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Methods and Challenges of Teaching English to Blind and Visually-Impaired Students at the Iranian Special Needs Schools



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ABSTRACT

Since inappropriate educational approaches and techniques prevent blind people from choosing fields of study that require foreign language skills, conducting research in the area of foreign language teaching to such learners is required. Thus, the present study was aimed at researching on the challenges and strengths of EFL teachers at the Iranian blind and visually-impaired schools and also the techniques and materials utilized by them. To this aim, considering descriptive-analytic method for the study, all EFL teachers at such schools in Tehran were interviewed and their classes were observed. Then, thematic analysis was conducted on the obtained data. The findings revealed that due to the lack of holding suitable training courses for the teachers by the Ministry of Education and the lack of adapted teaching materials, Grammar Translation Method along with the techniques and materials similar to what is used for sighted learners were utilized at the blind and visually-impaired schools. However, according to the recent studies, these learners have different social behaviors and learning styles. The study suggests to the relevant policy makers and experts to conduct more effective courses through re-evaluating the existing pre- and in-service training programs. Furthermore, it puts emphasis on the development of special EFL teaching techniques and materials for blind and visually-impaired learners and formation of expert inclusive settings with visually-impaired and sighted learners.

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1. Introduction

As [World Health Organization \(2018\)](#) reports, an estimated 253 million people with vision impairment exist in the world. In this population 36 million are blind and 217 million have moderate to severe vision impairment. According to [Salamat News \(2018\)](#), Iran is ranked as the sixteenth country in the world with 115 thousands blind and 700 thousands visually-impaired persons. Unfortunately, forty percent of this population is unemployed although they include the most educated population among the Iranian disabled. In 1981, there were only 150 academically educated blind people in Iran but now they are more than 5 thousands. Furthermore, due to the modern life, one of the main factors to succeed in academic education and getting qualified for employment is familiarity with English language. However, as [Tran and Pho \(2020\)](#) expressed, many studies have been done on how to learn English as a second language by ordinary learners, but research on how to learn English as a second or foreign language by the blind is relatively rare. Thus, in the present study, foreign language teaching to such learners is investigated on.

2. Review of the Related Literature

Recent Tools and Methods to teach a second language to BVILs¹

Generally, there are two categories of visually-disabled people: the blind category and the partially sighted category ([Alkhaldeh & Khasawneh, 2020a](#)). Based on an educational point of view, visually-disabled students, whether they are blind or visually impaired, require some

kinds of modifications in teaching methods, curricula and teaching aids that meet their individual needs in various areas including reading and writing, identification and mobility, and the development of different senses ([Amin et al., 2021](#)).

Morua Alvarez (2019) also achieved similar results in his study including that blind students create a method for themselves through which they can comprehend the language and learn it, and finally learning based on students' needs and priorities can make it more personal, focused and successful.

In the area of education, the professional competence of teachers is a concept that has been used in relation to the educational areas, all around the world since the emergence of educational reforms. ([Fazalali et al., 2020](#), [Rajainia et al., 2014](#)).

In this regard, [Basaran \(2012\)](#) focused on the techniques used by teachers teaching BVILs and illustrated their lack of knowledge on how to run a class orienting the requirements of such learners and using almost the same teaching techniques and materials that are commonly used to teach sighted students in Turkey. However, according to the earlier research, the visually-impaired have different social behavior and learning styles.

After describing the conditions of BVILs in learning English as a foreign language, [Kocyigit and Artar \(2015\)](#) concluded that personality traits of the BVILs have specific effects on the learning/ teaching process and even if they have a similar impairment, they

¹ . Blind and Visually-Impaired Learners

have different habits and use different strategies for learning.

Consequently, ignoring BVILs' differences and planning the lessons accordingly would likely to yield unsuccessful results. If the primary task of BVILs' teachers was to recognize their students' strengths as learners, they would vary the tasks and activities accordingly and obtain better results.

