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Effects of Word Recognition Skills on Iraqi EFL Intermediate School Learners' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract: Word recognition refers to the ability to read written words rapidly and correctly by focusing on the comprehension process, which assists readers' understanding of texts. Thus, improving reading comprehension depends critically on efficient word recognition skills. The current investigation attempts to demonstrate the effects of word recognition on the reading comprehension ability of Iraqi EFL intermediate school learners. To achieve the aim of this research, a sample of thirty first-grade students from Al-Hasanat, a public secondary school in Najaf for girls, was selected to be enrolled in two groups: the experimental and control groups. They had difficulties in reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition. An experimental group of fifteen participants was assigned to receive instruction on word recognition strategies to enhance their reading comprehension. The remaining fifteen formed the control group, receiving instruction in reading comprehension using the conventional method. A pre-test, a posttest, and an interview were employed in the current study, and the SPSS statistical program (version 24) was used for quantitative data analysis. The results demonstrated that the experimental group did better than the control group on the reading comprehension posttest after instruction, so there is a statistically significant difference between them and the control group. The control group recorded 6.20, 4.93, and 4.73 for the first, second, and third texts, respectively. The experimental group achieved scores of 8.61, 8.81, and 8.86 across the three texts. Furthermore, the experimental group's mean posttest performance has increased significantly, with scores ranging from 5.73 to 8.61 for the first paragraph, 4.86 to 8.81 for the second paragraph, and 4.40 to 8.86 for the third paragraph. The results suggest that teachers should incorporate word recognition activities into their instruction courses to enhance students' reading comprehension.

Keywords: word recognition, reading comprehension, EFL intermediate school learners.

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1. Introduction

English, whether it is used as a first language, a second language, or a foreign language, is universally acknowledged as an essential instrument for worldwide communication. It is now an effective communication tool, with listening, speaking, reading, and writing being the four basic skills required for language learning. In the early years of life, children learn language through listening and speaking, but developing reading and writing skills is crucial for personal growth. Reading is regarded as the cornerstone of education and the most practical and universal talent today, making it a crucial ability for personal progress. Reading is regarded as a significant receptive skill. It is a complex network of mental operations that may encompass a variety of cognitive processes, such as analysis, evaluation, judgment, imagination, reasoning, and problem-solving (Hoover and Gough, 1990, p.127).

Reading comprehension is the act of identifying written material and understanding its content. It is an essential skill for students and instructors because it improves language learning and helps readers read for a variety of reasons. Successful readers use cognitive methods to understand the content of a text better. Understanding a text demands people to think, be creative, and interact with it in various ways. Therefore, they need strategies to aid in their comprehension of the material. Readers' reading comprehension strategies reveal their work understanding, clue-seeking, text-making, and problem-solving abilities (Behjat, et.al., 2012, p.99).

Word recognition, on the other hand, is the ability to quickly and accurately read printed words through comprehension processing and decoding sounds to aid readers in understanding texts. Students must accurately read most of the words in a text, so word recognition is essential for reading comprehension. Vocabulary instruction, which includes speech or writing units, aims to enhance students' deep reading comprehension, as it is essential for understanding written and spoken communications. The training proved beneficial for individuals proficient in comprehension, regardless of their reading proficiency. Therefore, it is imperative to implement reading strategy interventions for students who are struggling readers while taking into account their ability to recognize words (Alqahtani, 2015, p.22,23).

According to the importance of word knowledge in understanding the texts, word recognition strategies and instruction have been focused on in the current investigation. This study is an endeavour to show the effect of word recognition on Iraqi EFL intermediate school learners' reading comprehension. In light of this, the researcher established three hypotheses. First, in terms of reading comprehension skills, there is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups in performing the pre-test. Second, there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups after performing the posttest. Third, there is a statistically significant difference in the experimental group's reading comprehension between the pre-and posttests after receiving word recognition activities.

