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Dr. Abdulrahman Al Towity

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Dr. Abdulrahman Ali Al Towity
Applied Linguistics, Department of English
University College of Aldayer Jazan University
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Applied Linguistics, Department of English
University College of Aldayer Jazan University
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Abstract

One of the most significant problems faced by the researcher when teaching English in general and reading courses in particular is reading deficiency in English texts among EFL female students of Aldayer University College, which reflects the students' poor reading performance. This brings about the assumption that the students face difficulties, which make them unable to read. This study aims to investigate the opinions and perceptions of Jazan University EFL students regarding the reading difficulties they encounter in English reading, and the factors that cause such difficulties. The study employed quantitative method, (162) female students of the University College of Aldayer participated in responding to the questions. The study results revealed that students really face difficulties in reading due to factors mostly related to background knowledge and linguistic abilities factors. Students' culture and L1 and L2 differences could influence reading difficulties. By contrast, the findings revealed that students had positive attitudes towards reading in English and most of them are highly motivated to read in English. The findings of the study are a good source of information that helps students and their teachers to recognize the factors that affect reading difficulties and work on the possible solutions.

Keywords: EFL students, reading difficulties, factors.

Introduction:

Reading is one of the most important skills for language learners either as a means to cultivate students' abilities to use the language or for language study. It is considered as a primary tool of success and language development (Hamarai, 2021: 894); (Li and Zang, 2016: 14; Alderson 1984:1; Anderson, 2003: 2), However, reading is not an easy task as one might imagine. Many students often fail to read or understand what they read. In fact, reading in a language requires both linguistic knowledge and cultural background of that language. It is an interactive process between the reader and the text, which leads to the understanding of the meaning and the main ideas of that text (Hassan and Dweik, 2021), Having an adequate knowledge and background enable students to think about the piece of writing, understand its meaning and then react towards the text. In their reaction with the text, students might integrate the new learning to their previous experience (Carrell and Eisterhold 1983: 559), and those who do not understand reading material cannot even enjoy reading (Al-Jarrah and Ismail, 2018: 32).

Of course, there must be some reasons that hinder EFL students in their efforts to understand what they read. In the Saudi context, for example, lack of motivation, limited vocabulary, difficulty in understanding the meaning of text and lack of extensive reading are among the major factors behind Saudi students' poor reading abilities according to Al-Qahtani (2016: 2). This is true for Jazan University (JU) students majoring in English. The researcher, as a teacher of English for a long time in this University, notices that many students cannot read properly, and hence they face many obstacles when they come to read. In fact, JU students do not live and grow with the English language, which is different from their native language (Arabic). Moreover, the differences in culture, beliefs and traditions between Saudi Arabia and English-speaking countries may cause more difficulties for JU students when reading in English. In this regard, Suleiman (1993: 32) attributes the inability of Arab learners' proficiency in English to the big differences between the two cultures, cultural attitudes as well as the linguistic differences between the two languages, Arabic and English. Readers face considerable difficulties since it is not their first language. While it is easier for the students to comprehend the text if it is related to their background knowledge (Alderson, 1984: 1).

Arabic and English are different in many ways. As students read in Arabic, they read from right to left and hence they could not adapt the direction of reading the English script from left to right. This could result in slow and difficult reading. Another problem is that the word order of English phrases and sentences is different from that of Arabic. Even when coming to use English, students are highly affected by their native language, Arabic. They try to adjust the word order of English with that of Arabic. Besides, we could assume that most of the students are not motivated enough to read and do not practice reading in English.

As we have seen, reading difficulties has been an issue for EFL students. Such difficulties result in students' slow reading, incomplete comprehension and sometimes inability to read even a single sentence correctly. When asked to read, many students apparently lack interest and feel shy fearing to be laughed at. Many of them struggle through a text and have trouble with almost every word. They used to read the passage word by word and pick meanings from an English-Arabic dictionary. All in all, reading difficulties lead to students' low achievement and poor proficiency in English during and even after finishing their studies at college. For these reasons, it is worthy to investigate the factors that cause JU students' inability to reading in English.

