

COMPARING INTENTIONAL VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES OF  
ROTE-COPYING VS READ-PLUS

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this within-group experimental study was to compare the effectiveness of two explicit vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) of Rote-Copying (RC) and Read-Plus (RP) treatment on vocabulary acquisition and retention among English as a second language (ESL) learners at lower secondary school level in Malaysia. Participants were 35 Form 1 students with low level English proficiency who participated in both treatments for two weeks with each treatment carried out once in each week. A posttest was administered a week after the treatments. Participants read adapted texts and underwent different treatments. The RC required participants to copy L2 words, sentence in context and its translated L1 counterparts twice; while three vocabulary enhancement activities were used in RP. Nation's 1000 Level Vocabulary Test was used in this study. Results indicate that there was no significant difference between RC and RP in vocabulary learning. Both treatments lead to significant vocabulary learning. However, participants showed better vocabulary gain after undergoing the RP treatment in the posttest. Interview finding indicated that participants preferred the more cognitively-challenging RP treatment. In contrast, the RC was deemed boring and ineffective. Nevertheless, RC is useful for low proficient ESL learners. In sum, intentional VLS are the key to vocabulary learning.

## ABSTRAK

Tujuan dalam kumpulan kajian ini adalah untuk membandingkan keberkesanan dua strategi membelajar kosa kata eksplisit iaitu dengan cara menyalin (RC) dan Membuat Latihan Kosa Kata (RP) di kalangan murid sekolah menengah rendah di Malaysia. Peserta kajian adalah 35 orang murid Tingkatan 1 dengan penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris yang lemah. Mereka mengambil bahagian dalam kedua-dua pengolohan selama dua minggu di mana setiap pengolohan dikendalikan sekali dalam seminggu. Satu ujian dilaksanakan seminggu selepas pengolohan. Peserta membaca teks yang telah diadaptasikan dan menjalani pengolohan. Kaedah RC meminta peserta untuk menyalin perkataan sasaran, ayat dalam konteks dan perkataan yang diterjemahkan kepada bahasa ibunda sebanyak dua kali; di mana tiga latihan kosa kata digunakan dalam pengolohan Membuat Latihan Kosa Kata. Ujian Kosa Kata Tahap 1000 oleh Nation telah digunakan. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa tiada perbezaan setara di antara RC dan RP. Kedua-dua pengolohan membawa kepada pembelajaran kosa kata yang setara. Walaubagaimanapun, peserta menunjukkan bahawa kemajuan dalam menguasai kosa kata selepas mengikuti pengolohan RP. Dapatan daripada sesi temu ramah menunjukkan peserta lebih gemar menggunakan kaedah RP. Sebaliknya, kaedah RC dianggap bosan dan tidak efektif. Namun begitu, RC adalah lebih berkesan untuk murid yang lemah dalam bahasa sasaran. Kesimpulannya, cara belajar kosa kata dengan sengaja adalah kunci dalam penguasaan kosa kata.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Words are the basic building blocks of a language. Knowing the lexical item in the target language is a requirement as it reflects one's proficiency and competence in the target language. Upon knowing a sufficient amount of words in the target language, the learners will be able to chain these words together to construct meaning for communication in the target language. According to Nation (2006), to deal with spoken texts, 6000 to 7000 families of words need to be known and a 8000 to 9000 word family is needed to deal with written text. Another discovery that Nation has found is that there is a great variation of vocabulary coverage in the first 1000 words and in proper nouns, which cover 78 to 81 per cent of written text and 85 per cent of spoken text. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge is essential to understand the simplest written texts as they contain words (Cohen & Johnson, 2011).

There are two main approaches to vocabulary learning – either they are learnt implicitly, incidentally or they are taught explicitly, intentionally (Dakun, 2000). Language teachers should know how to incorporate these implicit and explicit

vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) into their lessons to teach learners novel words. However, many of them are uncertain of how to do so in the language classroom (Read, 2004). To learn new words, Nation (2001) claims that explicit learning activities which focus on the target words are pivotal for successful L2 vocabulary acquisition.