The current study focuses on first-year intermediate public school students in the Najaf governorate during the academic year 2032-2024. The study proposes a new approach to teaching reading comprehension in intermediate schools, employing various word recognition activities to address poor performance among target students. It also highlights the importance of including word recognition activities in prescribed textbooks, which may benefit curriculum designers and teachers. The researcher will use specific procedures to gather data to achieve the study's objectives. They are as follows:

1. A sample of 30 first-class students was selected to be assigned as experimental and control groups.
2. A pre-test was given to the experimental and control groups to check for any difference in reading comprehension ability.
3. For three weeks, the experimental group received various word and phrase recognition activities to improve their word recognition skills.
4. Finally, the posttest is conducted, and the results are analyzed.

2. Literature Review

English is widely recognized as an international and universal language, influenced by its widespread use and introduction into educational systems worldwide. In Arab countries, such as Iraq, English is taught as the language of colonizers who ruled distinct Arab nations for extended periods. Iraqi institutions view English as a mandatory course and a crucial teaching tool due to its essential nature. The conflicts that have permeated Iraq over the last two decades have hurt society as a whole, as well as the educational sector in particular. Thus, teachers and learners face different environmental and educational problems that weaken the educational process, especially language learning. Even with the efforts made by the government, the overall language proficiency of Iranians, especially their reading skills, still needs to improve (Juma'a, 2020, p.6862). Consequently, Iraqis' reading comprehension skills need to be improved.

Reading is an activity that develops higher-order thinking skills; it entails decoding, understanding, analyzing, and integrating the notion presented in a text (Chamba and Ramirez-Avila, 2021, p. 22). Reading is crucial for acquiring knowledge, cultural engagement, democracy, and workplace success. The aim of reading development is to create a framework that empowers children to decipher and comprehend written content, thereby transforming their lives (Castles, 2018, p. 5–7). In addition, reading is the process of recognizing and perceiving written or printed content, as well as the cognitive techniques that lead to comprehension of the material's meaning. Therefore, we can infer that language form influences the reading process, while language content influences the final product, comprehension. In this context, the primary objective of reading is to convey meaning (Sheng, 2000, p. 14). Reading comprehension entails simultaneous extracting and constructing meaning from written communication via a reciprocal, holistic exchange of ideas between the interpreter and the message (Harris and Hodges, 1995, p. 39). The interaction and engagement with the text are influenced by both reader and text variables, occurring within a broader social context (Snow, 2002, p. 11).

Reading comprehension is crucial for academic success and personal life, as it is the key to acquiring knowledge and achieving success in the workplace. Two main issues impact reading comprehension: poor comprehension leads to poor decoding, and students need more reading comprehension knowledge. Poor comprehension can result in students' inability to actively concentrate on the meaning of what they read, which can impede their ability to monitor their comprehension. Reading necessitates that readers employ their linguistic expertise and background knowledge to comprehend the author's intended message (Huang, 2012, p. 1521). Processing and understanding a text is part of reading comprehension, which helps readers connect the material and prior knowledge. The study reveals a strong link between mastering vocabulary and improving reading comprehension skills, as understanding the meaning of words leads to a deeper comprehension of the context and better text representation (Granda and Ramirez-Avila, 2020, p.25).

Reading comprehension can be disrupted by impairments in word recognition or linguistic comprehension, including vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary is crucial for grasping a passage, and therefore, it should be taught in second/foreign language classrooms to ensure adequate reading comprehension (Schatschneider et al.,2007, pp. 16,17). Inadequate vocabulary leads to slow reading and poor understanding, causing students to read less and struggle to derive meaning from their reading. The focus on classroom learning has become popular due to its significant impact on student's progress in learning foreign languages. Students with a well-developed vocabulary read more, improve their reading skills, and learn more words, resulting in greater reading comprehension. Inadequate vocabulary slows reading and degrades understanding, while well-developed vocabulary ensures reading development and comprehension (Salim and Krebt, 2023, p.127)

Understanding a text is a complex skill involving various components, including word knowledge. With understanding the meaning of words, comprehension is greatly improved. However, the speed with which readers can retrieve word meanings from their mental lexicon may also play an essential role in text comprehension. Familiarity with words and retrieval speed from the mental lexicon is crucial for effective text comprehension (Fukkink, et.al.,2005, p.54). The major goal of vocabulary training is to

improve and facilitate understanding of what is read (Harmon & Wood, 2018, p.1). The Lexical Quality Hypothesis suggests that vocabulary knowledge is crucial for reading comprehension, arguing that word representation quality significantly influences comprehension (Perfetti, 2007, p.357)