The Study:

Needless to mention that among the language skills, reading is one of the most important skills for the students. However, the researcher observed that JU students majoring in English really have problems in English reading. In order to tackle this issue and help in improving students' language proficiency, firstly, the causes of these problems should be identified. The present study aims at a) investigating the difficulties that JU students face in reading in English either inside or outside the classroom and b) exploring what causes these difficulties. This will help students, teachers, and other educational institutions to be aware of these difficulties and remedy them with the suitable solutions and suggestions.

Research Questions:

The study focuses on two questions:

- 1- What are the possible difficulties that JU students encounter in English reading?
- 2- What are the factors that stand behind students' reading difficulties?

Literature Review:**Learner Attitude and Motivation:**

Research accentuates the role of Motivational/Attitudinal factors in causing reading difficulties. Attitudes and motivation play a big role in reading (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010; Seitz, 2010), Galgao (2016: 42) confirms that the attitude and motivation towards reading skill should be identified since reading is an indispensable skill in language learning. Dispositions according to Riveros, Norris, Hayward and Phillips (2012: 34), play a very important role in high-quality learning. Moreover, research support the idea that more positive dispositions towards learning could lead to greater academic achievement, while a negative disposition may limit the learners' possibilities for learning (Galgao, 2016: 42-43).

One cannot ignore motivation, according to Cambria & Guthrie (2010: 16), as it is the most important part of reading and those whose motivation increases will grow in reading skill. Suleiman (1993: 35) details the kinds of motivation that make a move to students' learning process, instrumental and integrative. Instrumental motivation is the desire to learn a second language for some useful purpose, such as a job, travel and so forth. Integrative motivation is the desire to learn a second language in order to communicate with its speakers. Learners with integrative motivation are highly likely to achieve greater language proficiency (Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic: 2004). In addition, the role of parents and friends is pivotal in igniting and determining students' motivations to study English.

Arab students belong to different socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds and their attitudes will reflect these differences. Students who have different attitudes tend to be dissatisfied, and uninterested in studying English language, thus leading to difficulty and boredom in English classes (Suleiman: 1993). Therefore, EFL students may develop certain negative type of attitudes towards English and other foreign languages and this comments their low proficiency in the language. In this connection, AL-Shamiry (2000: 13) states that "Arab students develop a negative attitude towards English", which leads to some constraints, such as, lack of interest and boredom, resistance to any teaching and learning techniques and failure in achieving any progress in the target language. Suleiman (1993:56) explains that attitudes are the outcomes of the students' personal experience, parental

influence, social ingredients, and the mass media, all of which help to shape the attitudes of the individual. Similarly, Krashen (1987: 40) proposed the affective filter, which is a constraint on learning, is caused by negative attitudes or experiences. Thus, language *attitude* is one of the major problems learners face when reading in English (Yochum and Miller, 1993), or one of the main factors in the learning and retention of second language skills according to the classification of Baker (1992).

Background and Schematic Knowledge:

Research points out that one of the factors that influence students' reading is their background and schematic knowledge. Anderson, R. C. (1984: 1) define schemata as "reader's existing concepts about the world (i.e. knowledge already stored in memory)". According to the schema theory, reading comprehension is an interactive process between the text and the readers' prior background (Adams and Collins, 1997:39; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983: 556). Barnett (1989: 35) states that schemata theory is the most thoroughly explored theory that guides much second and foreign language reading research. She describes two types of schemata: content schemata, which is the reader's prior background knowledge of the content area of the text and formal schema, which is the reader's prior background knowledge of the structure or form of the text (43). In the meanwhile, Carrell and Eisterhold (1983: 562) claim that the major influence of content schema is on reading comprehension. Anderson, Spiro & Montague (2017: 429) ensure that "without some schema into which it can be assimilated, an experience is incomprehensible, and therefore, little can be learned from it". Thus, one potential source of reading difficulties may be the mismatch between the reader's interpretation for the text and that one intended by the author (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983: 559), and in order to avoid reading difficulties, students should be familiar with the content area of a text and its structure.

