrating and interrelating the four basic skills in the communication process. The *English Acquisition of Reading and Writing Skills on Learners at fourth grade at Jesus School* article is a consolidation of the research study developed in 2013. The purpose of this study was to research on learning strategies that stimulate the acquisition of reading and writing skills in fourth level at Jesus de Atenas public school located in Atenas. The study implemented reading and writing strategies. The collection of data was performed by using a qualitative approach using four different instruments: three classroom observations, two artifacts as evidence of the students' performance, a focus group and, an interview to the English advisor at Regional de Alajuela. The data collection process demonstrated that students improved both reading and writing competence after performing strategies such as Word Walls, Group Writing and Print-Rich Environment. The analyzed results in this study confirmed that the applied strategies stimulate the acquisition of reading and writing skills in fourth graders at a public school.

Key words: Reading Strategies, Writing Strategies, EFL in Costa Rica, Teaching English, Qualitative Approach.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of teaching English at the elementary level in Costa Rica denotes the fact that early age is the best time to acquire a foreign language. “Children exercise a good deal of both cognitive and effective effort in order to internalize both native and second language” (Brown, 2001, p.87). Costa Rica’s Ministry of Education (MEP) proposes the introduction of reading and writing skills in the foreign language only after students have learnt to read and write in their mother tongue. The process of reading and writing in the foreign language starts at fourth grade, by this time, children have strengthened their mother tongue.

In the first cycle of the elementary education (I, II, and III grade), the purpose of teaching English relies on the integration and interrelation of oral and aural skills in the foreign language at a basic level. The communication process includes such activities as understanding, performing and following relationships. The organization reflects the differentiation between receptive (listening) and productive performance (speaking) skills.

Particularly, in Cycle II (IV, V, VI grade), the purpose of teaching English relies on integrating and interrelating the four basic skills in the communication process; however, the organization of the syllabus reflects the distinction between receptive (listening and reading) and productive performance (speaking and writing). In this cycle, learners start a language learning process that tends to reinforce reading and writing skills. From this perspective, Brown notes, “Reading ability will best be developed in association with writing, listening, and speaking activity” (Brown, 1994, p.283). The author reinforces the importance of acquiring a reading approach by capitalizing on the interrelation of skills; especially the reading-writing connection.

In the classroom, teachers pursue in their plans a well-organized set of actions in order to help learners achieve objectives. The English syllabus gives the teachers a list of procedures to work with during the daily forty minute lesson. This list guides teachers to develop tasks with emphasis on a required skill and it provides suggestions about the kind of approach

that teachers could use. However, English teachers frequently think twice about the selection of the best approach or approaches to enhance a particular study block, depending on the characteristics of a group.

In choosing the correct approach, teachers consider the aspect of time; some groups can spend more time in the acquisition of some themes in comparison with others. Based on the level of study, some children also show more facilities or difficulties in acquiring a skill than others; this is particularly true in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. The reality of each group and level differs a lot. In planning and teaching a class, teachers need to take into account many aspects of the level, such as age, interests, and first language background to know what will work and what will become difficult for some children.

As part of the integration of reading and writing skills the research devotes on searching the effectiveness of reading and writing strategies in fourth grade students. This school level experiment a gradual introduction of reading and writing skills to complement the language acquired during Cycle I. From this scenario, aroused the research question of how an English teacher can stimulate the acquisition of reading and writing skills at fourth grade in elementary school. Therefore, the following objectives have been stated:

■ General Objective

To conduct research on learning strategies that stimulate the acquisition of reading and writing skills in fourth level at Jesus School.

Specific Objectives:

1. To identify the reading and writing goals stated in MEP’s English syllabus for fourth grade.
2. To identify factors that influence the learning of reading and writing in young learners.
3. To analyze the learning strategies that stimulate the acquisition of reading and writing in fourth graders.

