

# Insights Gained from the Scholars, Educators and Researchers on Practices of Culturally Responsive English Language Teaching

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## APA Citation:

Soe, A.T. (2022). Insights gained from the scholars, educators and researchers on practices of culturally responsive English language teaching. *Journal of English Language and Linguistics*, 3(2), 91-111.

Received Date: December 5, 2022

Accepted Date: December 27, 2022

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## Abstract

This study evaluated the literature available on practices of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in the field of ELT. This documentary analysis of literature brought to light multiple insights for educators to consider. Document analysis was applied to explore the insights used by the scholars, educators and researchers. The process in this study involves evaluating electronic and physical documents to interpret them, gain an understanding of their meaning and develop upon the information they provide. Finally, three insights were addressed in this study: (i) the need for improved professional development (PD) for educators, (ii) educators' professional practices, and (iii) CRT strategies. The first insight gained was the extreme need for thorough CRT training for English teachers. In the many surveys completed, the majority of teachers felt there was not enough training on

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how to work with CRT. Moreover, the data also showed despite the benefits it may have, the PD currently being implemented is not sufficient. It was done only with small participant pools and was highly intensive. This level of time-consuming effort is not always possible for every educator. This raises the concern that there may be individuals who desire to become more experienced in CRT practices but are either not able to or not willing to put in the time and effort required. Therefore, the need for accessible, realistic CRT training is evident. In addition to CRT training, another insight gained from the research showed the benefits of using bilingual instruction and multilingual resources.

**Keywords:** Culturally responsive teaching, English language classrooms, Insights, Practices

## Introduction

Education is a major concern to the countries and students are introduced to two languages as early as the pre-school level. International schools and national schools tend to have native speaker teachers to teach the English language. More research should address this issue, if we are looking for a lifelong learning community with a proficient acquisition of the English language. We are living in the globalization era and the world economy is driven by the powers of knowledge, information and technology. The ability to understand and speak a different language is an important tool for international relations and for the development of science and technology. This is one of the most important reasons that forced the countries to reform their educational programs and enhance the English Language. Hence, this approach sets many challenges to educators, policy makers, parents and students. In order to constitute a clear image of this type of education in the world, we should define it, specify the students who study such programs and describe the characteristics of the instructors that engage in implementing this approach. We should also strive to have a clear recognition of the components of education to ensure the success of language, reading and academic achievement in learners.

In all Myanmar universities, the language of instruction is Myanmar when teaching Myanmar language, religion, and social studies. It is English when studying English language, math, and sciences. Extracurricular activities are administered in Myanmar or English. The universities follow the approach where the students are instructed in both languages depending on the subject matter. A few senior universities in Myanmar have native English speakers to teach English. As the need for foreign teachers is increasing, university administrators and stakeholders should highlight the concern towards what characteristics they look for when having a foreign teacher to teach the English. They have to study the efficiency of these characteristics in helping the students acquire proper linguistic skills. These issues pinpoint major concerns and many unresolved problems regarding teaching English to students whose first language is not English, in this case the students are Myanmar students, whose first language is Myanmar and who live in Myanmar.

This introduction sets the tone and the establishment of the different parts of this paper. The first part of this paper is the literature review: it projects a comprehensive overview of the findings of each key concept of the topic: students, culturally responsive teacher, and acquisition of the English language skills. The second part is the discussion: it develops a detailed argument to support the teaching experiences on the educators' own experiences, learning behaviours and learning styles. The last part will incorporate the conclusion and the recommendations addressed to all the education communities, parents, teachers, and school administrators. As far as the author is concerned, document analysis on culturally responsive teaching in the area of English Language Teaching in Myanmar have not been found.

## **Literature Reviews**

Many researchers contribute to understanding how students acquire literacy skills and provide helpful practical theories that many teachers follow to support them. Teachers that are culturally responsive help students developing their English literacy skills. The three key elements in CRT are

culturally responsive teachers, students, and English literacy skills. It is believed that providing relevant cultural information, teachers can better structure the curriculum to include this information in the students' university life (Griffer & Perlis, 2007; Sheryl & Suleiman, 1993) and it will accelerate the acquisition of the English language thus resulting in developing proper linguistic skills.

