



## THE EFFECT OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL NATIVIZATION ON READING COMPREHENSION AND VOCABULARY INFERENCE

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### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the influence of background knowledge and cultural familiarity on reading comprehension and vocabulary inference of Turkish 7th grade students in public primary schools in Turkey. For this purpose; two texts, one of which was based on the authentic culture and the other one based on the nativized version, a vocabulary test and parallel reading comprehension tests were developed by the researcher. To carry out the research, experimental and control groups were arranged and reading comprehension texts & tests were administered to the subjects in both groups. Additionally, experimental (EG) and control (CG) groups took a multiple-choice vocabulary test. It was concluded that cultural nativization of the text and elements related with background knowledge in the nativized text had a facilitative effect on comprehension of the short passages and inferring the meaning of the unknown words by the students. It was observed that EG students, who read the nativized version of the text got higher scores both in reading comprehension and vocabulary tests compared to CG students who read the denativized(authenticated) version. The findings of the study are expected to bear some implications for English material designers and EFL teachers.

**Key Words:** Cultural nativization, background knowledge, vocabulary inference.

### INTRODUCTION

Culture is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. Culture is what shapes the lives of human beings in a society. According to Peck (1998), culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people. Fairclough (1989) maintains that language and culture are from the start inseparably connected to each other and language is not an 'autonomous construct' ; but social practice both creating and created by 'the structures and forces of the social institutions within which we live and function' . Sapir (1970) supports this idea and mentions that language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives. Considering the notions above, here we should ask whether the main language skills are the sole elements that lead to language learning or are all these accepted ways of behavior of peoples of the target language a bridge to learning process as well ?. It is widely asserted that culture is one of the most basic elements in language learning process. Being a competent, up-to-date speaker of a target language and being able to communicate internationally necessitates , in a sense , being an intercultural speaker. Since every language inherently creates its own culture, the learner and the teacher of the target language automatically have to be conscious of the cultural values and habits of that language. At this point, we should be cognisant of the fact that 'if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning...' (Politzer, 1959). Here the key question should be 'do the above suggestions apply to learning of all the languages ?'. Alptekin (2002) proposes that if it were not English but any other language in the world, then it would be possible to teach the culture with the language; but that is not the same for English as it is a global language. Also, English language has more non-native speakers than native ones. That is, most languages belong to a certain group of people but



that's not the case for English language. For this reason, Alptekin (2002) infers that teaching English culture is not possible since whose culture is going to be taught is not clear.

Hinkel (2001) states that the term culture includes speech acts, rhetorical structure of texts, socio-cultural behaviours, and ways in which knowledge is transmitted and obtained. Hinkel further distinguishes between visible and invisible culture. Visible culture, more readily apparent, includes style of dress, cuisine, festivals, customs and other traditions. The far more complex invisible culture is shown through socio-cultural norms, world views, beliefs, assumptions and values. In order to build the context in which knowledge is transmitted and obtained by making use of the elements of *visible culture*, here we will consider nativizing texts, which proposes the adaptation of cultural elements in an authentic text into the L2 learner's own culture. In Alptekin's (2006; cited in Razi, 2009) study, the nativization provided students with a locality that they were culturally familiar with. By nativizing texts or familiarizing learners with the cultural components, as Cakir (2006) states it is aimed to :

- develop the communicative skills,
- understand the linguistic and behavioral patterns both of the target and the native culture at a more conscious level,
- develop intercultural and international understanding,
- adopt a wider perspective in the perception of the reality,
- make teaching sessions more enjoyable to develop an awareness of the potential mistakes that might come up in comprehension, interpretation, and translation and communication.