Culture, as a part of students' background knowledge, affects reading in language other than the students' native language. As Bensalah and Guerroudj (2020: 386) reported, "cultural knowledge-which is part and parcel of background and topic knowledge is enormously significant in comprehending texts". It affects the speed of reading and this is what accounts to students' hesitance as they reread the sentences for comprehension. Here,

one can say that, as reading is an interaction between student's own cultural and personal background with the text information, students perform better when a text is taken from their native culture than is taken from the other culture. Aminullah, Sada and Sudarsono (2019:194-195) support the idea that cultural familiarity promotes comprehension, and insisted on the role of local culture-based materials in the EFL classroom. Here, we can say that students learn easily what is connected with the background they have previously in their minds and based on that we can conclude that background and schemata knowledge have their influential role and effect on reading performance.

Learner Linguistic Abilities:

Another fundamental factor that causes reading difficulties is students' linguistic abilities. It is highly important to shed some light on the likely influences of linguistic factors on reading difficulties such as L1 and L2 differences in writing systems and alphabets, directionality of reading, letter and word identification as well as phonological differences. Arabic and English have different orthographic and alphabetic systems (Suleiman, 1993: 22). Corcos and Willows (1993:179) reported that orthographic knowledge is directly related to reading ability. EFL students need to learn a new writing system as they experience another alphabet and orthographic system that is not similar to English (Haynes: 1989), and because of that, Arab readers could face reading difficulties. The complete difference between Arabic and English alphabet definitely hinders the reading speed of Arab students reading in English. As they read in Arabic, Arab students used to read from right to left. This directionality of reading is completely the opposite of English. Such difference can also slow down the reading speed. The effect of students' native language (Arabic) on English reading is supported by Al-Salmi, (2005: 68-71).

Another linguistic factor, namely letter / word identification, affects the reading speed and comprehension. Yochum and Miller (1993) concluded that word identification and comprehension are two major problem areas in the learners' reading. The fluent readers have the ability to process words fully not letter by letter. By the same token, Weaver (1988: 116) asserts, the very poorest readers tend to read almost one word at a time. Carver (1990: 85) considers this phenomenon as one of the bad habits which cause an individual's reading rate to slow down.

There are other linguistic factors such as phonology and syntax could affect reading process. Barnett (1989: 27) claims that most foreign language readers do not have a fully developed phonological system when they begin to read and the semantic and syntactic differences could cause reading difficulties for EFL learners. For example, a number of sounds in English do not exist in Arabic, which adds a new difficulty for the Arabic-speaking learners of English when reading certain English sounds. Among these sounds are /p/ and /v/. In addition, Haynes (1989: 17) illustrates that Arab readers of EFL try to re-read and re-pronounce the letters (sounds) or words more accurately and this obviously means taking more time in reading. On the other hand, students tend to perceive the target language text as their native language syntactic structure. Some of the main syntactical differences between Arabic and English are word order (in Arabic the word order is VSO while in English it is SVO), tenses, and articles: a, an, the, and duality of pronouns (in Arabic). The differences between Arabic and English could greatly influence the reading speed of the Arab readers of English and, hence, add considerable troubles to them.

Some Related Research:

In a review paper conducted by Alotaibi (2022), the researchers found out that Saudi EFL learners face challenges in reading such as limited vocabulary, lack of self-study exercises and difficulty grasping the meaning of the text, spelling of words and pronunciation problems, and not having the habit of reading widely.

Another study by Al-Salmi (2005) concluded that that the curriculum was the main source of reading difficulties faced by the Omani students. Then, the differences between the students' native language (Arabic) and English was the second source and lastly was the teaching methodology utilized by the teachers.

Al-Arfaj (1996) investigated the opinions and perceptions of Saudi beginning EFL students regarding the factors which cause their difficulties in English reading. The findings reveal that a high percentage of the students face reading difficulties when reading English. The findings also show that most of the reading difficulties were attributed to linguistic factors. On the other hand, the results, unlike what the researcher hypothesized, indicate that

a large majority of the students have positive attitudes toward EFL reading in particular and learning English in general.

Dennis (2008) stated that reading comprehension is a complex process between identifying symbols and interpreting the meaning of these symbols. Students are affected in their reading comprehension by some factors such as complexity of the reading text, environmental influences, interest and motivation and decoding or word recognition speed.