## *1. Definition of Terms*

### *1.1 English Learner (EL)*

English Learner (EL) is a label which can be used to describe multiple concepts in educational fields. For example, EL programs involve teaching English as an additional language. Additionally, EL educators teach English to multilingual students, and EL learners are students who are learning English as an additional language (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016).

### *1.2 English Language Learners (ELLs)*

English Language Learners (ELLs) are students who are learning English as a language additional to what they already speak. They are provided EL services generally after completing a home language survey. English Language Learners can face unique challenges when compared to their mainstream peers. Due to these challenges, ELLs require different teaching strategies from monolingual learners (Soland & Sandilos, 2020).

### *1.3 Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)*

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is a broad term which encompasses a teacher's ability to understand how students have a variety of ways they learn due to cultural differences. Teachers who use CRT value those differences and use them as a scaffold to meaningful learning. Culturally responsive teaching can include multiple types of differentiation and inclusive strategies for educators of culturally diverse student populations. However, the strategies always involve honouring the personal cultures of students and building independence in students of minority status (Hammond, 2015).

## Research Objectives

This study intended to evaluate the literature available on practices of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in the field of ELT for native English teachers to be able to teach English for students in Myanmar. This documentary analysis of literature brought to light multiple insights for educators to consider. Document analysis is applied to explore the insights used by the scholars, educators and researchers. The process in this study involves evaluating electronic and physical documents to interpret them, gain an understanding of their meaning and develop upon the information they provide. Finally, three insights have been addressed in this study: (i) the need for improved PD for educators, (ii) educators' professional practices, and (iii) CRT strategies.

## Methodology

### *1. Research Design*

This study examines the function of documents as a data source in qualitative research and discusses document analysis procedure in the context of actual research experiences. The application of document analysis to a grounded theory study is illustrated. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of research reports and journal articles that mention document analysis as major methodology. What has been rather obvious is the absence of sufficient detail in most reports found in the reviewed literature. This study examines the documents to increase knowledge and understanding of CRT with a view to promoting its effective use in language classrooms.

## Results

It is important for educators to be aware of the data available on CRT effectiveness and understand it has not been studied with all of the languages and cultures represented in their classrooms. When implementing the CRT strategies, students across a range of ages and grade levels had significant gains in their learning (Borrero et al., 2013; Castro-Olivo et al., 2018; Clark & Fleming, 2019; Kelley et al., 2015; Lin, 2015; Lohfink & Loya, 2010;

Méndez et al., 2015; Zhang-Wu, 2017). Students showed higher engagement and increased self-efficacy when provided content that was inclusive of their language and culture. Teachers must ensure they are using strategies which align to these findings. Therefore, while all teachers cannot be bilingual, more multilingual text options need to be available in a wider range of languages. Finally, the studies have shown a clear lack of diversity in the populations of their participants. Despite the limitations to the studies completed, CRT practices have still been shown to provide extreme benefits.

### *1. Insights on the Need for Improved PD for Educators*

Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) reveal that when teachers use the student's L1 linguistic tools, transformation of these skills occur in the students' second language. According to Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) teachers need to recognize linguistic, historical, and cultural considerations to have a positive effect on the educational needs of the students and their families. Teachers wish to establish positive relations with students must be prepared to their culture and their histories (Sheryl & Suleiman, 1993). Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) provide important cultural and linguistic information about speakers that set a starting point for teachers who are interested in understanding their students and their families. Bialystok (2007) and Uchikoshi & Marinova-Todd, (2012) discuss the development of literacy skills in students. They indicate that if teachers know how students develop their literacy skills, it would be easier for them to develop proper teaching and assessment strategies. They study the development of literacy skills within the mother language and provide a critical background on the foundation of how students become literate in their foreign language. Others focus on developing the following literacy skills: oral proficiency, representation of concepts of prints and phonological awareness and nonverbal reasoning, vocabulary, phonological awareness and naming speed (Geva & Lafrance, 2011; Bialystok (2007). Geva and lafrance (2011) set a framework about how to teach students and how they acquire reading skills. It is very essentials to consider the skills mentioned earlier when teaching students. If one of these skills is not properly developed it may affect the acquisition of proper literacy skills.