### Schema and Schema Theory

Different researchers use different labels for the concept of background knowledge; in addition to schemata, other terms commonly used are *frames* (Fillmore, 1976), *scripts* (Schank & Abelson, 1977), *event chains* (Warren, Nicholas & Trabasso, 1979), and *expectations* (Tannen, 1978). Carrell (1983) states that however much these concepts aren't all identical, they share some fundamental assumptions and yield some of the same important insights into comprehension. The role of background knowledge, also called prior knowledge, in second language comprehension have widely been discussed. Schemata are accepted as interlocking mental structures representing readers' knowledge (Perkins, 1983; cited in Razi, 2009) and researches clearly indicate that what we understand of something is nothing but activating our past experiences. Rumelhart (1980) has illustrated schemata as "building blocks of cognition" that are used in the process of understanding sensory data, in repossessing information from memory, in organizing aims and sub-goals, in allocating resources, and in leading the flow of the processing system.

In traditional classification of schema, *formal* and *content* schema are the most commonly adopted types. Formal schema, often known as textual schema, is defined as knowledge of language and linguistic conventions, containing knowledge of how texts are structured and what the key characteristics of a particular genre of writing are (Alderson, 2000; Carrell, 1987; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). A person can use formal schematic representations of a text to understand information in a new text. A study of formal schema proposes that "texts with familiar rhetorical organization should be easier to read and comprehend than texts with unfamiliar rhetorical organization" (Carrell, 1987; cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). Sharp (2002) assumes that formal schemata are part of the macrostructure of a text and contain the logical organization of the text which the writer has used to represent the intended meaning. Meyer and Freedle (1979; cited in Zhang, 2008) explored the effects of different formal schemata on recall. The 4 types of formal schemata compared were: (1) contrastive schema; (2) cause-effect schema; (3) problem-solution schema; and (4) collection-of-descriptions schema. The first three types of formal schemata have "an extra link of relationship" over the descriptive schema. Results demonstrated that subjects who were exposed to formal schemata 1 and 2 recalled more than formal schemata 3 and 4. The results can be explained by schema theory. Based on this theory, recall of information relayed by the first three formal schemata, which offer extra linkage, should be better than that of the descriptive schema. Meyer *et al.* (1980) conducted another experiment to confirm that readers who adopted the strategy of identifying the author's organization



structure would be able to recall more information than students who did not. Results were consistent with the predicted outcome.

On the other hand, content schema is background information that is essential for understanding a text (Martin, 1995; Carrell, 1982; Enkvist, 1987). Content schema refers to the familiarity of the subject matter of the text and contains an understanding of the topic of the text and the cultural-specific constituents required to interpret it. It also refers to a reader's background or world knowledge and provides readers with a foundation, a basis for comparison (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989).

The place of schemata in reading comprehension is heavily scrutinized within schema theory. "This theory is grounded on the belief that every act of understanding includes of one's knowledge of the world" (AL-Issa, 2006). Jalilifar and Assi (2008) inform us that one of the most interesting and well-documented findings of schema-theoretic studies, particularly in L2 reading, has been the significant role that cultural schemata or cultural background knowledge plays in reading comprehension. It has been argued that non-native readers' failure to activate appropriate cultural schemata during reading may result in various degrees of non-comprehension. The reason is that while native readers, as Ketchum (2006) points out, already possess the necessary cultural background knowledge when approaching a written text, non-native readers must overcome an added challenge of cultural unfamiliarity when processing written communication. Carrell (1983) informs us that we comprehend something only when we can relate it to something we already know – only when we can relate the new experience to an existing knowledge structure. The process of interpretation, according to schema theory, is guided by the principle that every input is mapped against existing schema and that all aspects of that schema must be compatible with the input information. This principle results in two basic models of information processing. Bottom-up processing is evoked by the incoming data; the features of the data enter the system through the best-fitting bottom level or specific schemata. As these schemata converge into higher level, more general schemata, these too are activated. Top-down processing occurs as the system searches the input for confirmation of predictions made on the basis of higher order, general schemata.

## METHODOLOGY

This applied research was conducted in four different public schools in Konya, Turkey during the fall semester of 2012-2013 academic year.