For the past few years, the comparison between incidental and intentional VLS has been widely researched and a majority has found out that intentional vocabulary learning triumphs over incidental VLS (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Barcroft, 2003; Min, 2008; Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010; Amiryousefi & Kassaian, 2010). However, the comparison between different intentional VLS remains under researched. In addition to that, VLS is a relatively new area of English as a Second Language (ESL) research especially in the Malaysian context (Tuluhong, 2006). Some researchers (Azedah Asgari & Ghazali Mustapha, 2010; Sharimllah Devi Ramachandran & Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2004; Shima Kameli, Ghazali Mostapha & Roselan Baki, 2012) have investigated on the use of various VLS by local Malaysian tertiary students who have achieved a certain level of proficiency in the English language. Yet, emphasis was not put on lower secondary school students with low English language proficiency. It is therefore, necessary to investigate intentional VLS among Malaysian lower secondary school students with low English language proficiency.

## **1.2 Background of the Study**

The English Language Curriculum in Malaysia adopts the communicative approach which requires teachers to teach English vocabulary communicatively as well (Sharimllah Devi Ramachandran & Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2004). This means that L1 should be avoided at its best in the classroom with maximum exposure to the L2

(Zimmerman, 1997). Taking into account students with minimal command of the L2 or English in the Malaysian context, students would face difficulty in comprehending classroom instructions. Studies have also shown that the use of English alone may only be suitable for the intermediate and advance level learners (Sharimllah Devi Ramachandran & Hajar Abdul Rahim). Hence, slow learners might be left out in English lessons as they do not receive comprehensive input in which they can understand what is being delivered by the teacher. According to Krashen (1982), new information needs to be presented in a comprehensible way for learners to understand and to process in their brains. This explanation could be a contributing factor to the participants' poor grasp of English as they could not understand lessons conducted fully in the target language.

Besides, students do not realise the importance of English language as an international language because they communicate almost completely in their L1 within their community. This also indirectly causes them to be less motivated to learn the target language because they question its usefulness. As a result, learning English is deemed unimportant and is sidelined. After these students have completed their primary school education with little knowledge of English, they proceed to secondary school education.

The secondary school English teacher would face difficulty in teaching when they discover the learners' unexpectedly low level of proficiency in the target language. Many lessons would fail to be carried out such as group discussion, brainstorming and presentation because of learners' limited command of the language. It is also reported that Malaysian teachers have a heavy workload due to the exam-oriented system which requires the teachers to finish the syllabus in preparation for the students to face major examination (Koh, 2004). To make matters worse, Koh pointed out that Malaysian teachers have to carry out non-instructional work or administrative works in school. Due to this additional burden, teachers have less initiative and less time to implement new teaching methodologies in their classroom (Koo, 2008). Due to these constraints that L2

teachers are facing, the teaching of vocabulary is largely neglected though they are aware of the importance of learning vocabulary.

This study sets out to aid L2 teachers to examine the effectiveness of two VLS to teach vocabulary to the low proficiency students. The present study focuses on intentional VLS since researchers (Hulstijn, 1997; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Barcroft, 2009) have found that intentional VLS are more effective than incidental VLS. Barcroft (2009) mentioned that direct instructions to learn target words and other explicit methods of learning new words enhance vocabulary learning during reading. This research attempts to compare two intentional vocabulary learning strategies of rote copying with the target L1 words provided (Rote-Copying) and doing a series of vocabulary exercise after reading a passage (Read-Plus).