Since word recognition is essential to reading comprehension, learning to read begins with word recognition. However, word recognition is not an isolated skill, as it serves as the foundation for comprehending what you read, and reading becomes impossible without it. While written word recognition requires reading, writing, and identifying letters, syllables, and pronunciation, oral word recognition involves speaking and listening. One of the most important phases of learning to read is the development of word recognition, which requires specific literacy instruction. This process includes teaching voices and letters, learning alphabetical correlations, and progressively identifying syllables and words (Güneş, 2013, p. 232). Students must accurately read most of the words in a text, so word recognition is essential for reading comprehension. Finally, vocabulary, including speech or writing units, should be taught to improve learners' deep reading comprehension since it is necessary for comprehending written and spoken communications (Alqahtani, 2015, p. 23).

Consequently, due to the significance of English text comprehension, the current study's experiment aims to investigate the impact of word recognition activities on reading comprehension among Iraqi learners to determine if these strategies can enhance reading comprehension. The goal of this study is to add to the body of knowledge and provide a workable remedy for students' inadequate text comprehension.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

The study employed a randomized pretest-posttest design. To examine how vocabulary acquisition affects students' improvement in comprehension and performance, the researcher randomly enrolled a similar number of participants in an experimental and a control group.

3.2. Participants

Thirty first-grade students from Al-Hasanat, a Najaf public secondary school for girls, were chosen due to their difficulties in reading comprehension and vocabulary. A study involved 15 students in an experimental group trained on word recognition strategies to enhance reading comprehension, while the remaining 15 were in a control group taught traditional reading comprehension methods, providing both quantitative and qualitative data. All participants had a limited proficiency in English and identified as native speakers of Iraqi-Arabic.

3.3. Instruments

A pre-test, a posttest, and an interview were employed in the current study; each test included three passages, and each passage was followed with five questions (true-false questions, multiple choice questions, and fill-in-the-blank questions) for examining the students' reading comprehension ability. The passages in each test are divided into three levels: simple, intermediate, and advanced, and each one was graded at ten marks. The pre-test was conducted on 12th March to ascertain whether the students understood or recognized the words in the passages correctly before using any word recognition skill. The posttest was implemented on 10th April to evaluate the study's efficacy and students' enhancement in recognizing the meaning of words in the passages and improving their reading comprehension. The interview was done at the end of the work. Students were asked two open questions about the importance of word recognition skills in learning vocabulary, perspectives about improvement, and the incidence of vocabulary knowledge in understanding passages. Interviews were conducted with two participants from each group at random. To acquire trustworthy data, it was implemented in Iraqi-Arabic.

3.4. Data Collection

The experimental groups underwent homogenization and pretesting before instruction, followed by training them to read various texts using three distinct word recognition activities. The first activity was a

letter-centred game like Scrabble, which can enhance word recognition skills and vocabulary fun and engagingly. The participants were exposed to several new words and were required to order their letters. They were encouraged to create words out of letters and, after playing, take a moment to admire the words everyone created. The second activity involved displaying some picture-based clues, and the participant had to match the pictures with corresponding words in passages. The third activity involves identifying the different parts of speech associated with several words. Participants will read and classify new words into parts, aiding memorization. The experimental group was administered timed word and phrase recognition exercises, particularly vocabulary exercises derived from the materials they read during the treatment. The control group was not subjected to any of the activities above; instead, they were provided with the original passages and their Arabic translation. Following the treatment, we administered a posttest to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. It is important to note that the posttest sections were harder than the first test.

3.5. Data Analysis

The investigation was carried out during the weeks of March-April 2024. The SPSS statistical program (version 24) was used for quantitative data analysis. Identifying patterns in student responses to open-ended questions in the interview was employed for qualitative data analysis. Mean values were calculated to investigate the differences between pre-and posttest scores for both control and experimental groups. Students were required to respond to 5 questions for each passage after reading, and the analysis graded them accordingly. A figure displays the results of the three passages in each passage to visually compare the means.

