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# **ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS: AN ASSESSMENT**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

English language is not only the language of western civilization but also becomes the *lingua franca* of the people of the world. Modern discovery on scientific and medical knowledge are largely written in English language. Universities and colleges around the world have integrated English subject as part of their curricula. The Philippines educational system is a good example where English is used as medium of instruction not only in school but also in the government practice as well. Yet, college students in particular have not generally mastered the English language. Low functional literacy is the number one academic problem facing among the students particularly in Sulu. There are many students in the freshmen college were not able to comprehend and relate the meaning of the sentences. This scenario should become an urgent issue which school officials should look into this problem and reassess further the language learning strategies of the faculty members.

This paper anchors on the belief that strengthening the functional literacy of the college students is the correct strategy to improve the performance of the students defined in terms mastery of English, science and mathematics. Without full comprehension of the English language as a philosophy, the students will find difficulty to understand the classroom instructions. The objective of this study is to assess the current learning strategies in teaching English on the college level. The study is based on survey among the freshmen students of the Mindanao State University-Sulu using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL questionnaire.

## **I. LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES**

Learning strategies are very important in teaching English language to the Tausug students. Almost from the beginning of their schooling, the students have been exposed to English as the medium of instruction in classes. Because of its difficulty to learn, educators are doing their best to encounter this difficulty. They continue finding strategies of learning to make the students more motivated to learn the language. According to the research of O' Malley, Chamot and Kupper, effective listeners used three specific strategies: self-monitoring, elaboration, and inferences while ineffective listeners were concerned with the meaning of individual words. This study demonstrated that the use of certain learning strategies improved the learning among students. Learning strategies are defined by Oxford as "operation employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information."

It has been observed that many students are not aware of their learning strategies the teachers have deployed. The students are largely dependent on the teacher's initiative to provide them with the lessons to be learned. The students are only learning from the context of the lectures presented to them by the

teachers. There are no apparent learning strategies employed by the students in learning English language in the classroom. This information indicates that the failure of the students to employ learning strategies may contribute largely to their deficiency in learning English language.

This definition is further expanded to include "specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations." (Oxford, 1990) These definitions show that the weight in foreign language teaching and learning is changing from teacher centered to learner centered instruction. This change has brought language learning strategies to the center of attention for some educators.

However, the situation in the classroom is not congruent to the daily observation of this researcher. Such specific actions as explained earlier are best achieved when the learning activity is fast tracked to the best advantage of the learners, for example localizing the global knowledge which is based on related experience, is significant to both learners and teachers per se. The teachers could not only explain and expound the importance of establishing a so-called repertoire of strategies for learning but more importantly learners/students would become enthusiastic and participative in the learning process. Similarly speaking, when the weight in foreign language teaching and learning is carried into the mainstream it would not only elicit interest of the learners but enable them to become familiar of the varieties of challenging tasks which are very vital in meeting a student-centered approach. Therefore, the student-centered approach as a strategy in the motivation of the learner's background and beliefs is still an effective driving force to meet both ends.

There are 62 strategies mentioned by Oxford and they are divided into direct and indirect strategies. The strategies used directly in dealing with a new language are called direct strategies. The three groups that belong to the direct strategies are memory, cognitive, and compensation. The indirect strategies are used for general management of learning. The three groups belonging to this category are metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Here a brief introduction of each group:

The direct strategies are beneficial to the students because they help store and recover information. These strategies help learners to produce language even when there is gap in knowledge. They also help to understand and use the new language.

Memory strategies are based on simple principles like laying things out in order, making association, and reviewing. These principles are employed when the learner faces challenge of vocabulary learning. The words and phrases can be associated with visual images that can be stored and retrieved for communication. Many learners make use of visual images, but some find it easy to connect words and phrases with sound, motion or touch.

The use of memory strategies is most frequently applied in the beginning process of language learning. As the learners advance to higher level of proficiency memory strategies are mentioned very little. It is not that the use ceases but the awareness of its use becomes less. Here is an example to apply memory strategy by making association. If the learner wants to remember the

name Solange of a French person, it could be associated by saying Solange's face is long.