METHODOLOGY

The study took place at Jesus School in Atenas, a rural public school with only one fourth grade group. The group attended English classes every day for a forty minute lesson. The selection of the sample population corresponded to the convenience sampling approach, according to Marshall, "It involves the selection of the most accessible subjects" (Marshall, 1996, p.2). The research took place in the 2013 and last a school year.

The study focused on the qualitative approach, it dealt with the case of a group, fourth grade, which starts the process of acquiring reading and writing skills. By using a qualitative approach, a researcher can explore how the English teacher should appropriately handle the effective acquisition of both skills, by applying some approaches and strategies that stimulate the fourth graders' learning process.

Throughout the investigation, a participant observation was carried. The observation lasted forty to eighty minutes and students were studying different contents or objectives. The Regional English Advisor was interviewed to look for information about the issues that he considered could affect the process of teaching reading and writing skills at fourth grade. Through artifacts it was intended to assess student's proficiency based on the reading and writing performance. Finally, the students' focus group gathered information about learner's perception of the activities that they had done in the last weeks, the activities included: Word Walls, Group Writing, and Print- Rich Environment. The researcher invited all the students to participate in this activity, however, only sixteen learners accepted. They sat in a semi- circle and spoke Spanish with the researcher.

The instruments resulted from the categories methodology, performance, and motivation. At the same time, each category had outcome from the sub-categories classroom interaction, completion of tasks, classroom activities, attitude, and didactic resources. Table 1 shows the division of categories and sub-categories.

Instruments were coded for guiding the reader to a better understanding of the collected data and for further analysis of the information maintaining the confidentiality of the participants. (Table 2)

■ Implemented Activities during the Application of Instruments

This section provides a short description of implemented activities that fourth grade learners performed during the research process. The activities are the following:

Activity 1

Picture Impression Technique

Objective:

To activate prior knowledge before reading.

Description:

The teacher leads a discussion about learners' inferences in order to activate students' prior knowledge before reading. Individually, students look carefully at the readings' images, drawings and picture. Then, they infer what the reading is about and some main ideas just by looking at the pictures that the reading presents.

Activity 2

Reading for INFO

Objective:

To obtain information from different texts.

To answer some reading comprehension questions.

Description:

Individually or in small groups, students read different texts, descriptions, dialogues that relate with topics of the English Syllabus' study blocks. Then, they look for information in the readings in order to answer some comprehension questions.

Activity 3 Revising Stage Activity

Objective:

To promote free writing tasks.

Description:

The teacher promotes a writing environment and assumes the role of consultant for fourth learners. Students start writing about an idea or given picture and they can go freely to the teacher's desk and ask for feedback about what they are writing. The teacher motivates learners with ideas and comments about their work. During this activity students' grammar errors are not checked.

Activity 4 Volunteer Reading

Objective:

To read pieces of writing aloud.

Description:

The teacher motivates students to read aloud, from their desks, little pieces of writing that relate with the studied objectives and contents. Students decide to read when the teacher looks for volunteers; they have no pressure for doing this.

Activity 5 Print- Rich Environment

Objective:

To identify studied vocabulary and produce pieces of writing.

Description:

The teacher labels material in strategic places of the classroom. The material could include vocabulary, statements, posters, ads, and so on that highlight contents studied before along with story books that catch students' attention. By looking at the material, learners interiorize the correct writing of the prints and their meanings so they can use this vocabulary to produce pieces of writing.

Activity 6 Group Writing

Objective:

To write a short story in small teams.

Description:

Students seat in groups of three people and choose the topic they want to write about in order to write a booklet. Then, they make a picture in each page. The teacher guides students think about a title and keep coherence among the sentences.

Activity 7 Word Walls Strategy

Objective:

To use known words in different context.

Description:

Students prepare a list of known words and make labels. They color and decorate the words as they want. Students arrange the words in alphabetical order and hang them in a wall of the classroom. The teacher reviews the word lists for some days and she asks learners to create oral sentences using this material.

Activity 8 Retelling Pyramid Strategy

Objective:

To retell reading's events or information using a specific number of words.