### Participants

The participants, all of whom were at 7<sup>th</sup> grade of primary education, were divided into two groups, the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG). Each group consisted of two classes in two different primary schools, four schools in total in Konya, Turkey, with a fair distribution of classes in terms of gender and level of students to provide reliability for the study. 121 students participated in the study. There were 34 males and 31 females in EG and CG was comprised of 29 males and 27 females.

### Materials

For the purpose of the study, two texts were prepared by the researcher (See Appendix A). The first text, which was target-culturally loaded was about the 'Independence Day', a turning point of American political history. It isn't an authentic text, since it wasn't prepared by a native speaker. However, it was authenticated by the researcher, i.e. made up to be rich in target cultural content within the scope of the research. In the rest of the study, it will therefore be referred to as 'denativized' or 'authenticated' text not as 'authentic' text. The second text, also prepared by the researcher was about 'Republic Day', the most important event in the history of Turkish Republic. It was loaded with the elements of Turkish history and culture, thus provided a schematic basis for the students. In the rest of the paper, being culturally familiarized, it will be mentioned as 'nativized' text. Before the implementation of the study, both texts were proofread by a native and a non-native speaker of English. The texts



were't kept too long because the students could be classified in elementary level and it was aimed to avoid negative effects of long stories during the students' reading process. Both texts were one step beyond the students' current language ability, because this would stretch the boundaries of students' knowledge and force them to make an extra effort to provide a better understanding and as Krashen (1981) states, allow learners to continue to progress with their language development.

In the nativization process, the name of the cities, countries, events and dates in the authenticated text were transformed to Turkish equivalents to activate the schemata of the students in the experimental group about the most important day of Turkish history, which Alptekin (2002) calls 'Turkification'. All the elements used in nativized text were elaborately selected for the EG students to visualize that national, historical day full of nationwide celebrations held both in televisions and stadiums.

Table 1: Textual and Contextual Cues in the Two Versions of the Texts

<b>Denativized ( Authenticated ) version</b>	<b>Nativized (localized) version</b>
Independence Day the <a href="#">United States</a> Washington declaration of independence July 4, 1776 American flag Americans 235 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration of Independence	Republic Day <a href="#">Turkey</a> Ankara declaration of republic October 29, 1923 Turkish flag Mustafa Kemal Atatürk 88 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration of Republic
especially in the streets	especially in the stadiums

### **INSTRUMENTS & PROCEDURE**

Nativized text was administered to experimental group and denativized text was given to control group. In the beginning of the study, all the students were instructed in their mother tongue as to what to do after reading the texts and both experimental and control groups were given thirty minutes to answer the questions. In order to collect relevant data, firstly both groups were made to read a parallel text, same in content and design but different in cultural/schematic elements. Then, a parallel true-false test was taken by both of the groups to evaluate reading comprehension. Except for the above-cited cultural and historical, textual and contextual cues, the rest of each sentence was the same in the whole body of parallel true/false tests (See Appendix B). By the way, with the aim of minimizing the guessability of the T/F reading comprehension tests, target words and their Turkish meanings were not included in T/F reading comprehension items. In order to provide reliability for the answers and a full and flawless understanding of the questions, T/F items were given in Turkish to all of the participants, i.e. in their mother tongue.

Secondly, with the aim of exploring to what extent both groups inferred correct meaning of the words in the texts, a multiple-choice vocabulary test was administered to each of the groups (See Appendix C). The distractors in multiple-choice test were chosen from different aspects of life in order not to create a historic,cultural atmosphere in the minds of the students. This way, it was aimed to prevent the distractors from serving as reminders or cues to the participants during the test. Contrary to the reading comprehension true-false test which had two versions adapted to the two different cultures, there was only one type, standard vocabulary test, because the target vocabulary that was aimed to be correctly inferred by the students was the same and these words were written in bold in both of the texts to draw the attention of the students during reading process. For the same reasons as in



reading comprehension test, choices in multiple-choice vocabulary test were written in Turkish. In other words, the students were oriented to find the meaning of English words by choosing from the Turkish words. Before the application of the test, it was made sure that all the students had no knowledge of what the target words mean. In addition, to establish reliability, reliability coefficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) were found as 0.653 for the vocabulary test, which would let the researcher use the instruments in the study.