These are perhaps the most popular strategies with language learners. The target language is manipulated or transformed by repeating, analyzing or summarizing. The four sets in this group are: Practicing, Receiving and Sending Messages, Analyzing and Reasoning, and Creating Structure for input and output. Practicing is the most important in this group which can be achieved by repeating, working with sounds and writing, and using patterns. The tools of receiving and sending messages are used when learners try to find the main idea through skimming and scanning. It is not necessary to check every word. The adult learners commonly use analyzing and reasoning strategies. These are used to understand the meaning and expression of the target language. These are also used to make new expressions. Here is an example of a learner who practice with sounds of the words that have letters *ough*. The words through, though, tough, and trough contain *ough* but sound different. To understand them better the learner may make own phonetic spelling: *throo*, *thow*, *tuff*, and *troff*.

Learners use compensation strategies for comprehension of the target language when they have insufficient knowledge of the target language. These strategies make up for the deficiency in grammar and vocabulary. When learners do not know new words and expressions, they guess the meaning. The learner brings own life experience to interpret data by guessing. Compensation strategies are also used in production when grammatical knowledge is incomplete. When the learner does not know the subjunctive form of verb, a different form may be used to convey the message. Here is an example of guessing based on partial knowledge of the target language. When the learner recognizes the words shovel, grass, mower, and lawn in a conversation, it could be understood that it is about gardening.

Indirect language learning strategies work together with the direct strategies. They help learner regulate the learning process. These strategies support and manage language learning without direct engagement and therefore called indirect strategies.

Metacognitive strategies go beyond the cognitive mechanism and give learners to coordinate their learning. This helps them to plan language learning in an efficient way. When new vocabulary, rules, and writing system confuse the learner, these strategies become vital for successful language learning. Three sets of strategies belong to this group and they are: Centering Your Learning, Arranging and Planning Your Learning, and Evaluating Your Learning. The aim of centering learning is to give a focus to the learner so that the attention could be directed toward certain language activities or skills. Arranging and planning learning help learners to organize so they may get maximum benefit from their energy and effort. Evaluating learning helps learners with problems like monitoring errors and evaluation of progress.

Research has found that compared to cognitive strategies metacognitive strategies are used less consistently by the learners. Here is an example of arranging and planning learning. For the learner who wants to listen to the news in the target language can plan the task by first determining what topics might be covered in the program. Most news programs have segments of politics and

economics. The learners can look up the words related to the topics before listening to the news. This would better prepare the learner. The affective factors like emotion, attitude, motivation, and values influence learning in an important way. Three sets of strategies are included in this group: Lowering Your Anxiety, Encouraging Yourself, and Taking Your Emotional Temperature. Good language learners control their attitudes and emotions about learning and understand that negative feelings retard learning.

Teachers can help generate positive feeling in class by giving students more responsibility, increasing the amount of communication, and teaching affective strategies. Anxiety could be both helpful and harmful. It is felt that a certain amount of anxiety is helpful for learners because it helps them obtain their optimum level of performance. Too much anxiety has the opposite effect which hinders language learning. Anxiety often takes forms of worry, frustration, insecurity, fear, and self-doubt. The common high anxiety creating situation for learners is to perform before the peers and teacher when they are not prepared. Here is an example of how learners try to lower the anxiety. Some listen to their favorite music for a few minutes before practicing the target language.

Social strategies are very important in learning the language because language is used in communication and communication occurs between people. Three sets of strategies are included in this group: Asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others. Among the three, asking questions is the most helpful and comes closest to understanding the meaning. It also helps in conversation by generating response from the partner and shows interest and involvement.

Cooperation with others eliminates competition, and in its place, brings group spirit. Studies show that cooperative learning results in higher self-esteem, increases confidence, and rapid achievement. Learners do not naturally apply cooperative strategies because of strong emphasis put on competition by educational institutions. Sometimes competition brings a strong wish to perform better than others, but it often results in anxiety and fear of failure. It is important to help learners change their attitudes from confrontation and competition to cooperation.