Hassan and Dweik (2021) shed light on the factors that cause English reading problems for Jordanian students. Results of the study showed that grammar, new words, homonyms and homographs, among others, hindered reading comprehension. Results also revealed a wide range of factors that could lead to reading comprehension difficulties. These factors were grouped as personal, linguistic, curricular, and resources related factors.

Another study by Nurhayati, Julyan and Williyani (2023), in which they examined the reading difficulties faced by EFL learners in an Indonesian university. They found out that students predominantly struggled with sentence comprehension. The main challenges they face were limited vocabulary, grammar proficiency, and sentence interpretation. The study also concludes that students' reading difficulties primarily revolve around understanding the text itself, which in turn leads to other complications such as grammar mastery, vocabulary limitations, and text translation problems.

The study of Huyen and Anh (2022) investigated the factors that EFL students in Vietnam thought to have the greatest effects on reading comprehension. Most of the participants posited that they had obstacles in vocabulary, grammatical structures and unfamiliarity of the topic and vocabulary was seen as the most problematic. Then, grammatical structures were seen as the second most difficult.

Research Methodology:

Participants:

The participants of the study were a total of (162) female students majoring in English at the University College of Aldayer, Jazan University. They are following a four-year undergraduate program in English at a female university college. Before that, they had experience in doing reading tasks in their intermediate and secondary school.

Instruments:

This study employs quantitative method, in which a questionnaire was employed to collect data. The questionnaire was developed based on relevant research (Jayanti, 2016; Trang, 2021; Okumura & Miyamoto, 2010). The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part was designed to elicit relevant information about the use of English by the students and their parents. The second part includes a list of (28) questions to find out students' views about EFL reading difficulties and factors that may cause these difficulties. The questionnaire was conducted online using Google form and students were asked to select whether they strongly agree with statements, agree, disagree or strongly disagree. The data obtained from the items answered by the respondents was analysed using the (SPSS) which stands for Statistical Package for Social Sciences version (16.0.)

Data Analysis and Discussion:**Results of the First Part of the Questionnaire**

The first part of the questionnaire aimed to take some necessary information about the percentage of students' fathers and mothers who speak English and percentage of those who have traveled to a country where English is the native language. The breakdown of the questions related to parents' knowledge of English reveals that (9.7%) of students' fathers can speak English and only (5.6%) of the students' mothers can speak English. The existence of a percentage of parents who speak English, even low, is a source of support to the students to learn and read in English. On the other hand, this explains why students participated in this study have a good interest to study English. The results show that most of the students are highly motivated and have a positive attitude towards reading in English. We can attribute lower percentage of mothers who are unable to speak English to the fact that the majority of Aldayer university College students' mothers are staying at home as housewives and taking care of children.

Table (1) breakdown of students whose fathers speak English

Fathers speak English	Frequency	Percent
Yes	17	10.5%
No	145	89.5%

Table (2) breakdown of students whose mothers speak English

Mothers speak English	Frequency	Percent
Yes	9	5.6%
No	153	94.4%

Looking at the students' responses to item 4: Have you traveled to an English-speaking country: Students' answers reveal that only (17) students (10.8%) traveled to a country where its people speak English as their native language.

Results of the Second Part of the Questionnaire:

This part includes (28) items. Items are divided into four sections in the table: attitudes, motivation, background and schemata knowledge and linguistic abilities (7 items each).

Table (3) Results of the Second Part of the Questionnaire

No	Items	Mean	S.D	Rank
I	Attitudes			
1	Reading in English is important.	4.41	.744	1
18	To comprehend what I read in English, I should know English culture.	4	.902	6
2	I like to read in English as a foreign language.	3.96	1.002	7
20	I become upset when I do not know how to pronounce what I read.	3.92	1.045	8
23	If it were up to me, I would never learn English.	3.04	1.376	22
19	I do not like to read in English because I do not understand most of what I read.	2.86	1.199	24
21	I feel that reading in English is a tedious thing.	2.54	1.132	27
	Total	3.533	1.057	
II	Motivation			
4	Though I face difficult words, I keep reading in English.	4.23	.750	2
7	My parents (one or both of them) encourage me to learn English.	4.01	1.086	5
6	Our teachers motivate us for outside free reading in English.	3.85	1.043	9
17	My friends encourage me to learn English.	3.55	1.046	13
5	All/some of my friends encourage me to read English books and magazines.	3.32	1.145	18