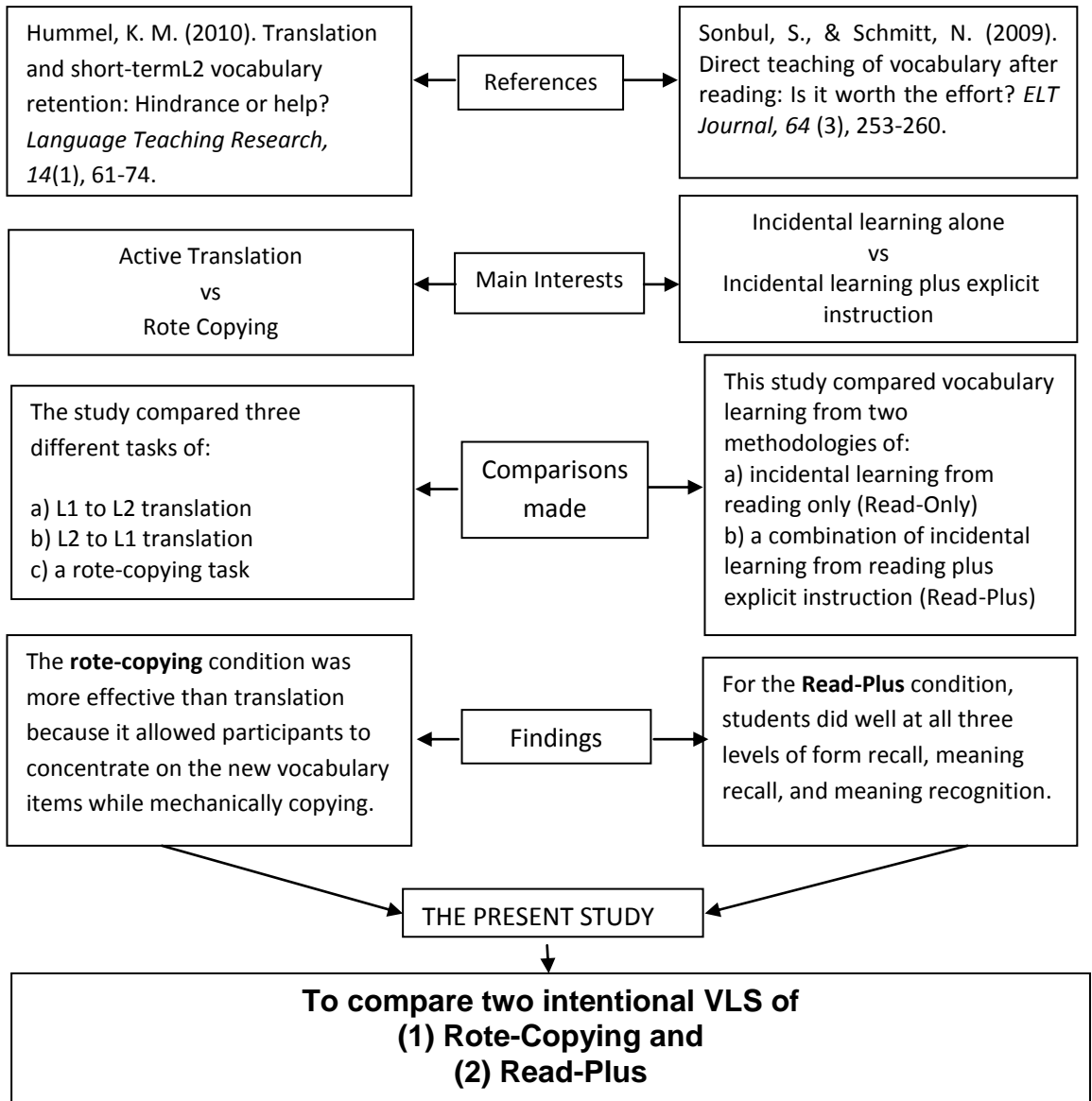
The former method sees the use of rote copying in learning vocabulary with the L1 translation provided. A research on intentional vocabulary learning strategies was carried out by Hummel (2010) to compare the three conditions of (1) L1 to L2 translation, (2) L2 to L1 translation and (3) a rote-copying task. Though translation is not favourable under the pervasive influence of direct method and behaviorism, claiming that learners' L2 will be influenced by L1, the role of active translation might contribute to vocabulary learning (Hummel, 2010). Findings from this research shows that having learners to copy the provided sentences and translation of the new vocabulary is the most effective way to acquire new words instead of actively translating the words from L2 to L1 and vice versa. This exposure and rote-copy group seems to contribute more effective L2 vocabulary retention. Explanations given for the beneficial effect of copying condition are: (1) rote-copy draws learners' attention to the structure of the word, and (2) separate motor trace in the memory is activated to assist retrieval (Thomas & Dieter, 1987). Hence, this research employs the successful Rote-Copying method to compare with the Read-Plus strategy which will be explained below.