Empathy is very important in communication. Empathy means to put oneself in someone else situation to understand that person's point of view. Learners can use social strategies to develop cultural understanding and become aware of thoughts and feelings of others. Learners can apply the strategy of cooperating with others by doing something together in the language they are learning. Daily telephone conversation with a friend in the target language is an example to practice listening and speaking skills.

### **III. LEARNING ATTITUDE OF THE STUDENTS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

The composition and characteristics of the respondents in terms of age, time learning English language, attitude to learn the English language, effort to learn the English language and other characteristics in this study showed in the following table.

**Table 1**  
**Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Respondents**

<b>Age</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
Below – 21	25	50.0
21-above	25	50.0
Total	50	100.0
<b>Time learning English</b>		
Years	50	100.0
<b>Desire to learn English</b>		
Not much	15	30.0
Medium	24	48.0
Much	11	22.0
Total	50	100.0
<b>Effort to learn English</b>		
Medium	13	26.0
Much	24	48.0
Very much	13	26.0
Total	50	100.0
<b>Usually stayed in place where people speaking English</b>		
Yes	4	8.0
No	46	92.0
Total	50	100.0
<b>Place of origin</b>		
1. Jolo	7	14.0
2. Patikul	7	14.0
3. Indanan	7	14.0
4. Maimbung	6	12.0
5. Panamao	8	16.0
6. Talipao	8	16.0
7. Luuk	7	14.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 1 showed the frequency and percentage distribution of the 50 students grouped according to age, time spent in learning English, level of desire to learn English, the level of effort to learn English, usually stayed in the place where English language are used in daily speaking and the students' place of origin.

In terms of age, 25 (50.0%) of the respondents at age level below to 21 years old, 25 (50.0%) of the respondents at the age level 21 years old and above. In terms of the length of time learning the English language, 50 (100%) of the students learned the English language for years, usually the length of time the students enrolled in formal education. But, the numbers of years in school from the intermediate level to the college level showed less effect because the students are not showing full interest in learning the English language. In terms of attitude to learn English, 15 (30.0%) of the respondents responded not much interest to learn the English language, 24 (48.0%) on the medium interest in learning English and 11 (22.0%) have much interest in learning English.

In terms of the attitude of the students learning the English language, 13 (26.0%) are in the medium effort in learning English, 24 (48.0%) have much effort in learning English, while only 13 (26.0%) have very much effort in learning English. In terms of staying in place where people speak English, only 4 (8.0%) answered yes and the majority 46 (92.0%) answered no. The data showed that majority of the students are living mostly on the areas where the people are not speaking English in their day-to-day conversation. The students are living in the following places: 7 (14.0%) lived in the town of Jolo, 7 (14.0%) lived in Patikul, 7 (14.0%) lived

in Indanan, 6 (12.0%) are from Maimbung, 8 (16.0%) are from Panamao, 8 (16.0%) are from Talipao and 7 (14.0%) are from Luuk. These data showed that the respondents in this study almost uniformly distributed in the seven areas of the province of Sulu. English language is used inside the classroom by some teachers who are teaching English, mathematics, and science. English instruction is also used by the teachers who are assigned to teach social sciences, like economics, psychology, sociology, and humanities. The textbooks in majority of the discipline are written in English. The students by discipline learned the English language indirectly from the different mentioned subjects.

The students are coming from the seven areas in the province of Sulu-I, which was identified according to the place of origin presented in the legend as follows: 1-Jolo, 2-Patikul, 3-Indanan, 4-Maimbung, 5-Panamao, 6-Talipao and 7-Luuk. In evaluating the six learning strategies such as memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social learning strategies the researcher of this study is using adopted questionnaire for analysis and interpretation of data. Several studies have been conducted in other countries to determine the effect of the learning strategies on the achievements of the students. The mean of the responses of the students to the given checklist questionnaire are presented as follows:

The highest total mean (39.73) garnered by the students from Luuk slightly differed with the total mean response (39.66) of Talipao. The student residing in Luuk and Talipao are slightly better in memory strategy than those students residing in the other parts of Sulu.