**Table 1**

*Article Tracking Matrix 1* (Insight 1 gained from Sheryl and Suleiman, 1993; Bialystock, 2007; Geya & Lafrance, 2011)

Sr No	Insight 1	Scholars/ Educators/ Researchers	Theme 1A: Negative Perceptions	Theme 1B: CRT and Perceptions	Theme 2A: Cultural Awareness	Theme 2B: Linguistic Awareness	Theme 3: Independe nt Learners
1	<p>Focused on developing the following literacy skills: oral proficiency, representation of concepts of prints and phonological awareness</p> <p>Mentioned nonverbal reasoning, vocabulary, phonological awareness and naming speed.</p>	Bialystok (2007); Geva and Lafrance (2011)	-	✓	-	✓	-
2	<p>Presented many considerations and cultural approaches when teaching English to students. These considerations include the writing systems, the syntactic differences, the sociolinguistics difference between both languages.</p> <p>Provided important cultural and linguistic information about speakers that set a starting point for teachers who are interested in understanding their students and their families.</p>	Sheryl and Suleiman (1993)	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
Calculation			0 %	100 %	50 %	100 %	50 %

According to the data in table 1, Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) also stated that CRT provides important cultural and linguistic information. Bialystok (2007) and Geva & Lafrance (2011) stated that CRT practices focused on the literary skills. So, administrators should develop alternate CRT professional development options for educators. Additionally, universities must develop more inclusive multilingual libraries. Finally, teachers should monitor the effectiveness of CRT strategies on EL students. When considering the lack of manageable professional development on CRT teaching, there are multiple ways educators and those in the educational field could solve this problem. First, university administration could apply this information by introducing volunteer or paid mentorships for EL coaching. Additionally, ensuring EL teachers are trained in CRT and then implementing co-teaching could also help to remedy this issue. So, there is an extreme need for thorough CRT training for English teachers. Finally, a few of the studies in the previous literature review discussed undergrad training in CRT teaching practices. By thoroughly preparing undergraduate teaching students, the need for CRT professional development for educators would diminish.

## *2. Insights on Educators' Professional Practices*

Johnson (2002) suggested that teachers should bring diverse experiences to their class. Teachers should play a role model, mentors and support culturally different students. He proposes as well to provide teachers with ethnographic experiences, to immerse in the community and interact with locals and other teachers from the same community. These experiences will help the English teachers to deepen their understanding and awareness of this community. He proposed that teachers should reflect on their experiences and to develop their teaching and learning experiences in accordance with these reflections and teach effectively. This critical reflection examines situations, initiates the teachers into more community or cultural inquiry and develops a more understanding and appreciation.

Culturally responsive teachers are related to students' success. They are trained to identify the barriers and improve the students' personality for better achievement (Lenski, Crumpler, Staliworth, & Crawford, 2005).



Direct connection and awareness to the cultural backgrounds between the students' daily life and the content of instruction make an interactive curriculum, thus resulting in a better success in the student's university life. Teachers who communicate with bilingual students while working through their culture differences or barriers creates better educational opportunities to those students.

Gay (2010) and Rueda & Stillman (2013) conducted studies in USA and Canada to evaluate what best essential elements for teachers to exhibit in order to provide better learning experiences for students. They tackle culturally responsive teachers, and it affects positively student's achievement or develop student's literacy skills. Culturally responsive teachers constitute five elements:

1. Knowing about student's culture.
2. Integrate this knowledge in the student's curriculum.
3. Build a caring and a learning community.
4. Communicate effectively.
5. Use the culture of the students to plan for instructional strategies

### *2.1 Knowing about Student's Culture*

Culture is related to language, religion, music, art, food, color and costumes. Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) present important information about the culture and its language:

Language is one of the world's great civilizations, and one to which the West has been profoundly indebted for over a millennium in fields as diverse as mathematics, chemistry, geography, and philosophy. (p.4)

They defined the culture as a culture of poetry and literature and not bounded to skin color or cuisine or a folkdance, culture in this essence has a deeper meaning. Gay (2010), believe that a culturally responsive teachers are teacher who know how to interpret what culture is, know their students, their culture (Rueda & Stillman, 2012) and their subjects. Once teachers incorporate these three aspects into

their teaching pedagogy, they are known as culturally responsive teachers and help their students in acquiring and developing their English literacy skills.