The second strategy used in this present research is based on the findings of Sonbul and Schmitt (2010) who compared (1) incidental learning from reading only condition (Read-Only) with (2) a combination of incidental learning gained from reading followed by word-related activity (Read-Plus). Results show that the latter treatment is more superior to the Read-Only or incidental learning condition in terms of vocabulary learning. In other words, for the Read-Plus condition, learners would encounter the words incidentally while reading a text in the target language. Then, a follow up activity is given to explicitly draw learners' attention to the vocabulary found in the text by doing a series of vocabulary exercise. Therefore, the successful Read-Plus treatment is employed in this study to be compared to the Rote-Copying condition by Hummel (2010).

### 1.3 Framework of the Study

The present study is based on the successful findings of these two studies by Hummel (2010) and Sonbul and Schmitt (2009). It is summarized in Figure 1.3.

**Figure 1.3:** Framework of the Study





#### **1.4 Statement of the Problem**

Learning vocabulary is one of the prominent challenges that learners will face during the process of second language learning (Azadeh Asgari & Ghazali Mustapha, 2011). This is indeed true especially to beginners and low proficiency students. The researcher had made personal communication with some low proficient students and found that they do not know the best way to remember a word. In a polling done in class, more than half of them do not understand the L2 instruction given by the teacher. Quite often, they would rely on translation of the target words by the teachers but they would quickly forget the words learnt. This shows that though translation is used, retention of words is not achieved. Students also expressed that they are not interested in learning English as they do not see the purpose of doing so since they do not use it as a language of communication in their semi-rural local community. The production of target language is very limited because learners' environment is dominated by their L1 and students who speak in English (i.e., the target language) will be laughed at.

To further illustrate the problem, there is a need to gain understanding on the participants' educational background in this present study. The participants of this study are from the different races of Malay (n=25), aborigines (n=10) and Chinese (n=5). They speak their own mother tongue at home, making them their L1. For the Malay, English is their second language. The Malay students learn English in primary school but their teacher did not expose them to much English because Malay language was the medium of instruction.

However, for the aborigines and the Chinese students, English is their third language. They speak aboriginal language and Mandarin at home as their L1 which have major language system difference with the target language (i.e., English). These aborigines and Chinese students are only exposed to Malay and English language in

primary schools when they were seven years old. Because Malay language and Mandarin was the instructional language in the Malay National Primary School (Sekolah Kebangsaan) and Chinese Type Primary School (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan) which these students attend respectively, English was not given emphasis during their primary school education. English was taught in school merely because it was tested in the Primary School Evaluation Test (*Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* or UPSR). Students are drilled to answer the English language exam questions. This is especially true for schools in the rural setting. Therefore, these factors have indirectly caused participants to have poor command of the target language when they are in secondary school.

Regarding the learning of vocabulary in the target language, low proficiency students expressed that they are unsure of the meaning of words whenever they encounter novel words. Some students mention that looking up the meanings of words in the dictionary is of help. According to Azedah Asgari and Ghazali Mustapha (2010), Malaysian teachers encourage students to refer to the dictionary and expect them to learn new words independently. Their primary school teachers have taught them dictionary skills. Hence, these students are only aware of this strategy as a way to learn novel words. When asked further, they were clueless of how to learn new words, let alone to gain retention.

From the perspective of the teachers whom the researcher has spoken to, the teachers of low proficiency students said that when any unknown words were encountered in class, they would translate target words into learners' L1 immediately. A teacher from a rural area school in Kuala Tahan, Pahang said that he was the 'walking dictionary' in his low proficiency class. In his vocabulary learning lesson, an interesting yet simple story was given to the students to read. Then, it was followed by translation of target words into learners' L1. For the better students, they were encouraged to use the bilingual dictionary during the vocabulary lesson. He mentioned that he would dedicate a lesson solely for vocabulary learning without reading comprehension activity

because students “were not at the level of answering comprehension questions though they were easy”. If there is extra time, students were asked to make sentences with the target words which encouraged production of the language.

