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EFL students' speaking anxiety: a case from tertiary level students

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Abstract

Anxiety is one of the key issues in the acquisition of speaking by EFL learners in instructed language teaching context. Although extensively studied, speaking anxiety, there are still areas to be explored. With this in mind, this study investigates the causes of anxiety among foreign language learners with special reference to “speaking” as a skill. The major aim is to find out to what extent different variables such as proficiency level, onset of learning, and gender affect speaking anxiety. In addition, how these variables are connected to different types of anxieties such as speaking, preparedness, question-answer, test, discussion, public speaking, error correction was investigated. The study was conducted at preparatory school of a private university. A Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to 159 prep class students to collect a set of data. In the first part, personal information was elicited, while in the second, the participants were given an adapted version of the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS), developed by Huang (2004). The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed through Independent-Samples T-Test, ANOVA, and Bonferroni post hoc test by using SPSS. It was found that degrees of anxiety differ in terms of the mode and context of speaking. More specifically, students experience less anxiety in non-threatening contexts where they speak. The study offers implications for instructors and curriculum designers with regard to teaching and testing speaking skills. Rather than one-shot exam sessions, speaking skills should be taught in socially non-threatening settings to allow for greater learner performance.

Keywords: Speaking anxiety, testing anxiety, proficiency, student anxiety

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Introduction

The field of foreign language learning is closely related to the human psychology. As learners are at the center of learning process, their psychological states play a key role in learning process because affective factors such as motivation and attitude constitute the basis for linguistic factors such as learning or acquiring foreign skills. A number of studies reveal remarkable influence of affective factors on language learning process and suggest a critical relationship between language learning and affective variables.

Anxiety can be considered to be one of the most significant affective variables. Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis highlights the fact that when affective filter is high, the intake of knowledge for processing is inhibited by factors such as low motivation and negative attitudes towards the language being learnt. As part of the learner's affective filter, anxiety might interfere with the process of learning another language. Similarly, Liu (2006) argued that anxiety can negatively affect learner's achievement in the target language particularly in foreign/second language classrooms.

As the literature revealed, anxiety is a feeling that could cause decreased and ineffective levels of learning among students. However, reasonable amount of anxiety might give rise to investing current potentials into learning or more commitment to achieving the linguistic ends. However, if it is too much, anxiety might lead to failure in achievement on the parts of the students. Therefore, anxiety level is seen as one of the best predictors of achievement in the second language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Excessive anxiety experienced by learners may have low achievement levels, while those who experience a necessary amount of it may feel more motivated and ambitious to learn.

Literature Review

Anxiety

There are various definitions of anxiety in the literature. To begin with, Freud described anxiety as "something felt", an unpleasant affective state or condition (Freud, 1924. cited in Spielberg, 1966). According to Horwitz, et al. (1986), "Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (p.125). Anxiety, one of the most prominent and pervasive emotions, can also be defined as a feeling of uneasy suspense by Rachman (1998). Chiang (2012) defined anxiety as a synonym of worry, uneasiness, disquiet, disquietude and inquietude. Another definition by Suleimenova (2012) is that 'anxiety is distress or uneasiness of mind caused by fear of danger or misfortune' (p.1776). All these definitions show that it is a feeling that is closely related to psychological system of individuals who are experiencing feelings beyond what it would normally be.

Recent research in the field of linguistics EFL has showed that there are 3 types of anxiety: trait, situation-specific, and state anxiety. According to Scovel (1978), trait anxiety can be described as 'a more permanent predisposition to be anxious' (p.137), whereas state and situation-specific anxiety are experienced in relation to some particular event or situation (Brown, 2001). Similarly, Spielberg (1983) described trait anxiety as a general tendency to be nervous in any situation, while state anxiety can take place in a particular time and situation by accompanying physical signs such as dry mouth, sweaty palms, and faster heart rate. Luo (2014) stated that a situation-specific anxiety is stable over time, similar to trait anxiety, but it might not be consistent across circumstances. Language anxiety is in the category of situation-specific anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Language Anxiety

According to Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013), a number of learners suffer from language anxiety at language classroom. Language anxiety is explained by Horwitz et al. (1986, p.128) as ‘a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from uniqueness of the language learning process.’ Likewise, Mac Intyre (1999) defined language anxiety as the ‘worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language’ (p.27).