Many subjects have a direct cultural implication and can be included in the teaching and learning process (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013). Every culture has its figures in many areas such as science, literature, poetry, medicine, economy and can be referred to when discussing a particular discipline with bilingual students

### *2.2 Integration of Cultural Knowledge in the Student's Curriculum*

Once teachers know about the culture of their students, they can use this knowledge as an instructional resource (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013; Rueda & Stillmen, 2012). Teachers should be able to convert this content knowledge into a culturally responsive curriculum. Teachers should help the students raise critical awareness to the messages that are embedded in these curricula. These key principals are essential to second language learners. Teachers should integrate these principles in the educational program rather than presenting them as supplement to the existing curriculum.

### *2.3 Building a Caring and a Learning Community*

Sheryl and Suleiman (1993) imply the importance of teachers appreciating the abilities of the students within the context of their cultural and ethnic differences. According to Rueda (2012) teachers make sophisticated connections across all disciplines. Once English teachers show the responsibility to understand their students' capabilities, they build a caring and a learning community. Culturally responsive teachers help students to appreciate the academic knowledge they have gained and to use this knowledge to support and encourage everyone. Teachers incorporate this knowledge to all other subject areas such as math, science, music, including language (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013).

## *2.4 Fostering Communications*

Communication within a culture involves many contextual factors. These factors involve body language, use of vocabulary, movements and gestures and the roles of speaker and listener. Culturally responsive teachers should be aware of these factors and adapt them in their students' learning experiences (Gay, 2010; Rueda & Stillman, 2012). Once teachers are aware of the language style or culture of students, they can teach them how to shift these styles according to different people and different context.

## *2.5 Instructional Strategies Based on Culture*

Culture is based on poetry and literature. Teachers can use poetry to teach reading, vocabulary and comprehension (Shyril & Suleiman, 1993). If teachers are aware to those styles in the culture, they support the students in developing their literacy skills (Gay, 2010). Learning styles and culture go hand in hand; many cultures have a preferable method for learning (Rueda & Stillman, 2012).

This discussion attempts to provide cultural and linguistic information about all students. The purpose is to assist teachers to know where to start in order to understand students and their families. Once teachers are familiar with the culture of their students, they can design and plan better learning experiences. Similarly, when they know how students develop their literacy skills, they can deal with the drawbacks between both languages: first and second language. In addition, teachers can pinpoint and deal with transfer pitfalls between English and Myanmar to increase the development of the English Language while maintaining the Myanmar. Rueda and Stillman (2012) indicate that teachers need to be very well prepared and trained in order to teach students effectively.

**Table 2**

*Article Tracking Matrix 2* (Insight 2 gained from Johnson (2002) and Lenski, Crumpler, Staliworth, and Crawford (2005))

Sr No	Insight 1	Scholars/ Educators/ Researchers	Theme 1A: Negative Perceptions	Theme 1B: CRT and Perceptions	Theme 2 A: Cultural Awareness	Theme 2B: Linguistic Awareness	Theme 3: Independent Learners
1	<p>Suggested that teachers should bring diverse experiences to their class. Teachers should play a role model, mentors and support culturally different students.</p> <p>Proposed as well to provide teachers with ethnographic experiences, to immerse in the community and interact with locals and other teachers from the same community. These experiences will help the English teachers to deepen their understanding and awareness of this community.</p> <p>Proposed that teachers should reflect on their experiences and to develop their teaching and learning experiences in accordance with these reflections and teach effectively. This critical reflection examines situations, initiates the teachers into more community or cultural inquiry and develops a more understanding and appreciation.</p>	Johnson (2002)	-	✓	✓	✓	✓