3.6. Results

According to the results presented in Table (1), it is clear that there is no significant difference under the probability level ($p = 0.05$) between the control and experimental groups in conducting the pre-test. Thus, the hypothesis states that "there is no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups in performing the pre-test" is correct.

Table (1): The Pre-test Results of Control and Experimental Group

Groups	Passage-1 (Mean ±St.D)	Passage-2 (Mean ±St.D)	Passage-3 (Mean ±St.D)
Control	6.60±1.45	6.2±1.61	4.86±1.76
Experimental	5.73±1.57	4.86±2.16	4.40±1.68
T-test (Df=28)	1.563	1.912	0.741
P-value	0.129	0.066	0.465

Concerning the results of the three passages in the pre-test, the control group recorded 6.60, 6.2, and 4.86 for the first, second, and third passages, respectively. In contrast, the experimental group achieved scores of 5.73, 4.86, and 4.40 for the three passages. The first passage got the highest results for both groups because it was easier and included simple vocabulary. The third passage got the lowest results because it was more difficult, including complex words that make reading comprehension difficult. Accordingly, there was no significant difference between the two groups. (See Figure 1)

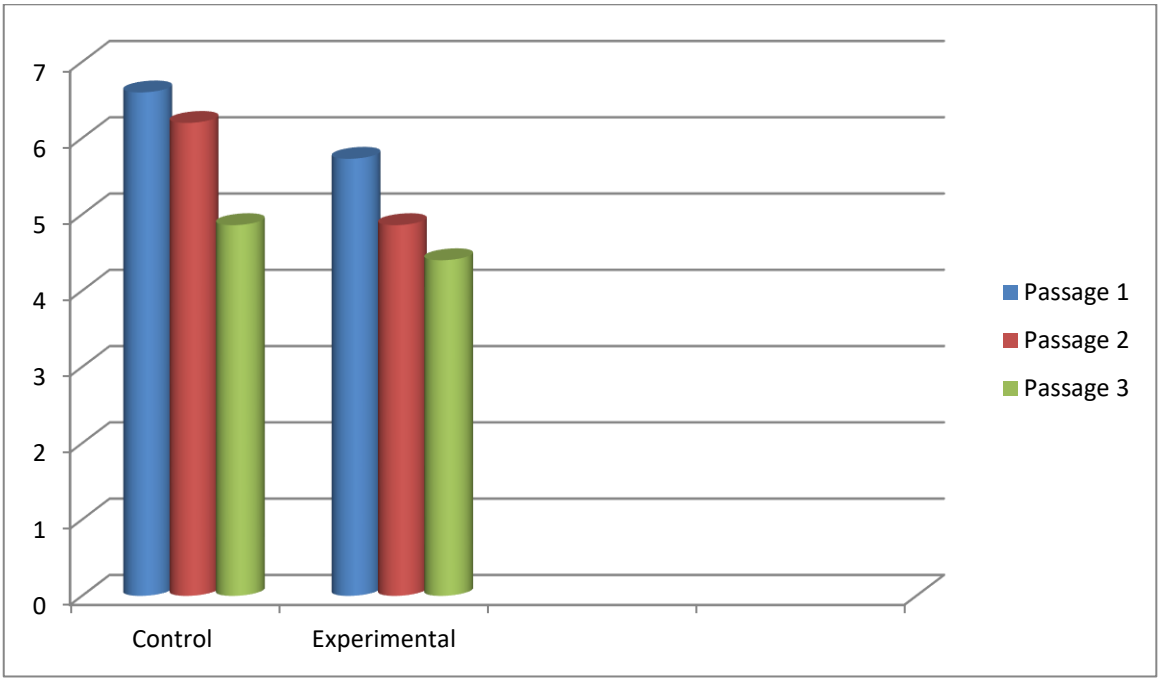

Figure (1): The Results of the Three Passages in the Pre-test Conducted by both Control and Experimental Group

The results in Table (2) show that there was a statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups in the posttest, which verifies the correctness of the second hypothesis, which states that "there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups in performing the posttest." Moreover, the experimental group did better on reading comprehension than the control group, with scores ranging from 5.73 to 8.60 on the posttest for the first passages, 4.86 to 8.80 on the second passages, and 4.40 to 8.86 on the third passage. Thus, the hypothesis that "there is a statistically significant difference in the experimental group's reading comprehension between the pre-and posttests" is correct.