The highest total mean garnered by the students from Luuk slightly differed with the total mean response of Panamao and in Talipao. The student residing in Luuk closely related to the students from Talipao and Panamao is slightly better in cognitive (51.29, 50.29, and 50.01), Compensation (26.29, 26.27 and 25.77).

The students from Luuk and Panamao are slightly better in metacognitive strategy (37.86, 37.65) than those students residing in the other parts of Sulu. The highest total mean garnered by the students from Luuk slightly differed with the total mean response of Panamao. The student residing in Luuk closely related to the students from Panamao is slightly better in affective (26.43, 25.13).

The given choices corresponding the personal decision of the respondents of the ability level using never or almost never true of me (1). Usually not true of me (2). Somewhat true of me (3). Usually true of me (4). Always or almost always true of me distributed to a range interval of (1.0 to 2.49) with corresponding description never or almost never true of me; (1.5 to 2.49) usually not true of me; (2.5 to 3.49) somewhat true of me; (3.5 to 4.49) usually true of me; and (4.5 to 5.00) always or almost always true of me.

Generally, the learning strategies assessment showed that the students from Luuk clearly revealed their responses in the range of 3.5 to 4.49, an indication these students accepted the memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive to be usually true to them. On the other hand, the assessment of the students from Panamao is that social strategies were somewhat true to them. The learning strategies inferred from the responses of the students from other parts of Sulu such as Patikul, Indanan, Parang, and Maimbung were viewed in the range of 2.5 to 3.49 as somewhat true to them. The use of these learning strategies

was also felt by the students from Luuk, Panamao and Talipao to be also true to them.

The analyses of the proficiency level of the freshmen college students in the six strategies showed that 12 (24.0%) are in the above average level with mean score of 19.25, the majority 21 (42.0%) are in the average level with mean score 15.35, 17 (34.0%) in the below average level with mean score of 8.42.

Generally, the proficiency level of the freshmen students under this study are in the average level of proficiency. Discrepancies are observed between the score in the pre-test and the posttest result. The results in the posttest are better than in the pretest score.

Three factors are known to influence the proficiency level of these students in this study. In the first place the desire to learn English is in the moderate level, and the effort extended to learn English is also moderate; the majority is in areas of non-speaking English people. The ability, proficiency, and capability of speaking, writing and learning English solely and directly acquired from the school. The environment has no evidence to influence the language proficiency of the students, in fact majority of the students are living in the areas of non-speaking English people.

Moreover, the means of overall strategy use shows that Students from Luuk employ overall language learning strategies more often than the other areas of Sulu. In each proficiency group, the means for the students from Luuk in overall strategy use are consistently higher than those for other students in the other areas of Sulu. Moreover, the means of strategy use increases according to proficiency levels. In each place of origin, the means of strategy use also increases according to the proficiency level. Although the results show a variation in strategy use in each place of origin and proficiency in favor of the students from Luuk and high-proficiency level, all means fall between 3.5 and 4.4, the range which Oxford (1990) defines as medium use. Thus, strategies are “sometimes used” by all the subjects.

#### **IV. SIX TYPES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES, PLACE OF ORIGIN AND PROFICIENCY**

Language learning strategies are specific actions or techniques that learners use to assess their progress in developing second or foreign language skills. (Oxford, 1990) Language learning strategies are believed to play a vital role in learning a second language, as they may assist learners in mastering the forms and functions required for reception and production in the second language and thus affects achievement. (Bialystok, 1979) Many researchers have suggested that the conscious use of language learning strategies is good for the language learners. They believe that strategies of successful language learners can provide a basis for aiding language learners. (Rubin, 1975; Reiss, 1983) O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo & Kupper (1985) asserted that the learning strategies of good language learners, once identified and successfully taught to less proficient learners could have considerable effects on facilitating the development of second language skills.

An analysis of use of the six strategy categories was further conducted. The total means of strategy use for different place of origin were higher (Luuk,



Panamao and Talipao) than those from other places in Sulu in all of the six categories. The students in Luuk, Panamao and Talipao tend to use these six strategy categories better than the other place (Patikul, Indanan, Parang and Maimbung). In terms of proficiency level, the means of strategy use for higher proficiency students are higher than those for lower proficiency students in all of the six categories. On the whole, the students from Luuk and high proficiency student tend to use these six categories of strategies more often than the students in other places in Sulu and low proficiency students.

