

Exploring the Impact of English as a Medium of Instruction on Learner Academic Achievement in Rural Secondary Schools in the Eastern Cape: A Critical Analysis

Pumla Nomatolo Msindwana and Lundi Nomlala

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9232-8315> and <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3349-7727>

Faculty of Education, Department of Humanities and Creative Arts Education, Walter Sisulu University, Komani Campus, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the impact of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) on learner achievement in rural secondary schools in the Eastern Cape. Using an interpretive qualitative approach and a case study design, the study explored learners' and teachers' experiences of teaching and learning in English to understand the subject. This study involved 5 English teachers and 6 Grade 10 learners from 1 secondary school, and employed semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed to extract patterns and insights. The study has shown that learners' limited English-language skills are a major barrier to understanding the content, as they need to translate information into their native language to comprehend it. This causes confusion, less comprehension, and poor academic performance. English as a medium of instruction also harms learners' engagement and self-confidence. The study found that learners fear being judged and find the language difficult to learn. Similarly, the mismatch between learners' home language and English creates challenges for teaching and learning, so code-switching and repetition are used to support English instruction. Despite these problems, code-switching, simplified language, visual aids, peer collaboration, and language support were recommended to improve the learning experience. It concluded that EMI may hinder academic success among learners who are not proficient enough, and that multilingual approaches and targeted language support should be developed.

Key words: medium of instruction, academic achievement, rural schools, poor academic performance, non-English speaking learners.

INTRODUCTION

The medium of instruction (MoI) refers to the language educators use to teach learners (Hennebry & Gao, 2021). Rose et al. (2023) define English Medium of Instruction (EMI) as

the use of English to teach academic subjects other than English in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of most of the population is not English. Using EMI to teach non-native speakers has direct consequences for learning content, cognitive development, and the overall learning experience. Many learners in the Eastern Cape learning a second language must acquire a great deal of difficult material and often face significant cognitive challenges. MoI is important for enculturation in the written literature and in available knowledge, as well as in knowledge governed by education policy and recognized as teaching and learning (Nqoma, 2024). In South Africa's multilingual environment, the choice of English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) remains controversial, particularly for learners in rural areas of the Eastern Cape who are learning English as a second or third language (Kretzer & Kaschula, 2022; Liyanage & Walker, 2019). The choice of MoI affects learners' academic performance and their ability to understand complex concepts (Galloway & Sahan, 2021). However, in the context of learners in the education system, in which English is not the first language of learners or teachers, this is a matter of educational equity and academic performance. In teaching in a foreign language of instruction (LoI), learners are often reluctant to speak, remaining quiet or inactive (Adamson, 2024). This is especially true in rural areas like the Eastern Cape, where English is a second or third language and not spoken. In South Africa, the post-apartheid government has decided to uplift the languages of education that had been left behind in the past in the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) (DoE, 1997). This policy makes multilingualism a cornerstone of cultural diversity and nation-building. It requires that learners be taught in their own language and that schools take these preferences into account and work towards multilingualism (DoE, 2003). Most schools still teach English, and in rural areas, teachers and learners still struggle with English literacy, which adversely affects communication and academic performance (Baines & Nahar, 2020). This is especially true in rural areas, where parents are illiterate and cannot help their children with English homework, leaving learners without exposure to English outside the classroom (Jokhio et al., 2025). This disadvantage for learners of English is a further reason why they struggle to master it and are therefore unable to be effective in it. When South African schools use English as the LoI, this practice has its roots in the colonial past, when English was the dominant language in education, government, and business (Magocha et al., 2019). Although South Africa has a national policy framework in 11 languages, English is still considered the language of socio-economic advancement, education, and commerce. English education was first introduced during the colonial era as the colonial language, primarily used to establish administrative and economic power. English has gradually become the primary language of education in schools