Language anxiety was divided in 3 categories by Horwitz et al. (1986): 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety, and 3) fear of negative evaluation to provide teachers with the nature of anxiety. They described communication apprehension as ‘a type of shyness characterized by the fear of or anxiety about communicating with people’, test anxiety as ‘a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure’ and fear of negative evaluation as ‘apprehension about other’s evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situations and expectations that others would evaluate negatively’.

Foreign language educators have hypothesized over decades that anxiety has an influence on foreign language learning. According to Chiag (2012), unless language anxiety is carefully tackled, learner’s proficiency will be affected accordingly. To Park and French (2013), due to the fact that foreign language anxiety has a crucial role in improving L2, acquisition theories, and teaching methods, it has attracted attention by many researchers in the domain of L2 acquisition and teaching. Therefore, the relationship between anxiety and achievement has been examined by number of studies. On the one hand, most of these studies found that there is a negative correlation between anxiety and achievement (Aida, 1994; Batumlu & Erden, 2007; Chen & Chang, 2004; Chiang, 2012; Elkhafafi, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986; Humphires, 2011; Lan, 2010; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Noormohamadi, 2009; Price, 1991; Şener, 2015; Wu, 2005). On the other hand, some of them concluded that there is a positive correlation between them (Chastain, 1975; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Kleinmann, 1977; Park & French, 2013; Subaşı, 2010). These studies investigating anxiety reached inconsistent conclusions partly due to the intricacy and complexity inherit in language learning process and partly to the discrepancies of instruments used to measure its effect (MacIntyre, 1999).

Liu (2006) conducted a study with Chinese undergraduate non-English majors at three different proficiency levels. Based on the findings, Liu concluded that more than one-third of the students in each group appeared to be anxious in Oral English classroom. The more proficient students tended to be less anxious. The students felt the most anxious while talking to the teacher and speaking alone in front of the classroom, yet they felt the least anxious during pair work and even much less anxious in speech communication.

Park and French (2013) investigated gender differences in language anxiety and the possible influence of gender and anxiety on L2 performance. The study conducted with the final grade of 948 university students learning English in Korea indicated that females had higher anxiety level compared to males, at the same time, females and the students with high anxiety received higher grades than males and the students with low anxiety. Therefore, it is worthy of note that anxiety had facilitating role in language learning.

Another study conducted by Chiang (2012) investigated the relationship between foreign language anxiety and English speaking proficiency among elementary students. FLCAS and 15 open-ended questions were distributed to 86 elementary school students. According to the results, the important cause for poor performance, decreased learning motivation and interference with the learning process was anxiety. Therefore, it was

concluded that there was a negative correlation between participants' anxiety and their English speaking performance. There wasn't a significant gender difference in English learning anxiety and the English speaking proficiency. Besides, speech anxiety had the highest mean score of anxiety factors while the fear of making mistakes had the lowest mean score.

Speaking Anxiety

Speaking is one of the most significant parts of language learning. Due to the great influence on the process of language learning, speaking anxiety has played a crucial role in language learning and in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). According to Placious (1998), what causes the most anxiety among learners is speaking.

Speaking anxiety, one of the most important affective variables that influences foreign language learning, often has a detrimental effect on the students' oral performance of English (Melough, 2013). It negatively influences the adaptation to the learning atmosphere of students and their achievement (Mohammed & Wahid, 2009). It can be argued that many learners are afraid of using a foreign language orally. Aydın (2001) categorized the reasons of speaking anxiety into 4 groups: personal reasons, the teacher's manner in the classroom, learners' beliefs and testing and teaching procedures. In order to be successful in language learning, speaking anxiety must be overcome (Chaokongjakra, 2013).

A number of studies have been carried out in relation to speaking anxiety (Balemir, 2009; Basic, 2011; Chaokongjakra, 2013; Luo, 2014; Huang, 2004; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Melouah, 2013; Öztürk&Gürbüz,2014; Suleimenova,, 2012; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Tüm & Kunt, 2013; Woodrow, 2006). For instance, Huang (2004) collected data from 502 EFL student by using the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) in order to investigate the relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and gender, learners' time of starting to learn English and their willingness to study. According to the findings, females were found to feel more anxious than males and those who started to learn English in kindergarten had lower anxiety than those who started later. Additionally, the students who were more willing to study after class were less anxious.