Furthermore, the preferred strategy category by the students of the different places of origin was memory, followed by compensation then affective category. The least preferred category was metacognitive, cognitive and social. In terms of proficiency level, there are not too many variations among the ranks of these categories. The most preferred strategy category for all three proficiency groups was the memory category and the least preferred category was the metacognitive category. The difference lies in the rank order of cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social category by three proficiency levels. For example, the cognitive category, which was ranked fourth by high proficiency group, was rated sixth by intermediate and low proficiency groups. The social category, which was rated fifth by high proficiency group, was ranked fourth by the intermediate and low proficiency groups. The memory category was ranked second by the high proficiency group was rated first in the low and intermediate proficiency groups. Compensation was rated first by the high proficiency group was rated third in the intermediate and low proficiency groups.

The main difference lies in the frequency of using these six categories. The means showed that there are not too many variations among the ranks of these six categories for the place of origin in Luuk, Panamao, Talipao and Jolo, Patikul, Indanan, and Maimbung and for different proficiency groups. The students from Luuk, Panamao and Talipao employed strategies with greater frequency than did the students from Jolo, Patikul, Indanan and Maimbung. Successful language learners employed strategies with greater frequency than less successful language learners.

## **Discussion of the Results**

Subjects of different places of origin background in Sulu specifically in Luuk, Talipao and Panamao did employ overall language learning strategies more often than those of other places such as Patikul, Indanan, Maimbung, and Jolo. The effects of place of origin in the present study seem to support the findings in previous studies. Research has shown that place of origin or ethnicity as used in other studies has a strong influence on the kinds of strategies used by learners of all languages (Ehrman and Oxford, 1995; Bedell, 1993; Grainger, 1997). The results confirmed the findings of two other studies (Bedell, 1993; Grainger, 1997), which showed that students with different place of origin or ethnic backgrounds or cultural backgrounds employed strategies differently. It might be attributed to the following factors. First, styles of language sound and culture are different from those of students in the other places. Competition is the main focus of learning in different places of origin learning environment. Owing to the highly competitive high school and System Admission and Scholarship Examination in MSU-Sulu,

classmates are usually regarded as competitors rather than cooperators. Teachers prefer to assess students' performance on the basis of individual work instead of teamwork. In order to get good grades, students from Luuk, Panamao and Talipao are eager to use study strategies or techniques that would help them acquire new things effectively. In the places of Jolo, Patikul, Indanan and Maimbung community, cooperation is one of the main characteristics of their lifestyle. As a result, students from these places may not exert more efforts to employ learning strategies to compete with their classmate of other places.

Second, students from Luuk, Talipao and Panamao lack appropriate training in using language learning strategies because they do not have the same educational background as their classmates from Jolo, Patikul, Indanan, which are adjacent by location. Since the academic knowledge they acquire in school is out of touch with their actual lives in mountainous areas and offshore islands, they may take little interest in school education. In addition, there are problems with the quality and quantity of teachers available in mountainous areas. Most non-aboriginal teachers work in temporary positions and apply for transfer to schools on the plains after the first year. They are not able to understand these students' learning problems, such as, their English pronunciation problems, and help them acquire effective learning strategies in a short time. Moreover, their efforts are often wasted because these teachers lack specialist knowledge or training in the different life styles which was used as aboriginal culture. (Cheng, 1995)

Third, the learning style of the students in Luuk, Panamao and Talipao may be different from Jolo, Patikul, Indanan and Maimbung which may influence the employment of language learning strategies which was categorized as aboriginal groups. Finally, students in Luuk, Talipao and Panamao might have different motivation and attitudes from Jolo, Patikul, Indanan and Maimbung which was used as non-aborigines in the other studies. Gardner (1985) claimed that the primary determining factor in language learning success is motivation because motivation, along with attitude, determines the extent of active personal engagement in language learning.