Technology-Based Tools Employed by Blind and Visually-Impaired Learners

Rapid technological changes in the "digital age" necessitate reconsideration of technology use for both personal and educational purposes. In educational systems, educational programs are needed to improve the efficiency, effectiveness of the system and teachers' awareness of updated knowledge. For this reason, pre-service and in-service courses are held for teachers every year. However, research shows that in these courses, they act like traditional courses. It means that the teacher instructors, who are usually from the universities, give lectures and the teachers just listen and take notes. But, this type of teacher training program is not compatible with the needs of today's changing world. [Fazlali \(2020\)](#)

Based on [Asghari et al. \(2022\)](#), still teachers at Iranian schools fail to use technology at their classes and overdo paper and pencil tasks. They cited different factors for such a decision such as time-saving, lack of facilities, and consideration of students' level. Meanwhile, many experts have recently attempted to overcome BVILs' limitations in life by the use of technology. As [Isaila \(2012\)](#) stated that computer-assisted

learning through assistive technology for persons with visual disabilities is a significant method in the accessibility of information and the principal pillar of self-study.

[Silman et al. \(2017\)](#) examined how technology used in Cyprus Turkish Blind Association assisted the teaching-learning and administrative for BVILs. It was found that with the assistance of technology, the participants were completely motivated and could easily communicate with each other and also with people outside their organization.

As [Seng \(2017\)](#) states, nowadays there are computer software which can download material and transcribe it into Braille dots but the machine which can Braille out the dots is very expensive. In addition, one of the significant problems of teachers who are not specifically trained to teach the blind is that they do not know Braille. By the use of technology, we can overcome this problem through training blind students to use computer. In addition, by installment of sound synthesis software such as text to speech and voice recognition, they can use computer easily.

Foreign Language Teaching to the Iranian Students with Visual Disabilities

Due to the modern life, one of the main factors to succeed in academia and getting qualified for employment is familiarity with English language. In the words of [Retorta and Critovao \(2017\)](#), improving the availability of language learning for BVILs has been the common purpose of different organizations including European Blind Union (EBU, France), the Pancyprian

Organization of the Blind (POB, Cyprus), Czech Blind United (SONS, Czech Republic) and the Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union (UNSS, Slovakia). These organizations believe that their national teaching infrastructures are not adapted to the specific requirements of the visually-impaired adults who wish to learn a foreign language. Indeed, non-adaptive approaches, techniques and teaching tools (visual-based modules, interactivity, pictograms and lack of materials in Braille) deter visually-impaired adults from choosing courses which require competency in a foreign language. In this regard, studies on pedagogical engineering are not enough and thus, it is necessary to conduct more research on such cases. In Iran, the problem is more serious because such an organization which can conduct research on language learning issues of BVILs does not exist and apart from a few studies carried out by the university students, no serious action is taken in this regard. These studies are as follows:

[Gerami \(2003\)](#) has examined the impact of inclusive educational system on English language learning of the blind pre-university students in Tehran. He concluded that the exclusive educational system which was the main current system at that time was not appropriate because of the lack of social and verbal interactions among the blind and sighted students. The blind students can learn beside the sighted students enjoying from suitable methods and receiving teaching aids.

[Firoozabadi \(2006\)](#) has worked on the impact of application of podcasts on English listening comprehension of BVILs and has reported a significant positive impact of

using such a technology on the English listening comprehension of the participants in the experimental group. Then the researcher interviewed them and found out that they had adopted a positive attitude towards application of technology in English language learning.

[Gholamian \(2014\)](#) has reported that not only there is a significant correlation between the blind students' motivation and their success in English language learning but also there are eight factors including internal motivation, personal consent, others' consent, communications, personal progress, external motivation, social relationships and individual encouragement of which five factors of internal motivation, personal consent, others' consent, social relationships and individual encouragement have had significant correlation with these students success in English language learning.

[Safi \(2015\)](#) has investigated on teaching French language to the blind teenager students through audio materials. In her descriptive-analytic study, she has analyzed these students' motivations to learn a foreign language through audio materials by the use of a researcher-made questionnaire.

[Allahi \(2016\)](#) has carried out a study in which after designing an educational model for the application of mobile phones in English language teaching to the blind students, he has presented the statistics and analyses on motivation of educational progress, learning and contribution of the students. These statistics and analyses reveal a significant positive effect on all these variables through which, he has strongly insisted on applying high tech in the

educational system of Iranian special needs students.

Considering these studies, it is expected that there is a big gap between the conducted investigations in the world on language teaching to BVILs and the language teaching method implemented in the Iranian educational system of special needs students.