and higher education institutions, but it remains the second language in urban areas and in higher education. English remains a widely used language for social and economic purposes, including education, employment, and everyday life. This perception has led to English being the language of instruction in many African countries, particularly in southern Africa, which has the most rural areas, where indigenous languages are more widely spoken. English in classrooms in the Eastern Cape is a major challenge due to high poverty and educational disparities. The Eastern Cape is home to a wide range of African languages, with isiXhosa being the most spoken one. These languages are culturally and socially important to the people of the region. For the people of the Eastern Cape, African languages are very much a cultural and identity symbol. They are deeply entrenched in social relationships, cultural behavior, and oral tradition. Most learners in this region grew up speaking isiXhosa or other indigenous languages at home and had not been educated in English before entering school. This linguistic gap can make it difficult to understand and learn when English is the primary language of teaching. In rural contexts, it is often exacerbated by a lack of educational resources, teacher shortages, and insufficient training for EMI teachers. On the other hand, globally, English has been increasingly used as a lingua franca (LoLT) (Bacha et al., 2021). English has emerged as the world lingua franca across a variety of fields, including commerce, science, technology, and international affairs. Consequently, the impact of EMI on academic achievement in rural secondary schools is a significant research topic. The central aim of this paper is to explore the impact of English as a medium of instruction on learner academic achievement in rural secondary schools in the Eastern Cape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English as an Instructional Language in Academic Performance.

The literature indicates that English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners face significant challenges when English is used as the medium of instruction. As Sua (2021) suggests, poor English language proficiency can hinder understanding of fundamental concepts across numerous subjects. Learners are also cognitively challenged and lack conceptual understanding when English is not their first language. Such challenges impose a cognitive burden that can significantly limit their ability to understand basic topics. Funk (2024) also shows that learners from African and Coloured communities who have poor English proficiency when English is not their mother tongue face a double challenge: limited content knowledge and poor English language skills, which hinder academic performance. Learners may resort to memorization and

rereading during exams rather than developing a deep understanding of the subject. Chen (2025) showed that English proficiency and knowledge comprehension are highly correlated, so a learner must work hard to become proficient in English to do well academically. Lack of English proficiency causes learners to struggle academically and at school, and to have difficulty accessing higher education and job opportunities. Omidire (2019) and Alrasheedi (2020) point out that in rural schools, teachers can mix English with their native languages to enhance understanding, reflecting the greater difficulty of limited exposure to English outside the classroom, particularly in rural areas. Limited exposure is a problem that affects basic English communication skills, academic achievement, career choice, and psychological well-being, and undermines learners' confidence. Jin et al. (2015) found that a lack of confidence in learning English is associated with poorer English language proficiency, which, in turn, hinders learners' performance. Building confidence in using English is essential for improving proficiency, as self-assured learners are more likely to engage in classroom discussions and improve their language skills. The pervasive use of English as the MoI across nearly all subjects, except for the learners' mother tongue, poses significant obstacles for those with limited English proficiency.

While English is important in today's globalized society, insisting on English as the sole language of instruction across all areas might be counterproductive. Incorporating learners' native languages into the curriculum, even in part, can support their learning and enhance their comprehension of complex concepts. It is also critical to provide instructors with the pedagogical abilities they need to teach effectively in multilingual classrooms. This covers tactics for scaffolding learning, using appropriate language, and establishing inclusive learning environments.

Perceptions and attitudes towards the use of English as a medium of instruction

Using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in educational contexts where learners and educators are English-as-a-second-language speakers is a complex and varied topic. It is not just a practical decision; perceptions, attitudes, and other sociolinguistic elements heavily influence it. The literature indicates diverse perceptions and attitudes toward the use of English as a medium of instruction. Some see it as an advantage, whereas others see it as a disadvantage. Novawan et al. (2021) state that English-language resources are accessible to both learners and teachers, particularly through a wide range of English-language books and the internet. It is a pity that the same cannot be said about the availability of resources in the learners' mother

tongue. The lack of resources in learners' indigenous languages may make it difficult for non-English-speaking learners to access information. On the other hand, the literature has acknowledged teachers' lack of confidence and, in some cases, their efforts to develop their competency and skills in teaching English. As a former teacher, the researcher has observed some content subject teachers teaching their subjects in IsiXhosa, even though they were supposed to be taught in English. This does not enhance learners' English language proficiency. Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory (1978) emphasizes the role of social interaction, cultural tools, and shared meanings. It provides a powerful lens for examining how the use of English, a language that may differ from learners' native languages and cultural backgrounds, influences their learning experiences and academic outcomes.