Woodrow (2006) examined the relationship between second language anxiety and speaking performance and the major causes of anxiety with 275 advanced English for academic purposes students by using a self-designed questionnaire. A significant negative relationship was found between second language speaking anxiety and oral performance. The major cause of anxiety was interacting with native speakers. It was concluded that speaking anxiety made a debilitating effect on speaking English for some students.

Balemir (2009) conducted a study with the participation of 234 students to investigate the sources of foreign language speaking anxiety and the relationship between proficiency levels and degree of foreign language speaking anxiety. The finding of the adapted version of the Foreign Language Speaking Scale (FLSAS), which was developed by Huang (2004) showed that there was a moderate level of foreign language speaking anxiety among participants. The female participants had slightly more anxious than males. No significant effect of the level of learner's language proficiency over speaking anxiety was found. However, it was found that the major anxiety provoking factors were testing procedures, personal reasons, and the fear of negative evaluation.

The relationship between speaking anxiety and achievement has received particular attention in the literature. This study aims to investigate how EFL learners' proficiency level, gender and onset of leaning affect their foreign language speaking anxiety. Although there are

numerous studies that investigate general foreign language anxiety, there are relatively fewer studies on foreign language speaking anxiety. Therefore, this study mainly focused on exploring the relationship between foreign language speaking and proficiency as well as gender and length of learning experience and onset of learning. Additionally, the sources of speaking anxiety were examined in order to contribute to the literature by providing more conclusive evidence related to the causes of foreign language speaking anxiety in a Turkish EFL context. The study raises the following research questions:

- 1) Is there a relationship between learners' proficiency levels in L2 and their speaking anxiety?
- 2) Is there a relationship between learners' gender and speaking anxiety?
- 3) Is there a relationship between learners' onset of learning English and speaking anxiety?

Methodology

Participants

The study was conducted at Preparatory School of a private University in Turkey. A total of 159 (79 female, 80 male) Preparatory School students of different departments voluntarily participated in the study. They were divided into different proficiency levels – A1, A2, B1, B2 - in accordance with the results of the placement test which was given at the beginning of the semester. The students receive a certain amount of English education according to their proficiency levels. The A1 and A2 groups take 28 hours of English language courses per week, B1, B2 groups take 26 hours. Since they study English language skills in an integrated way, they do not have a separate speaking lesson.

Data Collection

In this study, the data was collected through the questionnaire – the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS). Overall Cronbach's alpha value of 27 items is .822 suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency. The questionnaire in Turkish was distributed to the students of preparatory school in the beginning of the first semester of the 2014/2015 academic year. The questionnaire, developed by Huang (2004), was adapted by Balemir (2009) for the purposes of his study in order to measure the level of speaking anxiety. The adapted version, which was translated into Turkish by two researchers to prevent misunderstandings, was also used in this present study with the purpose of measuring the relationship between speaking anxiety and the learners' proficiency level, gender and onset of learning English. The five-point Likert Scale, in which the responses ranged from one 'strongly disagree' to five 'strongly agree' (See Appendix B for the FLSAS) had two parts. In the first part, the participants' personal information was collected. The participants were asked to respond to three items on their age, gender, and time of starting to learn English. The second part of the scale had 27 statements on speaking anxiety. The statements in the questionnaire were categorized under 7 different sub-categories such as the anxiety of speaking, preparedness, question-answer, testing, discussion, public speaking, error correction.

Data Analysis

In this survey study, the variables which are connected to sub-categories such as speaking, preparedness, question-answer, testing, discussion, public speaking, error correction was searched. The Statistic Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data quantitatively. The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed through descriptive statistics, Independent-Samples T-Test, Bonferroni post hoc test, and correlation. By means of these categories, the reasons of foreign language speaking anxiety were described in this EFL context.

Findings

In this part of the study, the research questions are answered in the light of the findings.

RQ1: Is there a relationship between learners' proficiency levels in L2 and their speaking anxiety?

A descriptive analysis was carried to find out the relationship between learners' proficiency level and speaking anxiety. Table 1 illustrates this relationship.