### Data Analysis

After gathering data from the two instruments, in order to find out if there was a significant difference in the answers of experimental and control groups to reading comprehension and vocabulary tests, independent samples T-tests were conducted through SPSS program.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are given in detail below. The research questions related with the research are firstly brought in one by one and then the results are illustrated.

### RQ1. Do background knowledge and nativization of the text facilitate reading comprehension ?

In order to understand if background knowledge and cultural familiarization of the text facilitate reading comprehension, independent samples T-test was applied to compare the answers of EG and CG students to reading comprehension true-false test.

Table 2: Independent Samples T-test Results comparing EG and CG's Answers to Reading Comprehension Test

Group	N	Mean	Sd.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
CG	56	5.6964	1.43868	-3.159	119	0.002
EG	65	6.4615	1.22573			

$p(=0.002)$  is significant at the  $<0.01$  level

The results of T-test above indicate that the difference between the answers of EG and CG students is statistically significant ( $t= -3.159$ ,  $p<0.05$  ). The mean values of the groups ( $\bar{X}_{EG} = 6.4615$  and  $\bar{X}_{CG}=5,6964$ ) also made clear that the scores of experimental group were much higher than those of control group, which suggests that background knowledge of the students existing in a text and familiarizing texts have a facilitative effect on students' reading comprehension.

### RQ2. Do background knowledge and cultural familiarization of the text help to infer vocabulary ?

To determine whether background knowledge and nativization of the text also help to infer meaning of the target words, another independent samples T-test was applied in order to compare the scores of EG and CG received from multiple-choice vocabulary text. As shown in the table below, there is a significant difference between the answers of experimental and control groups ( $t= -3.754$ ,  $p<0.05$  ).

Table 3: Independent Samples T-test Results comparing EG and CG's Answers to Vocabulary Test

Group	N	Mean	Sd.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
CG	56	5.9821	2.53335	-3.754	119	0.000
EG	65	7.8308	2.51624			

p(=0.000) is significant at the <0.01 level

It is also understood from the mean values of the groups ( $\bar{X}_{EG} = 7.8308$  and  $\bar{X}_{CG} = 5.9821$ ) that EG did much better than CG during the vocabulary test. Based on these results, we can easily state that background knowledge and nativizing texts have a positive effect on guessing the meaning of the words in the text.

To sum up, analysis of the data collected from a reading comprehension multiple-choice and a vocabulary test revealed that the text's including elements supporting background knowledge of the students and its familiarization to the history and culture of the EG students facilitated not only their reading comprehension, but also inferring the correct meaning of the words.

#### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study made clear that nativization of short stories from the target language culture into Turkish culture facilitated Turkish EFL students' comprehension of the stories and their inferring vocabulary existent in nativized versions. This is possibly due to the fact that (1) culturally-familiarized texts enable readers to activate their schemata more effectively than original versions do. (2) Settings, plots, events, characters and themes are basic constituents of fiction and these are the differing parts between nativized and original versions. Taloon (2006) suggests that the establishment of an identifiable setting is a strong psychological preference in most readers. In their reading of narratives, readers like to know where they are, and look for "clear spatiotemporal indications" of just where and when a thing happened (p.91). Accordingly, these indications, when visualized by the reader, are assumed to ring a schematic bell in the minds of readers. In line with Taloon's notions, for instance, it is very likely that a young Turkish EFL learner has a schemata of celebrations of national holidays and in his/her mind stadiums are the traditional settings to celebrate these national days. On the other hand, in the United States, the central point of celebrations aren't stadiums as in Turkey, activities mostly center around the streets, which may not eventually be found so conversant by the Turkish readers of the original text. As Jallifar and Assi (2008) state, readers' familiarity with the setting can trigger activation of the schemata about the incidents taking place in that setting.