3. Statement of the Problem

According to [Boltenkova et al. \(2020\)](#), nowadays the significance of the ability to communicate in English as in the global lingua franca is hard to be ignored. Unfortunately, blind and visually impaired people find themselves at a disadvantage here as current teaching techniques and materials tend to use a lot of visual information; however, as [Hurt \(2011\)](#) states, about 75% of our learning occurs through our vision. It has always been a trouble to be solved by teacher educators, teachers and other experts in charge of teaching to BVILs that how they can activate other senses including auditory and kinesthetic to compensate for such a limitation. On the other hand, [Cardenas and Inga\(2021\)](#) believe that BVILs need to have stabilized learning context because they have no cognitive problem. Therefore, the teacher that is now needed must be trained and updated in technological, pedagogical, and disciplinary knowledge so that s/he would be able to prepare practical support in English language learning and help to generate added value in the personal, professional, and productive lives of BVILs.

Although the previous research found specific differences in the way BVILs interact with their teachers and classmates in their learning settings, there is not enough

research on how this limited and different type of interaction should be managed not to affect their learning experience negatively. Consequently, ignoring BVILs' differences and planning the lessons accordingly would likely to yield unsuccessful results. If the primary task of BVILs' teachers was to recognize their students' strengths as learners, they would vary the tasks and activities accordingly and obtain better results.

4. Research Questions

To provide and achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions are brought up:

1. What are the challenges of EFL teachers working at Iranian blind and visually-impaired schools?
2. What are the strengths of EFL teachers working at Iranian blind and visually-impaired schools?
3. What are the techniques that are utilized by EFL teachers working at Iranian blind and visually-impaired schools?
4. What are the methods that are utilized by EFL teachers working at Iranian blind and visually-impaired schools?
5. What materials do EFL teachers use at Iranian blind and visually-impaired schools?

5. Research Design

This research has a qualitative research design and is a case study in which thematic analysis is used to analyze the data. Within this framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with EFL teachers at blind and visually-impaired schools and five classroom sessions of each participant were observed. The interviews were recorded and

transcribed later. In order to analyze the transcribed interviews, thematic analysis procedures were followed. Note-taking was also done during the observations. This information was used to evaluate the interviews data and draw conclusions.

6. Method

Participants

For this study, all English teachers of BVILs at the visually-impaired secondary schools in Tehran were interviewed and five seventy-five-minute classes of each teacher were observed. The participants included two sighted women, one blind woman and two blind men. However, none of them had studied English academically and they mostly had learnt English through self study.

7. Data Collection Procedure

The Data were collected through two tools: Interviews with five participant teachers and observation of five 75-minute EFL classes of each participant. Before beginning the procedure, a semi-structured interview schedule and a classroom observation guideline based on the research questions were provided and the first researcher consulted with an expert to avoid any leading questions and misconceptions. Since there are three blind and visually-impaired secondary schools in Tehran which have students from different cities and towns, the researcher planned to observe the classes of the EFL teachers at these schools and interview the teachers after observation. Through the observations and interviews, not only the researcher could reflect on the teaching process but also got an opportunity to gain some insight about the teachers' views and perceptions concerning their

strengths, challenges, techniques and materials. Firstly, the researcher succeeded in obtaining the official authorization after consulting the schools' principals. Then, she took the next step and met the teachers and assured them about the anonymity of the participants to reach an agreement on participation in the study. In addition, because of vulnerability of the students, written consent was obtained from their parents to observe their children's classes. It is worth to mention that due to the visual impairment of a few of the teachers and all of the students, there were very strict restrictions.

8. Data Analysis

As the present study is a qualitative research based on thematic analysis method, to analyze the collected data systematically and to prevent fast superficial generalizations and conclusions and biased interpretations, data analysis criteria were determined. Repeated readings for familiarization, coding, clustering codes and converting clusters into themes were the taken actions for identification of data analysis criteria. To this aim, after transcription of the interviews, the iterative process included repeated readings for familiarization, coding, data clustering-retrieving-reorganizing and finding relationships among codes to formulate themes and finally answering the research questions. To form the clusters, a word processor was used to highlight relevant data and then the related highlighted pieces were given the same label.