Description:

Students read a given text and then they answer some comprehension questions using the number of words that the teacher expects. Answers give shape to a pyramid. The teacher guides learner to comprehend informational text while having fun.

RESULTS

Findings are presented following established sub-categories. Each applied instrument was an opportunity for studying the accomplishment of reading and writing tasks.

■ Completion of tasks

This subcategory considered students' performance during the assigned tasks. During the OBS1 scholars worked on a student book exercise that required them to answer some reading comprehension questions about two texts. After reading the texts, in a sight and loud way, the learners had to answer the questions and write complete sentences. When students were writing their answers, they presented some difficulties related to the subject of the sentences; some others showed problems with subject-verb agreement and with the use of the preposition in. During this first observation, most of the children read the texts with certain difficulties in the pronunciation of some words or structures and also they wrote their answers with expected mistakes according to their level. The activity allowed the integration of skills which reinforced Brummitt-Yale, J. (2012) who had stated that reading affects writing and writing affects reading because when students intertwine both skills they have a more effective acquisition process.

The OBS2 took place in a lesson where fourth graders had already started unit number 6. The English teacher had already introduced vocabulary that named some aspects of the province and the structures *There is/ There are*. The teacher emphasized their use in a written and oral way. The activity invited children to read the text and then draw information from the written passage. Children acknowledged the meaning of the text because they had received input and besides it was meaningful. This process supports what Tomlinson suggested, "Make sure that the language the learners are exposed to is authentic..." (Tomlinson, B. 2001, p.69). After practice, each learner completed the chart individually. Besides, each child wrote from their own a little bit more about their province by completing

the sentences *My province isand Places people like to visit....* They tried to write sentences that included known vocabulary and adjectives plus the studied structures *There is/ There are*.

The OBS3 took place when fourth graders were preparing especial material to be used in future activities. Each learner wrote, colored, and decorated a piece of paper with a word, as they wanted. Fullan (1991) highlighted the importance of using innovation in students' activities. Students prepared their own flashcards with studied vocabulary. Then, the teacher arranged all the words in alphabetically order, as the strategy Word Walls suggested. The vocabulary was used to produce simple sentences.

In the data collection process, the two artifacts; *Artifact A* and *Artifact B* (ARAS and ARBS) revealed information about the sub-category *completion of tasks*. In ARAS, children answered five questions using the Retelling Pyramid Strategy which enhances retelling and summarization of a reading. This strategy helped children to compare and contrast the information from the description. In each question of the artifact, students increased the number of words in their answers. For instance, they started with one simple concept and ended up with an answer that required five or more words. The next Figure (Fig. 1) demonstrated the learner's performance in this activity.

The majority of the students performed effectively in all the tasks, 14 out of 18 did right in the first activity. In task number two, 50% of the students did deficient. During the application of the artifact, the researcher noticed that sometimes students did not have their answers correctly because they did not count the words of their answers, but, they understood the meaning of the questions and found the expected answers. The deficient job in this activity meant that children had problems in locating the appropriate food terms and transcript them correctly; for example, the question that presented more difficulties was question B, *Use two words to answer what is George's favorite food?*

In ARBS children had to apply their most advance writing skills. The activity consisted in