**Table 2 (Continued)**

Sr No	Insight 1	Scholars/ Educators/ Researchers	Theme 1A: Negative Perceptions	Theme 1B: CRT and Perceptions	Theme 2 A: Cultural Awareness	Theme 2B: Linguistic Awareness	Theme 3: Independent Learners
2	<p>Stated that culturally responsive teachers are related to students' success. They are trained to identify the barriers and improve the students' personality for better achievement.</p> <p>Mentioned that direct connection and awareness to the cultural backgrounds between the students' daily life and the content of instruction make an interactive curriculum, thus resulting in a better success in the student's university life.</p> <p>Discussed that teachers who communicate with bilingual students while working through their culture differences or barriers creates better educational opportunities to those students</p>	Lenski, Crumpler, Staliworth, and Crawford (2005)	-	✓	✓	✓	✓

**Table 2** (Continued)

Sr No	Insight 1	Scholars/ Educators/ Researchers	Theme 1A: Negative Perceptions	Theme 1B: CRT and Perceptions	Theme 2 A: Cultural Awareness	Theme 2B: Linguistic Awareness	Theme 3: Independent Learners
3	Evaluated what best essential elements for teachers to exhibit in order to provide better learning experiences for students.  Tackled culturally responsive teachers, and it affects positively student's achievement or develop student's literacy skills.	Gay (2010) and Rueda & Stillman (2013)	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Calculation		0%	100%	100%	100%	100%

According to the data, the insights gained can lead educators to consider how this information could be applied to educational practice. By using the information discovered, teachers can further improve their CRT instruction. This will in turn lead to higher achievement.

### *1. Insights on CRT Strategies*

To be culturally responsive, all teachers need to collect data about the experiences of the students including their language (Gay, 2010; Sheryl & Suleiman, 1993). Culturally responsive teachers make use of the information collected to develop instructional goals and invest this knowledge for further academic gain (Palmer & Martinez, 2013). These studies unravel the success behind teaching bilingual children that is equipping teachers with cultural awareness. Each of the reviewed articles provides and contributes to the students and their literacy skills. Each research results show that the development of the first language literacy skills is potentially different from that of the second language literacy skills. Therefore, policy makers and parents are aware of this difference, they can administer many procedures to provide supportive and appropriate learning positive experiences to students.

**Table 3***Article tracking matrix 3 (Insight 3 gained from Sheryl and Suleiman, 1993; Gay, 2010; Palmer and Martinez, 2013)*

Sr No	Insight 1	Scholars/ Educators/ Researchers	Theme 1A: Negative Perceptions	Theme 1B: CRT and Perceptions	Theme 2 A: Cultural Awareness	Theme 2B: Linguistic Awareness	Theme 3: Independent Learners
1	Stated that to be culturally responsive, all teachers need to collect data about the experiences of the students including their language	Sheryl & Suleiman, (1993); Gay, (2010)	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Discussed that culturally responsive teachers make use of the information collected to develop instructional goals and invest this knowledge for further academic gain	Palmer & Martinez, (2013)	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
Calculation			0%	100%	100%	100%	100%



According to the data in Table 3, in addition to alternative training methods, it is important teachers to be trained in the strategies proven to lead to the highest benefit for learners. The use of culturally relevant instruction in a student's home language provides EL students with the best possible learning. However, it is not possible or realistic to assume all teachers will provide bilingual instruction. Therefore, teachers must acquire a rich library of multicultural texts for their learners. Additionally, university libraries should have a higher percentage of dual-language texts so students can bring more literature home to their families. If teachers and universities had more access to multilingual stories, ELLs would greatly benefit. As previously mentioned, the majority of studies have been done on CRT practices. This data, while useful, is not going to benefit the diverse EL students as much as could be possible. Teachers can apply this important information to their professional practice by monitoring the success of their own CRT strategies with EL learners. Simply being aware of the languages present in their classrooms is the first, critical step (Sheryl & Suleiman, (1993); Gay, (2010)) After that, teachers can ensure they are using CRT practices on more than just their speaking EL learners. By making sure all students are benefitting from CRT strategies, teachers will improve the chances of literacy achievement for all of their learners (Palmer & Martinez, 2013).