Drawing from another teacher’s experience in a semi-rural Paloh Hinai secondary school in Pahang, she mentioned that vocabulary is taught incidentally when she was teaching reading or summary writing. She also used the same strategy of translating to gauge students’ understanding of the text. At times, she would expose students with vocabulary that learners might encounter before the lesson. According to Cowell (2012), pre-teaching vocabulary allows learners to have greater comprehension when a narrative text is given later. However, both teachers did not have any follow up activities to ensure learners have gained uptake of the vocabulary learnt.

In essence, the major problem faced by most teachers in Malaysia probably might be that they are unsure of what is the best method to teach vocabulary especially to the low proficiency students. They might teach vocabulary incidentally as the teacher encounter the words; or teach vocabulary explicitly, when the words are highlighted and given their meaning before the encounter. Intentional vocabulary learning also occurs when the students are told earlier that the target words will be tested in the exams, for example, definition of words found in a poem will be learnt deliberately when the teacher mentions in class that they would be assessed later. Many teachers also resort to translation since learners are proficient in their L1.

Looking at the perspective of learning vocabulary instead of teaching, students themselves are possibly unsure of the strategies to acquire vocabulary. They might remedy vocabulary learning with rote learning by memorizing, but they might find it hard to gain word retention as the appropriate way of memorizing is not learnt. Therefore, by studying the two intentional vocabulary strategies of Rote-Copying and

Read-Plus, they could help teachers to adopt a better pedagogy while teaching and help beginners to identify an effective way to learn vocabulary.

Another significant problem that is mentioned in the earlier chapter is that the comparison between different vocabulary teaching techniques is under researched. Research is especially rare in which they attempt to find out a suitable and effective way to teach vocabulary to the early teenagers. Though some studies have been conducted to ESL learners at tertiary level, vocabulary studies conducted in secondary schools can rarely be found. Hence, there is a need to address this problem by conducting a pioneer study to this target population.

## **1.5 Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to compare vocabulary learning strategies of a) rote copying of target words with learners' L1 provided (Rote-Copying) and b) vocabulary exercise after reading (Read-Plus). No research has looked into the comparison of the effectiveness of both strategies in the Malaysian context, specifically among lower secondary school students of Form 1 who are low in language proficiency.

## **1.6 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- a) To compare the effectiveness of the Rote-Copying with the Read-Plus vocabulary learning strategies on vocabulary learning;
- b) To compare the students' perceptions of the Rote-Copying method with the Read-Plus method on vocabulary learning.

## **1.7 Research Questions**

The research questions are as follows:

- a) Are there any differences between the Rote-Copying method and the Read-Plus treatment on vocabulary learning?
- b) What are students' perception towards the use of the Rote-Copying method and the Read-Plus method on vocabulary learning?

## **1.8 Hypotheses**

The researcher will conduct hypothesis testing to test the following null hypotheses:

- a) There is no difference in vocabulary learning between Rote-Copying and Read-Plus treatment.

## **1.9 Significance of Study**

Firstly, this study would contribute to the body of knowledge on a more effective vocabulary teaching technique for teachers to teach the low proficiency students to learn new words. When learners have been exposed to an effective vocabulary teaching technique, they would find learning vocabulary to be of less burden and could then concentrate on other aspects of the target language such as grammar and pronunciation. Learners could establish their preferred VLS, thus helping them to learn words easily. These learners also need immediate attention and help to learn vocabulary as they are weak in the word-semantic recognition skills. Failure to learn vocabulary could cause students to have difficulty in understanding instructions and in their upper secondary school years. As English will be made a compulsory pass paper in 2016 (Singh, 2013), students need sufficient vocabulary knowledge to tackle exam questions in the future.