Artifact A: Retelling Pyramid Strategy

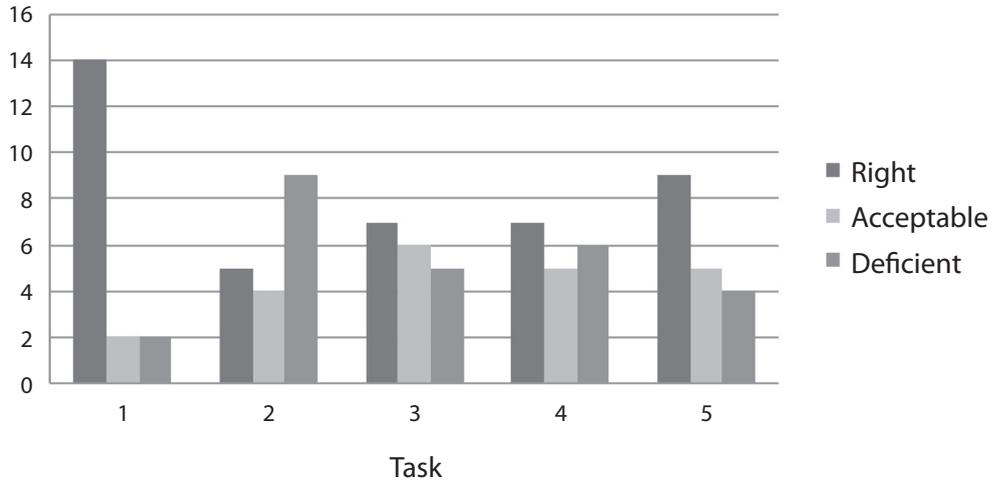


Figure 1. Results of learner's performance in a reading and writing exercise. (Source: Artifact A, 2013)

choosing a holiday and then writing sentences about it while applying a Print- Rich Environment strategy.

Figure 2 illustrates that all the students did *Excellent* writing sentences with the studied vocabulary and structures, only two students worried about the text coherence while writing. This fact represented the reality of the group; children belong to a learning stage in which they are not conscious enough of the importance of being coherent during the writing process. In this activity, they focused on writing complete sentences related to the chosen holiday rather than follow a sequence or coherence.

According to Brown (2001) when children write they go on a two-step process, "First you figure out your meaning, then you put it into language..." (Brown, 2001, p.336). The election of the holidays and celebrations was based on student's likes, dislikes, and cultural context. The next texts show a reproduction of what these students produced on this activity.

Independence Day

By ARBS.8

I like Independence Day.

Independence Day celebrated on September 15th.

Artifact B: Environment Strategy

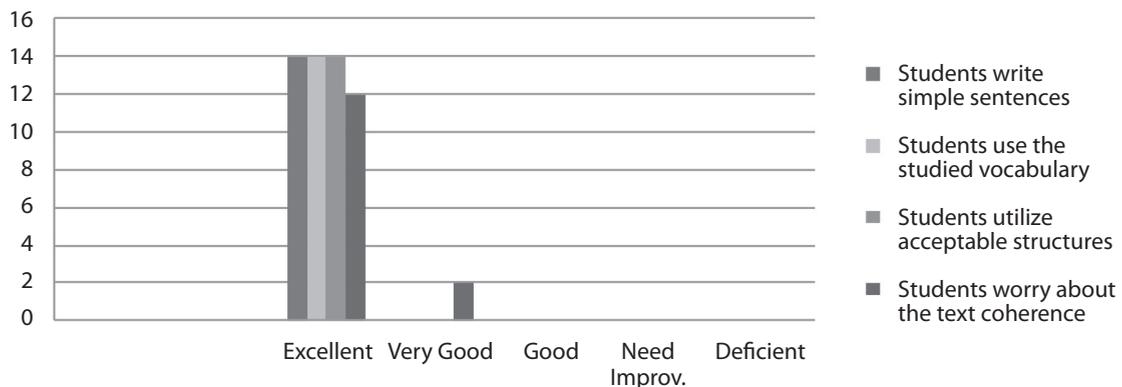


Figure 2. Results of learner's performance in a reading and writing exercise. Source: Artifact B, 2013.

I go to Independence Day festival.
In the Independence Day I sing the National Anthem.

Christmas

By ARBS.12

I like Christmas.

I love to eat tamales.

My mom eats tamales in Christmas.

My mom prepares tamales with corn flour, vegetables, rice, and plantain leaves.

Bull Fights

By ARBS.9

My family and I love to see Bull Fights.

I prefer bull fights in Zapote, Palmares, etc.

I like to eat in Zapote, too.

Bull fights are typical traditions.

The previous examples reflected the perceptions, insights, ideas, few common mistakes and obtained knowledge from the studied unit and the strategies they had been putting into practice for the last weeks.