The strategies that are used to enhance English language proficiency in learners

Zainil and Arsyad (2021) note that educators perceive code-switching as enhancing academic achievement because it supports English language learning and improves learners' responses to questions. When new concepts or unfamiliar words are presented to the learner, code-switching helps them make sense of them in their own language. Learning through code-switching can help avoid frustration and deepen learners' understanding of fundamental concepts. By processing information in their original language, learners can reduce the cognitive load of understanding and producing English. This might free up mental resources for deeper learning and critical thinking. Kumar et al. (2021) suggest that code-switching enhances the teaching and learning of English as a second language. Code-switching can help establish a more comfortable and supportive learning environment, reducing anxiety that can impede language acquisition. Learners feel more at ease participating in discussions and expressing themselves when they know they can utilize their native language as a safety net. Code-switching can facilitate the transmission of knowledge across languages. Learners can use their first language to grasp grammatical concepts and vocabulary, which they can then apply to their English learning.

Code-switching allows learners to practice speaking English more naturally and realistically. It helps individuals gain the flexibility and adaptability required for effective communication in real-world circumstances. Another strategy some teachers use is gestures and body language. Presenting vocabulary alongside concurrent gestures while teaching new terms in a second language (L2) may help learners remember the words (Huang et al., 2019). Teachers also use a variety of words to simplify the concepts being learned. This strategy helps learners develop

vocabulary. Vocabulary serves as a foundation for communication, a mirror of social reality, a source of positive emotions, and a predictor of academic achievement (Abadi, 2023). This implies that using a variety of words to explain the same thing can increase learners' vocabulary, leading to improved English language proficiency and, eventually, improved academic performance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory (1978), which provides a broad view of how language mediates learning and cognitive development in educational contexts. Learning is an inherently social process and is through interaction with more knowledgeable people, such as teachers and peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) argued that higher-order cognitive functions are social processes mediated by cultural tools, with language as the most important of these. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to the study, as language, as a form of instruction, is a cultural tool used to teach students and can be either advantageous or disadvantageous in rural Eastern Cape schools with non-native speakers (Liyanage & Walker, 2019).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is particularly useful for identifying learners' problems in English, the language used to teach the subject to them (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can do with the right assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, learners who are not fluent in English might find the cognitive burden of learning subject content in a second language too overwhelming to handle English-language learning tasks (Cummins, 2000). When teachers do not provide sufficient scaffolding (code-switching, simplified language, visual aids) during the learning process, learners become disoriented and are unable to understand what they are being taught (Cummins, 2021; Zainil & Arsyad, 2021).

Vygotsky (1978) also stressed the importance of social interaction to construct knowledge. When students do not believe in their English proficiency and do not contribute to learning and knowledge-building in the classroom, they miss out (Adamson, 2024). So, language barriers not only affect English comprehension but also reduce learners' engagement and self-confidence in their studies (Probyn, 2006). This research, by drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) theory, shows that effective teaching in multilingual settings must take into account learners' linguistic needs and is a scaffolding that makes sure that English is the bridge to learning and

not a hindrance to learning in the English language in international schools (UNESCO, 2016; Heugh, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Research approach and paradigm

Qualitative research was adopted to explore the impact of English as an EMI on the education of rural secondary learners in the Eastern Cape. Qualitative research is most appropriate for this study, as it examines complex social phenomena that reflect learners' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in the real world (Creswell, 2017). This study can help the researcher understand the role of language barriers in learners' education by examining their relationship with learning and academic performance in real-world settings. In the classroom, and how to overcome them. The interpretive research paradigm is useful for this study, as it helps understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their social context. The study explored the use of English as a medium of instruction from both teachers' and learners' perspectives and explored how language impacts understanding, engagement, and academic achievement. Using this paradigm, the study examined not only the challenges that exist but also how participants experience and interpret them in the rural classroom settings. The qualitative nature of the study yields in-depth, context-specific rather than generalizable findings.