Table (2): The Posttest Results of Control and Experimental Group

Groups	Passages-1 (Mean ±St.D)	Passages-2 (Mean ±St.D)	Passages-3 (Mean ±St.D)
Control	6.20±0.86	4.93±1.10	4.73±1.7
Experimental	8.60±1.10*	8.80±1.30*	8.86±0.91*
T-test (Df=28)	6.573	8.934	8.254
P-value	0.00	0.00	0.00

*** Mean value: significant difference**

Regarding the results of the three passages in the posttest, the control group recorded 6.20, 4.93, and 4.73 for the first, second, and third passages, respectively. The experimental group achieved scores of 8.60, 8.80, and 8.86 across the three passages. The results indicated that the experimental group could even recognize the difficult words in the third passage after following the word recognition skills. Consequently, a significant difference was observed between the two groups, and the posttest demonstrates an improvement. (See Figure 2).

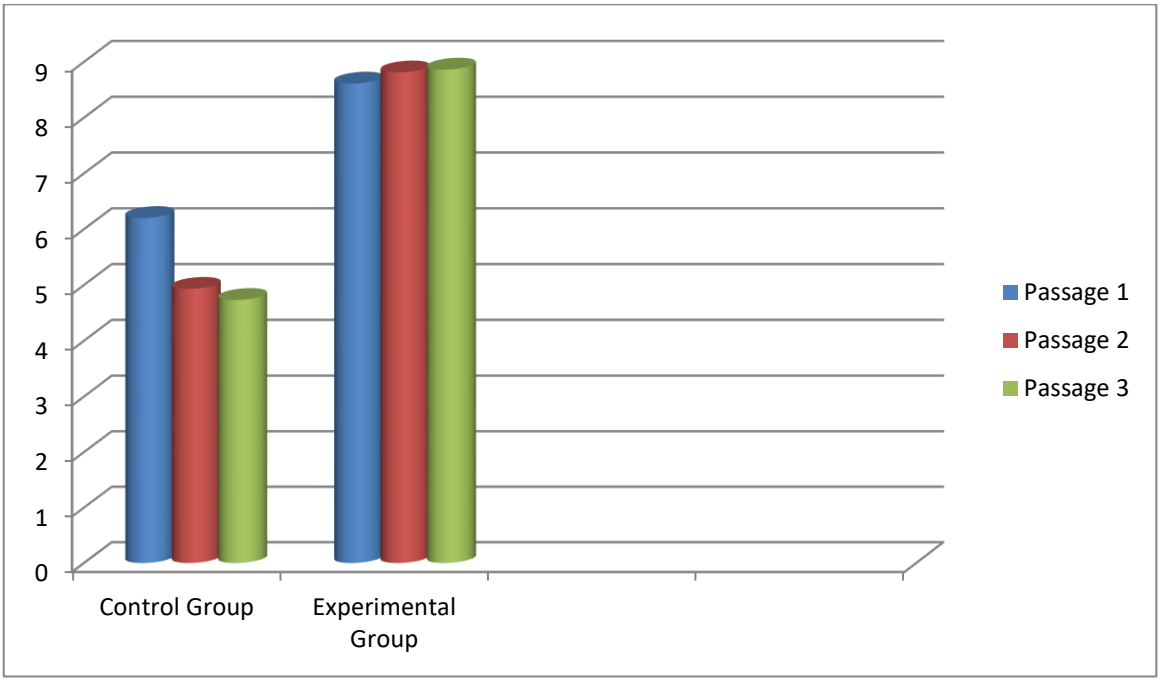

Figure (1): The Results of the Three Passages in the Posttest Conducted by both the Control and Experimental Group

Additionally, the interview supported the data regarding the challenges encountered in the reading comprehension process and the improvements made by the experimental group after training. The following is an excerpt from the interview dialogue translated into English.