■ Attitude

This category deemed the students' incitement while learning or using the foreign language. Data gathered showed that students have a favorable attitude towards some strategies that stimulate the acquisition of reading and writing skills. The majority of fourth graders said that they preferred the Words Wall Strategy because the words helped them write a booklet. (FGS4.3) mentions "the vocabulary taught us how to name the things that are in Costa Rica", FGS4.4 "the words helped us to pronounce them correctly, and we learnt how to write them". (FGS4.1) and (FGS1.3) mentioned that "their favorite activity was the Group Writing activity because the book facilitated the learning of words and they could share with the classmates". (FGS4.8) expressed that he preferred the Print- Rich Environment because "another children could appreciate what they did". "Any innovation that requires new activities

on part of students will succeed or fail according to whether students actually participate in these activities. Students will participate to the extent that they understand and are motivated to try what is expected" (Fullan, M, 1991, p.183) the introduction reading and writing provides a welcome change of pace in the students' routine.

For some students tasks were easy, (FGS2.3) notes "Yes because it was easier". For this child the acquisition of these skills meant a simple task following the proposed strategies. (FGS1.3) expresses "I want to do it again, to work in teams". This comment reinforces once again students' needs to work with their classmates and share time together while learning. The strategies took learners throughout different stages of learning in an easy and funny way. (FGS1.7) highlights "Yes because it was funny."

There were negative answers as well, two students expressed that the activities required a lot of effort and time from them. For instance, (FGS1.5) said "I did not like it was very tired". Both (FGS1.5), (FGS1.9) expressed "I felt tired because I colored and wrote too much". Children's comments demonstrated their interests and attitudes which are important factors that affect language acquisition.

Teaching a foreign language implies being aware of the students' framework. "The student's intention to understand or to reproduce material is very clearly related to his or her interest in carrying out the learning task, either for its own sake or in response to external requirements" (Ramsden, 1997, p. 201). The students' disposition toward activities becomes a challenge for the English teachers. From this perspective, (INEA) expressed "a child's attitude about learning a foreign language and language skills affects his or her ability to do so. If children approach reading and writing skills as something difficult and tedious, they may not make significant progress; whereas very motivated students are likely to do better".

■ Classroom interaction

The subcategory classroom interaction reported information about the students' understanding and

involvement during the three observed classes. The students' interaction influenced positively the performance that children had during this reading and writing activity. The researcher observed how 80% of the students really enjoyed the assigned activity; nevertheless, a minority showed some stress or boredom during the task.

Students' answers about their feelings during the activity demonstrate that learners enjoyed working with their classmates. Used strategies encouraged team and values such as cooperation, tolerance, friendship, and hard work, among others. A student mentioned "I felt good because we worked with our classmates" (FGS1.2). Expressions such as (FGS1.8) "I like it because I have fun in the activities" and (FGS1.6) "I like it because the activity is nice" motivated children to work happily. Though, there was a student, who did not show motivation towards the practiced strategies, "I did not like it because we had to write strange words" (FGS1.5)

■ Classroom activities

The subcategory classroom activities reflected on the teaching of reading and writing strategies that require learners to arrive to an outcome from a given task. There are difficulties that hinder the process of teaching reading and writing skills in public school because this articulation process starts until they get to fourth grade. According to the Regional Advisor, "In some cases the oral and aural skills are not integrated in the development of other skills. The reading and writing processes should start considering the material that the students already know in oral form... In some cases the reading or writing activity lacks the pre-writing activities, which is very important to guarantee the success of the task" (ENEA).

Teaching approach must involve communicative and realistic tasks to challenge students' participation and learning process. For instance, the regional advisor suggested a student-centered process that means a teaching acquisition process built upon what students need, already know, and can do. According to experts in the field, the process of

learning both skills must start in early ages "... is an articulation process, in which students may develop step by step those skills" (ENEA). The integration of skills takes into consideration students' learning styles, while encouraging the development of learning strategies.