Apart from the setting that functions as a leading element in the emergence of fiction, nativization of the characters have also a significant effect on activating schemata. Jallifar and Asri (2008) assert that nativization creates a sense of cultural intimacy between readers and their imagined persons because these persons seem more compatible with the readers' own culture. In the familiarized text used in this study, for example, while Americans regarded Independence Day as the most important day in the history of the U.S., Atatürk was the one who did it. With reference to this fact, Turkish students have Atatürk schema in their minds as the national hero and the founder of Turkish Republic. This schema is assumed to remind Turkish students of national holidays, one of which was mentioned in the nativized text. To sum up, the more the reader empathize himself with the character and identifies characters, the more inferences he/she is supposed to make from the stories.

The facilitative effect of background knowledge on vocabulary inference was already mentioned above. In his study, Stanovich (2000) explored that the nativized group who read the stories which were more in line with their



background knowledge could compensate for their possible vocabulary deficiencies by drawing on their background knowledge in order to infer the meaning of the unknown words or phrases; as a result, the fact that his surveyees' comprehension of the stories was enhanced is an underpinning of the findings of current study. Pulido (2004) moreover supports the idea that cultural background knowledge can facilitate lexical inferencing during reading.

This study further shed light on the issue that culture and language are inseparably linked and connected. In their study, Jalilifar and Assi (2008) found that nativization of short stories from the target language culture into Persian culture facilitated Iranian EFL learners' comprehension of the stories. The results also illustrated that cultural nativization enhanced the subjects' comprehension of the stories at the literal as well as the inferential level. While Alptekin's (2006) study made clear that nativization plays a facilitative role essentially in readers' inferential comprehension rather than reading comprehension as a whole, Razi (2004) found that nativization of short stories from target language culture into learner's own culture enhances their comprehension of the stories. Besides, Chihara et al. (1989) and Sasaki (2000) have explored that adapting texts to conform to the learners' cultural expectations makes them more comprehensible to the readers. Whether consciously or unconsciously, what EFL / ESL teachers have taught so far is closely linked to culture in some points. And this study made clear that cultural schemata can easily be activated through nativizing texts. Localizing classes, let's say putting local and cultural elements into the class during foreign language teaching may help to draw more interest assuming that L2 learners will be surprised to see local contents embedded in stories written in the target language. From this point of view, nativization technique can be utilized by EFL teachers and language material designers by tailoring stories & texts according to the levels and ages of students. Rashidi and Soureshjani (2011) inferred from their experimental study that teaching culturally-loaded texts also helped to increase motivation in EFL classes.

This study had also some limitations in some aspects. First of all, however much this study, which was built upon prepared nativized texts provided the results that were theorized in the very beginning, a longer text or a story richer in cultural content could have helped to concretize the events more, but students' being at elementary level and long texts' *proven uselessness* in reading comprehension (see Jalilehvand, 2012) stopped the researcher from using a longer passage. The instrument used was the other limitation. As was stated before, considering their levels, reading comprehension questions were asked in students' mother tongue and as the most appropriate type to facilitate understanding, true-false test was adopted. But this type of testing is questionable since there is a big chance of success as a result of fifty percent of fallibility. Lastly, the study was carried out with a small sample of students attending four different primary schools in Konya. Researches conducted in different schools and institutions could yield different results.

#### Appendix A Independence Day

Independence Day is a public holiday in the United States. Independence Day is the **declaration** of Independence and **celebrated** every year on July 4, 1776. It is commonly associated with fireworks, **parades**, speeches and ceremonies. **Patriotic** displays and events are organized throughout the United States with a large participation of **citizens**, especially in the streets. Especially Washington, the **capital** of the United States, is the heart of nationwide celebrations. Many people display the American flag outside their homes or buildings. Politicians appear at public events to show their **support** for the history, **heritage** and people of their country. Above all, people in the United States express and give thanks for the freedom and **liberties** fought by their **ancestors**. Public **administration** buildings, schools, post offices and many small businesses are usually closed and very few people have to work on that day. Last year, 235<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration of Independence was celebrated **enthusiastically** throughout the country. Independence Day occupies a big part of the political history of the United States. Americans **regard** this day as the most important **event** in the history of the United States.