9. Findings

In the analysis process, the themes that emerged from interview and observation data

were challenges, strengths, materials, techniques and methods. These main themes can be taken as a summary of sub-categories presented in Table 1, which elaborates the

main categories, sub-categories and English translation of relevant examples from interview and observation data.

Table 1. Summary of categories and subcategories that emerged from interviews, and relevant examples

Category Labels	Subcategories	Examples
Challenges	Multiple impairments	Audio-impairment, brain disorder like epileptic seizure or mental disorder like autism are common problems among blind students
	Learning disability	Some of the students have below average IQs
	Family-related problems	Some of the parents do not pay attention to the emotional and educational development of their children Especially among students who live in dormitories because of emotional distress, there is not enough focus for learning Some parents make their children attend some English institutes which their methods and materials are not adapted for visually-impaired students and this can result in their disappointment and disinterest in English learning
	Curriculum	The syllabus is very heavy specially for students with below-average IQs
	Non-adapted course book	Some exercises are vision-based so impossible to be done by BVILs The CD accompanied by the course book is not adapted for BVILs, so the teachers have to prepare other teaching aids
	Time constraints	As some parts of the course book are based on visual learning it is time-consuming for the teachers to teach all these parts English Braille contractions are very difficult and time-consuming for the learners because they have to memorize lots of irregular items
	Lack of sufficient knowledge and skills of teachers	Lack of proper pre- and in-service classes for BVILs' teachers by Ministry of Education has caused lack of necessary teaching skills for teachers Lack of holding English academic education by the teachers has caused insufficient knowledge among them Some of the BVILs use manual magnifiers which decrease the speed of reading and make their eyes tired and painful
Using inappropriate auxiliary equipment	As there is no eye contact or body language and gesture in communicating with such learners, the only tool to teach is the teacher's voice	
Communicating with the students		
Material Scarcity	Boys high schools did not have a language lab and the software system used in the girls high school's laboratory was not adapted for blind teachers	

		The schools lack suitable equipment for playing the CDs in the class There were not adapted CDs which included spelling of the vocabulary for BVILs
Strengths	Verbalism	For example congenital blinds do not know about colors at all but they talk about them as if they know
	Classroom Management	Classroom management can be done sufficiently by the teachers as the number of students in each class must be up to 10
	Contextualizing the content Better pronunciation Sense of humor	Teachers use the context and vocabulary by teaching lifestyle to them simultaneously As the students are more dependant to listening for learning, mostly they have a better pronunciation comparing to normal students Sometimes the teachers use sense of humor to motivate the students for learning
Materials	Course Material	The braille course books lack embossed photos to motivate the students The CD accompanied by the coursebook which is used for BVILs is the same as what is used for sighted students Some of the students bring their cassette players, voice recorders or cellphones to record their teacher's voice
Technique	Role-Play	Sometimes the teachers ask their students to come in front of the class and work on the conversation models of the book in pairs
	Drill	Occasionally the teachers practice sounds or sentence patterns in English, based on guided repetition or practice and use pattern practice to teach grammar
	Creating context with stories Communicative approach	The teachers prefer to create a context and teach through telling stories. English is hardly used for communication in the class
Method	GTM ¹	The teachers believe that they have to translate all the words and sentences into L1 to help their students understand them esp. since they cannot use photos and visual guides Persian is mostly used to teach vocabulary, grammar and reading

Regarding the challenges faced by the teachers in English language teaching to BVILs, multiple impairment and mental diseases were among the most challenging ones for the teachers as the impairments were

diverse (including Audio-impairment, brain disorder like epileptic seizure or mental disorder like autism) while the teachers are not experienced and knowledgeable for teaching them. Related to this problem, they

¹. Grammar Translation Method

also mentioned that some of the students have low IQs and consequently have difficulties in learning. They believed that mostly the talented BVILs are led to use the cohesive system; therefore, the average student in their schools has a moderate to low IQ. As one of the teachers expressed: “Some of the students suffer from multiple impairments and or low IQs but they sit at the same class with other visually-impaired students. So, this makes it impossible to adapt the teaching methods for all the students at the same class.”