The selection of authentic didactic resources and texts for practice and evaluation of the language skills contributes to the students' performance. "Didactic resources play an important role because they will help the students to develop the reading and writing skills" (ENEA). Teachers need to look resources that would contribute to the comprehension of the material and acquisition of the skills.

Fourth graders referred positively to the use of materials. One student says "They helped us because we can see the words" (FGS2.1). Another mentions, "Yes, because we could study and learn the words" (FGS2.2). Students recognized that personalized material really worked, not only to study or review the words; but also to learn or even memorize their meaning and correct use. In the data collection process, the researcher used the reading of some words and production of writing sentences with the new vocabulary almost every day. The previous comments reinforced the importance of using eye-catching materials or flashcards to introduce and study different type of vocabulary.

CONCLUSIONS

On second cycle of the Costa Rican Educational System, fourth grade students' start with the integration of reading and writing in their learning process, and during this experience children exercise both cognitive and affective effort in order to internalize native and foreign language mutually. As part of the conclusion, the findings are review based on the three main categories of the research study.

■ Performance

This category showed the students' proficiency in activities that stimulate the acquisition of reading and writing skills and how the teacher provided encouragement and praise as well as positive feedback

to the children. Learners worked on different activities that stimulated their language understanding while practicing both skills reciprocally. Moreover, this category offered a “classroom-eye-view” of authentic reading and writing assessment, for instance, student’s completion of tasks reflected the process and final products that showed improvements or backwards in the acquisition of both skills. Data revealed that fourth graders made an attempt to understand what they read. Participants wrote answers that included simple sentences, using known vocabulary, and acceptable structures according to what they knew. The mistakes they did during their writing sessions were expected considering their age and learning level.

■ Motivation

During the research there was the assumption that motivation is a significant element that increases the students’ work in their English classes. In the implementation process, students showed enthusiasm and really had fun when solving the tasks. They expressed they felt good because they could work with other classmates and even help their English teacher. Students reacted positively towards the proposed activities, this motivation was fundamental to transform the classroom interaction, and attitude. Most of the learners wanted to persist practicing the activities that promoted the acquisition of reading and writing skills. Learners took advantages of each task while investing time and energy in their resolution. They really enjoyed the activities which

focused in pursuing a goal while making students feel well.

The teacher let students get involved in this learning process; for example, children worked on the elaboration of visual aids, the grouped book and they personalized each flashcard done in class. They felt proud of their final products and the way in which they had worked. During the focus group session the participants expressed that the activity they had liked the most was making labels to write sentences from a list of known words.

■ Methodology

Additionally, the findings affirmed that the used tasks strengthened the class environment and provided a comfortable atmosphere. Methodology is not a specific formula but a systematic set of teaching practices that the teacher should develop and practice until discovering the ones that are suitable for

TABLE 1
Categories and sub-categories

Category	Sub-category
Performance	Completion of tasks
Methodology	Classroom activities Didactic resources
Motivation	Classroom interaction Attitude

Source: Researchers own creation, 2013.

TABLE 2
Codes Used for the Instruments

Instruments	Participants	Code
Students’ Observation Checklist #1	Students	OBS1.1-OBS1.13
Students’ Observation Checklist #2	Students	OBS2.1-OBS2.13
Students’ Observation Checklist #3	Students	OBS3.1-OBS3.13
Artifact A	Students	ARAS.A-ARAS.E
Artifact B	Students	ARBS.1-ARBS.20
Interview	English Advisor	INEA
Focus Group #1	Students	FGS1.1-FGS1.4

Source: Elaborated by the authors of the study, 2013.

the group. In this research, the teacher had planned and designed activities that linked theory and classroom practice. Students enjoyed the way they worked and most of the time they reacted positively to the different reinforcements that the teacher suggested them. Some areas that need more attention are vocabulary and pronunciation; as well as the reinforcement of values such as cooperation, working with more interdependence and being obedient.

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