Research Design

The study uses a qualitative case study research design. A case study design is suitable because it enables an in-depth investigation of a bounded system, such as rural secondary schools in the Eastern Cape. Creswell & Poth (2016) define case study research as the study of a phenomenon in practice, using a variety of real-world information. This design is appropriate for the study because it is a good way to examine how learners are challenged when English is the medium of instruction. By focusing on a specific context, rural Eastern Cape schools, the research results provide a rich context for educational practice and policy.

Data collection

The study employed qualitative data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data collection aims to gather detailed descriptive information about participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings (Creswell, 2017). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with learners and teachers to explore their thoughts and feelings on EMI. Interviews

are beneficial in getting a broader picture of participants' beliefs, experiences, and motives. Such data collection methodologies help the researcher obtain data in a more contextualized manner that supports the research questions and provides insights into them (Chand, 2025).

Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling method, was used to select 5 grade 10 English teachers and 6 grade 10 learners from 3 selected rural secondary schools in the Eastern Cape, who have knowledge and context relevant to the research problem. Purposive sampling helps select participants who can provide meaningful insights into English as a teaching method and its impact on learners' academic achievement (Creswell, 2017). A sample included both learners who are having difficulty with English and teachers who can provide instruction tailored to them. This method of data analysis adds depth and relevance to the data.

Data analysis

The data collected in this study will be analyzed using thematic analysis, in line with Clarke & Braun's (2017) framework. Thematic analysis is a process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes from qualitative data. This strategy helps the researcher to analyze and identify key themes in the data and key issues related to EMI and intervention methods. This method is well-suited for answering research questions that require learning about patterns in participants' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical aspect is very important in this paper, as it protects participants' rights and maintains the integrity of the research (Zhaksylyk et al., 2023). The ethical principles are informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and minimization of harm (Williams et al., 2017). The participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights prior to joining, and they provided voluntary consent. Informed consent ensures that participants understand the study and agree to participate without coercion. The study ensured that participants' identities were not disclosed and that data were securely stored. Ethical research should also ensure that any psychological or social harm to participants is minimized and that they are free to withdraw at any time without penalty (Buchanan & Warwick, 2021).

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section dwells more on the responses from teachers (T) and learners (S). Each theme covered the responses from both teachers and learners.

Theme 1: Limited English language proficiency and how it affects understanding of subject content

Interview Question: How does English language proficiency affect the understanding of the subject content?

Participants indicated that learners' poor English language proficiency affects their understanding of the subject content, as they must first translate the language, which causes confusion, limited comprehension, memorization rather than understanding, and poor academic performance. Their home language helps clarify and deepen understanding of the content.

T1: Most of our learners struggle to understand concepts because they first must translate English into their home language. By the time they understand the language, they have already missed the concept.

T2: Learners who are not proficient in English generally perform poorly, not because they do not know the work, but because they do not understand how the questions are framed.

T3: I have noticed that even when learners study, they still fail tests because the problem is not content knowledge; it is the language used to explain the content.

T4: English is a major issue. You find that learners memorize what is taught rather than understanding it.

T5: When I explain in English only, many learners look confused, but when I switch to their home language, they immediately understand.

S1: I cannot understand what the teacher is saying in English because English is so difficult.

S2: Sometimes I know how to answer it, but I do not understand the question because it is written in English.

S3: I must translate everything into isiXhosa first, and that takes time and makes me fall behind in class.

S4: English makes learning difficult because I focus more on the language than the topic.

S5: When the teacher explains in English, I get lost, but when they explain again in our home language, I understand better.

S6: I think I would perform better if the subjects were taught in my home language.

Theme 2: Lack of classroom participation and learner confidence

Interview Question: How does the use of the English medium of instruction affect classroom participation and learner confidence?

The participants stated that a lack of English proficiency reduces learners' confidence and engagement, as they fear making mistakes and being judged, leading them to remain silent despite the information they are exposed to.