No	Items	Mean	S.D	Rank
15	My reading speed is slower than that of my friends.	3	1.098	23
16	I read in order to pass the examination not to learn the language.	2.56	1.158	26
	Total	3.503	1.046	
III Background and Schemata Knowledge				
26	There is no problem in identifying and reading the English letters.	4.09	.869	3
3	It is important to read every word in English text that I want to read.	4.08	.834	4
24	I cannot understand much about the content of the reading texts because I do not have enough background knowledge of the topics.	3.38	1.034	16
28	The difference in culture between Arabic and English could affect reading in English.	3.33	1.131	17
27	Reading passages are difficult because I cannot predict what would come next.	3.23	1.019	19
22	Outside of college, I seldom read in English.	3.06	1.076	21
25	I hate reading English due to reasons related to the teachers of English.	2.67	1.200	25
	Total	3.406	1.023	
IV Linguistic Abilities				
11	The passages and stories in the textbooks should relate to our culture	3.74	1.055	10
14	The reading passage is difficult when the sentences are long.	3.74	1.014	11
13	I face reading difficulties because there are many new words.	3.68	1.007	12
10	Grammar and complex sentence structure cause me difficulties when reading in English.	3.54	1.064	14
12	I cannot guess the meanings of new words.	3.51	1.070	15
9	One of the problems I face when I read in English is that Alphabet is different.	3.14	1.182	20
8	Reading English from left is one of the problems I face.	2.35	1.208	28
	Total	3.386	1.086	

Learner Attitude and Motivation:

Table (3) reveals that the highest mean score of frequency was related to attitudinal factors that affect students' EFL reading. Most of the participants highly valued the importance of reading in English, *reading in English is*

important (M=4.41), and thus showed a positive attitude towards reading skill. This finding is reasonable since reading is among the most basic language skills. Students also valued the significance of knowing English culture (M=4) as a prerequisite to comprehend what they read. Moreover, students' inability to understand what they read does not hinder them from reading in English, item 19 (M=2.86). On the other hand, "*I feel that reading in English is a tedious thing*" was the lowest item supported by the students (M=2.54). In addition, students declared that *they like to read in English* (M=3.96), but *they become upset when they do not know how to pronounce what they read* (M=3.92).

Motivational factors such as "*though I face difficult words, I keep reading in English*" received a highly agreement from the students which means that when reading they are not influenced by difficult words and they keep reading anyway (M=4.23). Students receive encouragement from their parents and friends to learn English (M=4.01 and M=3.55 respectively). Teachers also motivate them to go for outside free reading in English (M=3.85). Most of the students were also *encouraged by friends to read English books and magazines* (M=3.32). Furthermore, so many students were *not influenced by their slow reading in compare to other classmates* (M=3). Less students deny the idea that *they read in English just to pass the examination not to learn the language* (M=2.56), which indicates how they are highly concerned about reading in general. Therefore, one can say that students are self-motivated to learn and read in English.

Background and Schemata Knowledge:

Regarding background and schemata knowledge factors, it was evident that as students read in English, most of them have *no problem in identifying and reading the English letters* (M=4.09). But in the level of words, it is important for the students *to read every word in English text that they want to read* (M=4.08). This means that students do not have enough morphological and syntactic background. Table 3 also illustrates many other schematic factors, which cause less reading difficulties. Among these factors were, "*I cannot understand much about the content of the reading texts because I do not have enough background knowledge of the topics*" (M=3.38), and "*The difference in culture between Arabic and English could affect reading in English*" (M=3.33). Students were also influenced by their

inability to predict what would come next (M=3.23) and by their rare reading outside of college (M=3.06).

Learner Linguistic abilities:

Out of the linguistic factors part, most of the students participated in the study unfold that the highest difficulties they face in reading in English were due to factors like, *the passages and stories in the textbooks should relate to our culture* (M=3.74) & *The reading passage is difficult when the sentences are long* (M=3.74). While “*Reading English from left is one of the problems I face*” was the least linguistic factor that could affect students’ reading in English (M=2.35). Hence, the inclusion of students’ culture in the reading textbooks is important to push students to read and develop. In addition, students’ responses show that they face difficulties when reading English texts when they come to meet *many new words in the text* (M=3.68), *encounter grammar and complex sentence structure* (M=3.54), and *guess the meanings of new words* (M=3.51). Surprisingly, students were less influenced in their English reading by *the difference between Arabic (L1) and English in Alphabet* (M=3.14).