In addition, Family-related problems especially for the students from other cities and towns who have to live in the dormitories and far from their families have caused emotional distress which distracts attention from learning. One of the teachers believed that: “Some of the parents do not pay attention to their children’s emotional and educational development and they have left the responsibility of everything to the school and the dormitory.” Also, some parents make their children take part in some English institutes which their methods and materials are not adapted for visually-impaired students and this can result in their disappointment and disinterest in English learning.

Furthermore, the curriculum was too heavy for BVILs with below average IQs. As one of the teachers said: “Below-average students prevent me from practicing more advanced English topics with other students in the class.”

Non-adapted course books and CDs for BVILs have caused other difficulties for the teachers and made them prepare special

teaching aids through spending a lot of time at home. In this regard one of the teachers indicated: “I have prepared special audio files through recording my voice while reading and translating the passages of the course book and doing one sample of each exercise to be used by the students at home.” And another teacher stated: “I download and share the English audio files which are adapted for blind students from www.gooshkon.ir”. To explain more, he stated: “as the CD accompanied by the course book has a high speed of speaking, it is inappropriate for my students; therefore, two institutes (Qazvin Assembly and Shahid Samani) have prepared other audio files with a lower speed of speaking to give blind students the opportunity to listen to them and read their braille book simultaneously.”

Time constraints is another problematic factor because visual learning based parts of the course books including photo dictionaries, tables, etc. are very complicated and time-consuming for BVILs to make sense. Furthermore, English braille contractions are very difficult and time-consuming to be learnt as the students are required to memorize a lot of irregular items.

Dissatisfaction of some of teachers with being forced to teach English despite their different fields of study was another problem that appeared in the form of their lack of mastery in teaching in the classroom. For example, when interested students asked them to introduce more advanced resources to improve their English, they could not do it properly. In addition, due to not holding appropriate pre-and in-service courses for EFL teachers of BVILs by Ministry of

Education and limitation of these courses to introduction to the newly-authored books' teaching methods and introduction to English braille contractions, the problem of lack of skills in teaching English to BVILs has remained unsolved. As one of the teachers expressed: "I had not participated in any in-service training programs specialized for the blind students and the only tool prepared by Ministry of Education for English teachers were some videos of virtual courses on the newly-authored English course books which were not adapted for the blind teachers, so I had to convert the videos to MP3 files to listen to and as the introduced methods are suitable for sighted students I had to try to adapt them for my exceptional students."

Using inappropriate auxiliary equipment by BVILs was another challenging matter as a teacher stated: "usage of inappropriate auxiliary equipment like manual magnifiers decreases BVILs' speed of reading and makes their eyes tired and painful and subsequently distracts their concentration."

As there is no eye contact or body language and gesture in communicating with such learners, the only tool to teach is the voice of the teacher and his or her tune of speaking. In addition, blind teachers cannot check their students to assure whether or not they are following their teacher for example when s/he is reading the book. Concerning this problem, one of the teachers said: "While teachers of ordinary students can use writing on the board, pictures, diagrams, and their body language to convey concepts, we teachers of the blind can only do so through our speaking which is very difficult."

Material scarcity, including lack of language laboratory in Boys high schools and also the lack of adaptation of the software used in the language laboratory for blind teachers at Girls high school has caused insufficient teaching of listening skill, while auditory learning can be considered very significant for BVILs. As one of the teachers indicated: "Even though the school where I teach is equipped with a language laboratory, because its equipment is not adapted for blind teachers, I, as a blind teacher, cannot use these facilities, while using laboratories can give students more motivation to learn."

The second item was probing into the strength of EFL teachers working at schools for BVILs. Under this main category were subcategories including verbalism, classroom management and vitality. The participants believed that their students could easily talk about the items that have never been received through one of their four active senses which is called verbalism in the literature. So, they took advantage of this fact through applying translation not only as a technique to teach English but also as a strategy to compensate for the elusive nature of abstract or intangible objects and features by utilizing what students could already express through verbalism in their mother tongue. Concerning classroom management, they believed that they could do it sufficiently because of the small size of the classes (up to ten students). The teachers emphasized that most of their students were eager to talk in English so they attended in class activities. These favorite qualities were labeled as vitality by the researcher and

categorized under the category of “strengths”.