### Republic Day

Republic Day is a public holiday in Turkey. Republic Day is the **declaration** of Republic and **celebrated** every year on October 29, 1923. It is commonly associated with fireworks, **parades**, speeches and ceremonies. **Patriotic** displays and events are organized throughout Turkey with a large participation of **citizens**, especially in the stadiums. Especially Ankara, the **capital** of Turkey, is the heart of nationwide celebrations. Many people display the Turkish flag outside their homes or buildings. Politicians appear at public events to show their **support** for the history, **heritage** and people of their country. Above all, people in Turkey express and give thanks for the freedom and **liberties** fought by their **ancestors**. Public **administration** buildings, schools, post offices and many small businesses are usually closed and very few people have to work on that day. Last year, 88<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration of Republic was celebrated **enthusiastically** throughout the country. Republic Day occupies a big part of the political history of Turkey. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk **regards** this day as the most important **event** in the history of Turkish Republic.

### Appendix B

#### True-False test measuring Reading Comprehension of Control group

Independence Day, Amerika'da resmi tatildir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Independence Day, dini bir gündür.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Independence Day ' i insanlar aile fertleriyle beraber evlerinde geçirirler.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Independence Day, Amerika için büyük bir öneme sahiptir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Independence Day, çeşitli törenlerle özdeşleşmiştir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Independence Day esnasında insanlar binaların camlarına bayrak asarlar.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Independence Day esnasında resmi daireler, okullar açık değildir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Independence Day esnasında devlet adamları halkla bütünleşir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]

#### True-False test measuring Reading Comprehension of Experimental group

Republic Day, dini bir gündür.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Republic Day ' i insanlar aile fertleriyle beraber evlerinde geçirirler.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Republic Day, Türkiye için büyük bir öneme sahiptir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Republic Day, çeşitli törenlerle özdeşleşmiştir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Republic Day esnasında insanlar binaların camlarına bayrak asarlar.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Republic Day esnasında resmi daireler, okullar açık değildir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Republic Day, Türkiye'de resmi tatildir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]
Republic Day esnasında devlet adamları halkla bütünleşir.	DOĞRU [ ]	YANLIŞ [ ]



### Appendix C

*Multiple-choice questions measuring vocabulary inference of Experimental and Control groups*

1. declaration

- a. hatırlama
- b. değişim
- c. sunum
- d. ilan etme

2. celebrate

- a. hazırlamak
- b. kutlamak
- c. bağışlamak
- d. üretmek

3. parade

- a. misafirhane
- b. geçit töreni
- c. bağışıklık
- d. sosyal fobi

4. patriotic

- a. karşıt
- b. yurtsever
- c. dostane
- d. hayâli

5. heritage

- a. miras
- b. unsur
- c. lezzet
- d. seyahat

6. liberty

- a. aşılama
- b. özellik
- c. numune
- d. özgürlük

7. ancestor

- a. ecdat
- b. durak

c. heves

d. ekip

8. administration

- a. eğilim
- b. yönetim
- c. süreç
- d. işletme

9. enthusiastically

- a. sınırlı bir şekilde
- b. kapsamlı bir şekilde
- c. coşkulu bir şekilde
- d. tedbirsizce

10. event

- a. olay
- b. konu
- c. etki
- d. biçim

11. support

- a. telafi
- b. görüşme
- c. destek
- d. adalet

12. regard

- a. saymak, olarak görmek
- b. üstüne basmak, çiğnemek
- c. ayırtırmak, uzaklaştırmak
- d. örtbas etmek, üstünü örtmek

13. citizen

- a. gösterici
- b. vatandaş
- c. katılımcı
- d. eylemci

14. capital

- a. büyükşehir
- b. başkent
- c. megakent
- d. vilayet



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