Discussion:

This study examines the factors that lead to reading difficulties among JU EFL students. Such factors might affect their reading performance. Researchers pointed out that students’ prior knowledge of the language, linguistic abilities, as well as attitudes and motivations are some of the significant factors influencing the reading difficulties. Based on the analysis of students’ responses, we can discuss the answer of the research questions as follows:

1- The first question: What are the possible difficulties that JU students encounter in English reading?

In response to the first question, students admitted that they face difficulties when it comes to long sentences, grammar and complex sentence structure, differences in the English alphabet and guessing the meaning of new words. However, it is not difficult for the students to read English from left to right. It is common that facing many new words in the text causes reading difficulties to most of the students. Most of the students do not relate reading difficulties to English letters, which are completely different from Arabic. They expressed their concern about lacking the required background

knowledge of the English topics, so they need to go through the text word by word in order to understand the meaning. Students complain that they face reading difficulties in comprehension, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. In general, the results confirm that the factors that cause reading difficulties are related more to schemata and background knowledge as well as linguistic abilities.

2- The second question: What are the factors that stand behind these reading difficulties?

Two categories, namely attitudes ($M=3.53$), motivation ($M=3.50$), were higher in mean scores than the other two categories, schemata ($M=3.40$) and linguistic factors ($M=3.38$). This means that students participated in the study are affected more in their English reading by schemata and linguistic factors than attitudinal and motivational factors. While the former factors highly hinder students' reading, the latter factors hinder students' reading at the medium level. Having high mean score in students' attitudes ($M=3.53$) and motivation ($M=3.50$) indicates that majority of the JU students have positive attitudes towards reading and learning English as a foreign language and they receive encouragement from relatives and friends. They carry on reading though they do not understand most of what they read and this means they like to read in English. Students are motivated enough to read even if they are slow readers and face difficult words. They value the importance of understanding English culture to be able to read in English. However, the difficulties they face are resulted from both background knowledge factors such as not having enough morphological and syntactic background, not having enough knowledge about the content of the reading texts, and their inability to predict what would come next. In regards with linguistic factors, students face difficulties mainly in long sentences, complex sentence structure, and in having many new words in the text.

Conclusions:

This study investigates the factors that cause reading difficulties which JU students' face when reading in English as a foreign language. It helps students to be aware of the factors that they might encounter when reading in English. Students could also get benefits from the suggestions and recommendations that are offered by this study. So, based on the results of the students' responses discussed above, we can conclude that most of the students really



face reading difficulties when reading in English. However, they have considerable attitudes and motivations to learn English. They are highly motivated by family, teachers and friends to read and learn English.

It is evident that students are suffering from schemata and linguistic factors more than from attitudinal and motivational factors, and the difference of English culture from theirs. Most of the students say that English culture is important to comprehend what they read in English, so they encounter difficulties because of lacking knowledge of English culture. Students prefers passages and stories in the textbook to be related to their culture. Moreover, reading is difficult for them because of their inability to pronounce what they read, facing difficult grammar rules and complex structure, and facing new words and long sentences. That is why most of the students disclose that when coming to read they read every word in English text. On the other hand, it is quite reasonable that most of the students face difficulties in reading since the culture of English is different from the culture of their L1, Arabic, and they do not have enough background knowledge of the topics. As a result, they cannot predict what would come next when reading English passages.

Recommendations:

- Since students expressed their preference to add passages and stories related to their culture in the English textbook, Arabic and Islamic cultures should be considered when writing and designing the textbooks.
- College should be equipped with suitable and useful books, stories, magazines and newspapers to be employed in teaching and reading in English and providing students with the latest information and knowledge.
- Students' high motivation to learn and read in English should be exploited to encourage a habit of extensive reading outside college.
- Efficient and effective teaching methods such as the Communicative Approach should be used in teaching English and enhance the reading skills.

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