Furthermore, contextualizing the content through using the newly learned vocabulary and grammar for teaching lifestyle to them could be very useful and interesting. For instance, teaching how to refuse offering help by the others: “Can I help you? No, thanks”. Also, BVILs have a better pronunciation as they are mostly listening-dependant learners comparing to normal students. In addition, teachers’ occasional usage of sense of humor for making the students more motivated was remarkable.

The third factor which was questioned about was the materials used in the classes. The braille course books’ content was similar to that of the ordinary ones except they lacked embossed photos which could bring about more motivation for BVILs. In addition, the used CDs for BVILs were the same as those for sighted students and adapted CDs with lower speed of speaking which include spelling of vocabulary were not available. Meanwhile, some of the students used their voice recorders or smartphones to record their teachers’ voice to be used at home. Concerning this matter, a teacher stated: “Auditory learning of vocabulary spelling could be useful for blind learners because learning through braille reading and writing is very time-consuming.”

Concerning communication approach, it is worth to mention that English language is hardly used in the class. As one of the teachers stated: “I mostly talk in Persian in the class since firstly, I cannot speak English fluently and accurately and secondly, my

students are not that skillful to comprehend my English speech.”

The fourth factor which was investigated on was the teachers’ techniques. Role-play was the most applied technique in their eyes. Drilling was another technique which was applied by all the participants. BVILs could develop good pronunciation habits through first listening to a model from the teacher, and then repeating this model several times while receiving positive and negative feedback for their attempts. In addition, practicing on dialogues and conversation models of the books was another technique for improving speaking.

Concerning the fifth factor which was methods, it was concluded that as the participants were not expert in language teaching, they could not mention their used methods exactly but through their explanations and observation of their classes, it was clarified that GTM had been their commonly used method of teaching.

10. Implications, Discussion and Conclusion

This is a case study focusing on strengths and challenges of and techniques and materials used by five EFL teachers working at all high schools exclusively for the visually impaired in Tehran. The analyzed data obtained from the observations and interviews present several themes such as multiple impairments, family-related problems, non-adapted course book, verbalism, vitality, material scarcity, and prevalent application of grammar-translation method by the teachers.

Considering the findings of the study indicates that the teachers who are the

participants of the study approximately used the same teaching techniques and materials as those which are applied for sighted students in Iran. This is contrary to the suggestions given in the earlier research including Alkhawaldeh and Khasawneh (2020a), Amin et. al. (2021), Kocyigit and Artar (2015), Basaran (2012), Fazali et. al. (2020) and Rajaeenia et. al. (2021) about this matter that the visually-impaired should have different learning styles. Furthermore, they have had special limitations and problems which have been remained unsolved because of the lack of education in English teaching to BVILs which should have been considered by Exceptional Students Education Department. The most significant implication of this study is for the Iranian national and local education administrators and higher education policy makers including in-service training programs for EFL teachers who teach at the BVILs schools should be re-evaluated and made more effective. Absolutely, EFL teaching programs should be revised and courses about teaching students with special needs should focus on the visually impaired students' characteristics such as their use of verbalism. Also as it was concluded by Isaila (2012) and Silman (2017), putting emphasis on the significance of digital technologies in improving their language learning skills with an eye on the fact that having a good command of English by BVILs can prepare them better opportunities to solve their problems of unemployment.

As one of the main challenges of the participants was having some students with multiple impairments which made them

confused for choosing suitable techniques and materials for teaching all the students in the same class, this can be overcome by forming smaller homogenous classes by assigning students with similar characteristics to the same class, if possible.

Furthermore, as it was indicated by Morua Alvarez (2019), a more student-centered approach should be adopted and the principles of learner autonomy should be adhered to by the teachers. In addition, as it was found out in the study of Gerami (2003), since blind students tend to compete and interact more with their sighted peers, preparing educational settings inclusive of both visually impaired and sighted students should be regarded more seriously and expertly. This way, the blind students who live in the towns and villages will not have to leave their families and live in the dormitories. It seems that a kind of teamwork is required to examine different aspects including appropriate materials development, exceptional children psychology, EFL teaching, digital technology, etc.

Finally, different implications such as the requirement for conducting formal trainings of visual impairment issues for EFL teachers of BVILs, development of special EFL teaching techniques and materials for BVILs and formation of expert inclusive settings with visually impaired and sighted students were suggested.

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