T1: Because they are not confident in English, learners are afraid to speak in class.

T2: You find that only a few learners participate, usually those who are comfortable with English.

T3: In many cases, learners prefer to keep quiet even when they do not understand, because they fear making mistakes in English.

T4: Confidence is very low. Learners tend not to ask questions because they fear being laughed at for speaking broken English.

T5: The language barrier limits interaction. Both participation and the overall learning environment are affected.

S1: As a result, I do not do well with answering questions in class because I am afraid of speaking English incorrectly.

S2: I am very shy to participate because other learners may laugh at me.

S3: Even when I know the answer, I keep quiet because I do not know how to say it in English.

S4: English takes away my confidence because I am not fluent in it.

S5: For me, I like it when the teacher speaks in our language because then I feel free to participate.

S6: I want to ask questions, but I do not know how to explain myself in English.

Theme 3: The difference between the language of instruction and the learners' home language

Interview Question: How does the difference between the language of instruction and the learners' home language affect teaching and learning?

The participants revealed that the mismatch between learners' home language and English as the language of instruction causes confusion, slows learning, and forces both teachers and learners to translate and switch codes to understand.

T1: There is a very clear gap between the spoken language at home and the language in class, making it very difficult for teachers to teach.

T2: Learners understand things much better when they are explained in their home languages, but the curriculum needs English.

T3: The mismatch also means that I must repeat explanations in different languages because I am teaching something different.

T4: This is confusing, especially in subjects where we must do more work: Science and Mathematics.

T5: Sometimes I am forced to code-switch to ensure learners understand the lesson.

S1: At home, we speak isiXhosa, but at school everything is in English, which can be confusing.

S2: It is hard to adjust because we are used to thinking in our home language rather than in English.

S3: I understand well when the teacher mixes English with our home language.

S4: In the end, it is the difference that I must think in two languages that makes my learning slow.

S5: Sometimes I misunderstand things because I translate incorrectly.

S6: I would like it if we were taught in our home language because that is the best way.

Theme 4: Strategies to curb language challenges in teaching and learning

Interview Questions: What are the strategies that can be used to curb language challenges in teaching and learning?

The participants suggested that code-switching, simplified language, visual assistance, additional language support, and increased reading and peer work can reduce language barriers and increase learning.

T1: Code-switching is one of the most effective approaches to help learners perceive difficult concepts.

T2: Teachers need to simplify English and use examples that learners can relate to in their daily lives.

T3: We need to encourage English reading from an early age to help them become fluent.

T4: With visual aids and practical examples, learners can understand without relying too much on language.

T5: English language support classes can help promote English language skills.

S1: Teachers should explain in both English and our home language so we can understand better.

S2: Extra English lessons would help us improve our understanding.

S3: With pictures and examples, learning becomes less difficult.

S4: Group work helps because we can explain things to each other in our home language.

S5: Teachers should speak slowly and use simple English.

S6: To get used to English, we can read more books in English.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings suggest that poor English language proficiency severely limits learners' understanding of subjects, as they must first learn English in their native language before they can understand the subject. This leads to delays, confusion, and cognitive overload, causing them to memorize rather than understand. The findings align with Cummins (2000), who states that those who lack sufficient cognitive academic language skills in the language of instruction need to be able to relate to subjects and engage with them. When they do not know the concepts, the knowledge is not shown. Cummins (2021) also points out that learning a second language without prior knowledge is less effective and detrimental to academic achievement. Learners' answers and their attitude towards language, in terms of being confused or concerned with language rather than content, seem to align with Probyn's (2006) finding that language skills

are central to how well learners interpret and respond to academic tasks (Waluyo & Panmei, 2021). The preference for home-language explanations aligns with UNESCO's (2016) view that mother-tongue teaching supports comprehension and facilitates learning.