## **Discussion**

English Language Learners (ELLs) have continually underachieved in literacy. This paper evaluated research done on the effectiveness of culturally responsive (CRT) practices on literacy improvement for ELLs. Multiple studies were synthesized in the areas of positive and negative teacher perceptions, effective culturally responsive strategies, and creating independent learners. The research determined CRT to be an effective method for improving teacher perceptions of ELLs. It was also shown that through culturally responsive practices, teachers can offer successful literacy strategies. The studies additionally indicated CRT practices could assist in developing self-motivated learners. While the data was promising, the majority of the studies were completed with exclusively students using

limited means. Therefore, more studies must be done on the effects of CRT practices on a more linguistically diverse participant pool using a larger variety of resources.

All students deserve to be offered the best possible methods of instruction, so they can learn to the best of their abilities. This review of literature sought to answer the question: In light of what is known about differentiation in the classroom, how can culturally responsive teaching practices lead to higher literacy for English Language Learners? Based on the research provided on the benefits of CRT teaching practices, educators can tailor their instruction to meet the needs of their EL students. The research studied offered evidence of the multitude of benefits of culturally responsive teaching practices. According to Gay (2000), “Teachers must show students that they expect them to succeed and commit themselves to making success happen” (p. 34). Atwater et al. (2010) discovered many teachers hold a negative view of the ELLs in their classroom. First, the previous analysis proved that teachers must have a positive perception of their EL students for literacy to improve. According to Rizzuto (2017), this can be detrimental to EL literacy achievement. In order to fully and effectively educate all of their learners, teachers must view the multitude of languages and cultures ELLs possess as an asset to the classroom. While challenging, the research on CRT proved that reversing negative perceptions is possible. Specifically, training on implementing CLR teaching practices can assist in this process (Trumbull et al., 2020; Mellom et al., 2018; Mette et al., 2016; Reece & Nodine, 2014). Once teachers are able to shift their mindset, ELL literacy should improve. In addition to ensuring altered teacher perceptions for ELLs, the studies have shown that by incorporating CRT teaching strategies for EL students, literacy increased. Lohfink and Loya, (2010), Lin (2015), Méndez et al. (2015), López (2016), and Castro-Olivo et al. (2018) found the use of culturally relevant texts, bilingual texts, building on students’ prior knowledge, and encouraging independence were all effective methods of increasing ELL literacy. Additionally, if the topics of the content were culturally relevant, all students could benefit, whether they are ELLs or not. Finally, the use of CRT teaching increased student self-efficacy, leading to greater independence. When students’ confidence in their abilities

increased, they were able to improve their literacy at a faster rate (Clark & Fleming, 2019; Zhang-Wu, 2017; Kelley et al., 2015; Borrero et al., 2013) This data upholds the importance of using CRT practices in English instruction. Teachers can use the information studied to impact the way they instruct their ELLs by including culturally relevant content, bilingual content, and encouraging students in their abilities. These few changes could drastically improve an ELL's mentality and abilities, leading to higher achievement.

## **Recommendations**

### *1. Implications*

Although more research must be conducted on the positive effects of culturally responsive teaching practices for ELLs, these studies showed there are definite benefits to incorporating them into classroom instruction. English language learners bring unique perspectives, ideas, and experiences, which must be welcomed and used as an asset in education. The pattern of literacy underachievement and ultimately not completing a high-school education must be stopped for EL students. The use of CRT teaching practices is one proven method for reducing the number of struggling students, thereby decreasing the likelihood of ELL students dropping out of university. Therefore, providing EL students with culturally responsive instruction should lead to improved overall English literacy achievement.

### *2. Further Studies*

There are recommendations suggested from much research that studies the same subject, Palmer and Martinez (2013) indicate being culturally responsive will not be as effective as it is expected if the teachers themselves do not own this positive attitude and beliefs toward cultural differences. The best way to use the results of this project is to observe how teachers implement CRT strategies, understandings, and knowledge in their classrooms, and recognize the impact it's made on overall student learning. In addition to seeing CRT in action through amazing teachers, the author

thinks there is power in communication between staff, specifically when it comes to what's working and not working in the classroom. His hope is that teachers decide to continue coming back to discussions about CRT to help one another grow as educators. There is nothing better than experience, so the author would encourage teachers who are having major success in their classrooms to share it with their colleagues, because only together can we move towards an education that is universally culturally responsive.

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