- **Control Group**

Participant 1: *"I am a good student, but I got low marks in the English exam because of an unseen passage."*

Participant 2: *"I do not know how to read the text, and I could not answer the questions in reading comprehension since I do not know the meaning of most of the words."*

- **Experimental Group**

Participant 1: *"For me, playing games with letters was interesting, and I could memorize the words easily, but parts of speech were so difficult and needed more time."*

Participant 2: *"I got a high mark in the second exam since I can recognize the meanings of the words."*

The participants proved that they face difficulty in reading comprehension due to insufficient word identification skills, which may be the initial barrier to understanding. Therefore, until one achieves a sufficient level of proficiency, word recognition should be a crucial part of text interpretation. Ultimately, the students expressed interest in this experience and hoped to continue such activities to learn the meaning of a wide range of words.

4. Discussion

The research shows that pupils who engaged in word recognition exercises outperformed their peers. The study's findings show that each participant's level of reading comprehension competence was the same before training. The participants' inadequate decoding abilities hindered their ability to comprehend what they were reading, but after therapy, they made some progress, proving that the lessons had been beneficial. After conducting the posttest, we observed clear and tangible differences in students' comprehension of the materials. Most students relied on guesswork to solve the questions without understanding the content. However, after presenting the vocabulary and explaining them through various activities, including a letter-centered game, matching pictures and corresponding words, and identifying

the parts of speech of the words, we observed a positive change in students' responses. In the subsequent and final test, the students read the words and phrases and converted them into meaning by recalling the words they had learned from the training course rather than relying on guesswork. They demonstrated an improvement in their ability to read and distinguish written words. As a result, the correctness of the investigation's three hypotheses is verified.

The study indicates that word recognition exercises significantly enhanced the reading comprehension of Iraqi EFL students. These exercises help learners retain more knowledge and contribute to comprehension skills, demonstrating that word recognition activities are valuable for teaching reading comprehension. Motivating students to engage in extracurricular activities to enhance their vocabulary knowledge is also crucial. This is because their comprehension is inadequate, and they lack sufficient fluency in reading and word recognition. Thus, vocabulary development is critical for reading comprehension, necessitating comprehensive vocabulary instruction for readers of all ability levels, especially intermediate learners.

Training in word recognition activities can be highly advantageous to the academic discipline of foreign language acquisition. According to the research, English language learners should intentionally use these strategies to adjust their performance and learning because they may learn more words and feel more confident. Furthermore, instructors may join these activities since they improve their students' learning experience. This study offers significant information for foreign language instructors, researchers, and curriculum creators about employing activities to teach English vocabulary. Additionally, it emphasizes how well these methods help students understand texts better and suggests that language academies support their teachers in using these methods in the classroom. Consequently, word recognition tasks help learners remember information and improve their comprehension.

5. Conclusions

Reading comprehension is an interactive process where readers use effective strategies to create meaningful representations of a text, aiming to understand the text rather than acquiring meaning from individual words or sentences. Furthermore, reading comprehension entails interpreting a text's meaning through conceptual and procedural knowledge, culminating in a mental representation that the reader combines with their prior knowledge. The training improved all readers' comprehension skills, indicating that strategies for weak readers should focus on word recognition activities. Thus, our research demonstrated that word recognition exercises increased reading comprehension among Iraqi EFL students. These exercises help individuals learn new words and enhance their vocabulary.

The research findings indicate that word identification skills might be a valuable tool for language instructors, especially those dealing with low-proficiency students, since they considerably improve text comprehension among Iraqi EFL learners. This study suggests that learners should engage in extra word-identification activities to improve their reading rate and their comprehension as well. The results are also helpful for curriculum designers, who may include many word recognition tasks in their textbooks to improve text comprehension, particularly at the starting level of language ability. Consequently, supervisors can motivate teachers to implement a more effective program in this area.

The study has four limitations: First, the sample size of participants was small, including 15 participants in each group. Second, the study exclusively included female participants, making it challenging to generalize the findings to males. Third, the study limited its scope to first-intermediate students. Fourth, the study's geographical restriction hinders the extrapolation of its results to other contexts. Consequently, the researcher proposes several recommendations for future studies. The first suggestion is to increase the number of participants to get more significant outcomes. Second, a contrastive study between males and females should be conducted. Third, a further study should be done considering participants from other stages or different old ages. Fourth, conducting a comparative study with participants from schools in different geographical locations is a viable option. Lastly, consider how employed word recognition activities impact other language skills.

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