This paper also shows that using English as a medium of instruction negatively affects classroom participation and learners' confidence. Qualitative research is the most appropriate approach for this study, as it addresses complex social phenomena and situations that are at the heart of learners' experiences, feelings, perceptions, and obstacles in the real world. The study helps the researcher understand the role language barriers play in learners' education, relate them to learning experiences and classroom academic performance, and identify ways to overcome them. Adamson (2024) has also found that low proficiency in the language of instruction makes learners reluctant to participate in classroom discussion, as they fear sharing their feelings. From a social constructivist perspective, Vygotsky (1978) argues that interaction is necessary for learning; when learners are unable to participate in class and construct knowledge, they lose their capacity to learn. The participants' responses show that language barriers not only impact understanding but also reduce active participation in learning.

The results also show that the gap between the language of instruction (English) and the learner's home language is a significant challenge for both teachers and learners. The learners must think, process, and respond in a language different from what they speak every day, and thus they learn more slowly. Teachers, however, often must repeat explanations and code-switch to bridge the language gap. Multilingual classrooms are subject to language disconnects that limit access to knowledge and hinder effective teaching (Krulatz et al., 2023). Arvind et al. (2024) also state that learners are better off in their home language, which will therefore have a greater impact on the content. The need for code-switching aligns with Santiago & Dagdag (2021), who found that teachers in multilingual South African classrooms often switch languages to facilitate comprehension. However, code-switching does not only help with immediate support but can also slow curriculum coverage and lead to confusion in instruction. The findings show that the language gap increases cognitive load on learners and reduces learning and teaching in higher-order thinking languages.

The findings suggest that some language barriers can be overcome through code-switching, and that other approaches include using visual aids to enhance language, providing more language support, reading, and peer collaboration. Code-switching is an effective strategy for learners to understand and is well established in the literature for multilingual contexts

(Santiago & Dagdag, 2021). In this way, the use of simplified language and visual aids is consistent with Mayer's (2024) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which posits that visual and verbal explanations improve comprehension. Cummins (2000) also emphasizes that reading and language skills are crucial for long-term success, and that developing English-speaking ability is equally important. Peer collaboration and group work also align with Vygotsky (1978) in that learning is more effective when it is based on social interaction, and learners support each other through the language they are all familiar with at home. These strategies are useful in the classroom, but we believe they cannot address the systemic problems that arise when the whole school uses English as the sole language. For one thing, Heugh (2011) suggests that more sustainable solutions are policy-based; bilingual or mother-tongue-based education should be promoted so as not only to support language development but also to strengthen academic performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are made to address problems with English as a medium of instruction and to improve learners' academic achievement in rural secondary schools:

- Mother-tongue-based bilingual education should be strengthened in the early grades. Teaching learners well in their home language and then gradually shifting to English will make it easier for them to understand a second language.
- There should be English language support programs for the targeted learners. Schools should be doing more English classes, reading programs, and language development interventions to improve language skills.
- Teachers need to be flexible with their language skills, such as code-switching, simplify language to accommodate learners, and use visual aids, while also focusing on strong language skill development to enhance the learning and teaching process.
- It is recommended that classroom methods promote active learning and confidence in the learners. Teachers need to create friendly, safe spaces for learners where they do not have to worry about being wrong. Group work, peer learning, and collaboration should be promoted for learning.
- Language-in-education policies should be updated and strengthened to reflect the reality of rural schools. Policies should be in place to support multilingual teaching and ensure its effective implementation.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the impact of English as a medium of instruction on learner academic achievement in rural secondary schools in the Eastern Cape. The findings reveal that limited English proficiency significantly hinders content comprehension, reduces classroom participation, and undermines learner confidence. The linguistic mismatch between learners' home language (isiXhosa) and the language of instruction creates cognitive overload, leading to memorization rather than meaningful understanding. While strategies such as code-switching and visual aids offer temporary relief, they do not address systemic challenges. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence from a rural South African context, highlighting the urgent need for multilingual pedagogical approaches. It underscores that EMI, without adequate linguistic support, perpetuates educational inequity. The findings advocate for policy reforms that embrace mother-tongue-based bilingual education and targeted language interventions. Ultimately, this research informs educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers on creating inclusive, linguistically responsive learning environments that enhance both language development and academic success.

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