Secondly, this research is also especially helpful to busy L2 teachers who are dealing with weak learners. As the teacher might not have time to experiment on different vocabulary teaching techniques, the results of this research can enlighten the educators on how to teach vocabulary successfully. Teachers can incorporate the more

effective teaching method in their classroom and make learning of vocabulary possible. Upon knowing the possible most effective method could greatly facilitate vocabulary learning.

Thirdly, syllabus designers and textbooks writers will benefit from this study because they can design vocabulary exercise that is effective for low proficient learners. As they are the ones who designed what gets taught, inserting exercises or activities which truly assist vocabulary learning is useful to both the teachers and the learners. The textbook writers can also do the same. As such, the teachers can use the exercises directly from the textbook alongside with the passages provided which are parallel with the themes in the syllabus. On the contrary, in order to cater to students of varying proficient levels, syllabus designers or material developers can design regular activities for competent learners while making a side note to mention an alternative way to teach vocabulary to the low proficiency students.

### **1.10 Scope of the Study**

This study was conducted on lower secondary students of Form 1 at a semi-rural national secondary school or *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan* (SMK) in Sri Jaya, a small town on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The sample is only from this school (i.e. SMK Sri Jaya) because the researcher is an English teacher at this school. The researcher has easy access to the target participants for this research. There are 35 Form 1 students in the participating school who has low English language proficiency who had not mastered the first 1000 words in English according to Nation's First 1000 English words test.

Other than that, from the aspect of the research topic, this study will only limit the investigation to intentional vocabulary learning strategies of Rote-Copying and Read-Plus. This is because the explicit comparison between these two methodologies has not yet been done extensively by other researchers. In addition, researches (Hummel, 2010; Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Amiryousefi & Kassaian, 2010) claimed that intentional VLS helps vocabulary learning as compared to incidental VLS.

Moreover, this study investigated only passive and receptive vocabulary ability but not productive vocabulary. Learners' ability to recognize a word encountered and are able to provide at least the meaning of the word is emphasized. However, participants' ability to make sentences and produce language using the target words is not the main focus of this research. In addition, this research is only confined to high frequency words or the first 1000 words in English since the target participants are low proficiency students.

### **1.11 Operational Definition of Key Terms**

There are a few concepts and key terms central to this study that need to be clarified and established in this section for example the meaning of incidental and intentional vocabulary learning; and the two vocabulary learning strategies employed in the present study which are the Rote-Copying and the Read-Plus treatments.



### **1.11.1 Incidental vs Intentional Vocabulary Learning**

Barcroft (2009) has clearly defined incidental and intentional learning. Incidental vocabulary learning means learners pick up new words without having the intention to do so. They stumbled upon the words and learnt them without realizing it. On the other hand, in intentional vocabulary learning, learners deliberately learn the words encountered in text with strategies such as making a word list, doing exercise on workbook in an attempt to learn novel words. However, Barcroft asserted that vocabulary learning can neither be purely incidental nor purely intentional. As such, vocabulary learning occurs on a continuum between incidental and intentional (Coady, 1997). As for vocabulary instruction methods, they can also range from being highly indirect to highly direct (Wesche & Paribakht, 1997).

On another note, Hummel (2010) defined intentional and incidental vocabulary in another perspective—intentional learning occurs when participants are informed that the target words will be subsequently tested and are instructed to retain items; incidental learning is a situation in which learners are not informed that memory for the words learnt will be tested. The present research will regard intentional vocabulary learning as deliberately learning the target words with distinct strategies.

### **1.11.2 Rote-Copying**

The rote-copying method used in this research is when the participants are in the ‘exposure and copy’ condition, in which unknown L2 words are presented in an L2

sentence context and the translated L1 words with its sentence provided. Participants are only required to attend to the sentences with the copy exercise.

### **1.11.3 Read-Plus Treatment**

In the Read-Plus treatment, learners are given word-related activities after reading a given passage. It employs a mixture of incidental learning from reading with explicit instruction. There are three sections of vocabulary enhancement activities in this research: 1) matching target words to their meaning, 2) gap filling sentences with the target words and 3) translate the L1 words into the English vocabulary from the text (Refer to Appendix D).

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