A second finding of this study was that freshmen college students in MSU-Sulu who have high English proficiency level did employ overall language learning strategies more often than those who have low English proficiency level. This finding is also consistent with the evidence of other studies. Many researchers have found that that proficiency level had a strong effect on overall strategy use. (Chen, 2001; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Luo, 1998; Oxford & Ehrman 1995; Park, 1997; Tsao, 2002; Wang, 2002; Yang, 1994)

Students in the present study were found to employ memory strategies most often, followed by compensation, affective, social, cognitive and metacognitive. The result that freshmen college students, no matter what place of origin they belong to, employed memory strategies most often is consistent with the findings of studies performed by Chang (1990), Yang (1993a), and Watanabe (1990) which showed that the memory category was the highest rank category. It is natural for students to make greater use of memory strategies as these can allow them to recall the meaning of what they have heard or read or to remain in the conversation despite their limited grammatical and vocabulary

knowledge. Some studies have found social strategies to be generally unpopular among Chinese and Japanese students (Noguchi, 1991; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). This does not hold true in this study. English learners in Sulu learn English in an environment where English is not used for communicative needs in their social and economic daily lives. Consequently, EFL learners are typically situated in what Kouraogo (1993) called an “input-poor” English learning environment and are exposed to meager target language input. Moreover, in EFL contexts in Sulu, English teaching focuses on rote memorization, translation of texts and recognition of correct grammatical forms in reading. Students are not encouraged to ask questions as Chang pointed out. Thus, the less frequent use of social strategies in the study is expected. Contrary to our expectations, social strategies are the second most-preferred strategies by the subjects in this study. The high usage of social strategies could be attributed to the development of computer, multimedia and networking technologies, which has increased students’ exposure to foreign cultures and more English input.

Memory and compensation strategies were found to be the frequent used categories by students in the current study. This was often also often in the case in other studies among Chinese students in Yang’s study (1993a) and Koreans in Oh’s study (1992). The possible explanation is that Tausug students have similar characteristics considering the learning of English language as the Chinese students almost depend on rote learning, therefore, they know little about using visual imagery or linking verbal material with motion. Affective strategies are techniques that help learners control their emotions and attitudes towards language learning. All affective categories deal with how to combat fear or anxiety when speaking English. However, in traditional English classrooms in Sulu where English teachers usually function as an information giver, students do not have many chances to speak English. This shows why affective strategies ranked as the second least employed strategy category in the present study.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Strengthening the functional literacy of the college students must be priority action to improve the performance of the students defined in terms mastery of English, science and mathematics. Without full comprehension of the English language as a philosophy, the students will find difficulty to understand the classroom instructions. However, the teaching of English language to non-English speaking people like the Tausug is proven difficult. The teachers have to find relevant strategies to make teaching English live and interesting.

The strategies used in the assessment of this research is based on the Oxford approach which is divided into direct and indirect strategies. The strategies used directly in dealing with a new language are called direct strategies. The three groups that belong to the direct strategies are memory, cognitive, and compensation. The indirect strategies are used for general management of learning. The three groups belonging to this category are metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The finding of this study showed that freshmen college students in MSU-Sulu who have high English proficiency level did employ overall language learning strategies more often than those who have low English proficiency level.

The data on the use of the six strategy categories has showed the total means of strategy use for different places of origin were higher in Luuk, Panamao and Talipao than those from other places in Sulu in all of the six categories. The students from Luuk, Panamao and Talipao inclined to use these six strategy categories better than other places like Patikul, Indanan, Parang and Maimbung. In terms of proficiency level, the means of strategy use for higher proficiency students are higher than those for lower proficiency students in all of the six categories. On the whole, the students from Luuk and high proficiency students tend to use these six categories of strategies more often than the students in other places in Sulu and low proficiency students.

In terms of the length of time learning the English language, 50 (100%) of the students learned the English language for years, usually the length of time the students enrolled in formal education. But, the numbers of years in school from the intermediate level to the college level showed less effect because the students are not showing full interest in learning the English language. In terms of attitude to learn English, 15 (30.0%) of the respondents responded not much interest to learn the English language, 24 (48.0%) on the medium interest in learning English and 11 (22.0%) have much interest in learning English.

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