Table 1

Statistical results on the relationship between learners' proficiency and speaking anxiety

	Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	F	P
Preparedness	1	34	3,5000	,73598	,12622	2,248	,085
	2	51	3,7843	,59795	,08373		
	3	42	3,7321	,59570	,09192		
	4	32	3,4844	,69832	,12345		
	Total	159	3,6494	,65731	,05213		
Que_Anser	1	34	2,8137	,89965	,15429	,344	,793
	2	51	2,7059	,74728	,10464		
	3	42	2,8492	,84328	,13012		
	4	32	2,8750	,93804	,16582		
	Total	159	2,8008	,84120	,06671		
Testing	1	34	3,4485	,87642	,15030	1,272	,286
	2	51	3,4853	,68813	,09636		
	3	42	3,2798	,79096	,12205		
	4	32	3,1797	,84059	,14860		
	Total	159	3,3616	,79139	,06276		
Discussion	1	34	2,6838	,76947	,13196	1,406	,243
	2	51	2,3725	,66214	,09272		
	3	42	2,3929	,81552	,12584		
	4	32	2,3828	,82546	,14592		
	Total	159	2,4465	,76430	,06061		
Public_Speaking	1	34	3,0441	,88221	,15130	1,268	,287
	2	51	2,7157	1,00127	,14021		
	3	42	2,9524	1,05812	,16327		
	4	32	2,6563	1,04293	,18437		
	Total	159	2,8365	1,00394	,07962		
Error_Correction	1	34	2,7500	,73340	,12578	4,210	,007
	2	51	2,2059	,65327	,09148		
	3	42	2,4881	,84636	,13060		
	4	32	2,3359	,59096	,10447		
	Total	159	2,4230	,73667	,05842		

ANOVA was used to find out whether there is a significant difference between the types of speaking anxiety and proficiency level and it was found that Foreign language speaking anxiety level varies significantly by proficiency level in terms of 'error correction'

anxiety. ($F=4,210$ $P=,007$). In order to investigate which proficiency level students has the difference in terms of foreign language speaking anxiety, a Bonferroni test was conducted. The results confirmed that there was a significant difference among A1 and A2 proficiency levels in terms of foreign language speaking anxiety. In other words, A1 level students are more anxious while getting error correction from their teachers than A2 level students ($P=,005$).

RQ2: Is there a relationship between learners' gender and speaking anxiety?

A descriptive analysis was carried to find out the relationship between gender and speaking anxiety. The table illustrates the descriptive statistics of the participants according to their gender.

Table 2

Distribution of the relationship between learners' gender and speaking anxiety

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Er. Mean	t	P
Speaking	1	79	3,2046	,67619	,07608	3,382	,001
	2	80	2,8375	,69252	,07743		
Preparedness	1	79	3,8291	,58909	,06628	3,550	,001
	2	80	3,4719	,67622	,07560		
Question-Answer	1	79	3,0169	,85884	,09663	3,318	,001
	2	80	2,5875	,77085	,08618		
Testing	1	79	3,6139	,71812	,08080	4,200	,000
	2	80	3,1125	,78545	,08782		
Discussion	1	79	2,5316	,78074	,08784	1,399	,164
	2	80	2,3625	,74301	,08307		
Public Speaking	1	79	3,0127	,95399	,10733	2,226	,027
	2	80	2,6625	1,02739	,11487		
Error Correction	1	79	2,4873	,77304	,08697	1,096	,275
	2	80	2,3594	,69792	,07803		

An Independent-Samples T-Test was carried out to determine whether there is a significant difference between the male and female students with regard to their speaking anxiety. As it is shown in Table 2, the results did not indicate a significant difference between female and male students in terms of discussion and error correction anxiety. On the other hand, the Independent-Samples T-test displays a significant difference among the students having anxiety of 'speaking individually' ($t= 3,382$, $p=,001$). In respect to this result, female students have more anxiety than male students. There was a significant difference between female and male students with regard to the anxiety of preparedness. ($t= 3,550$, $p=,001$). In other words, female students are more anxious than male students if they do not prepare for the lessons beforehand.

In addition, a significant difference was found between female and male students concerning the anxiety of question-answer ($t= 3,318$, $p=,001$), the anxiety of testing, ($t= 4,200$, $p=,001$), the anxiety of public speaking ($t= 2,226$, $p=,027$). In other words, female students have higher anxiety level than male students during question-answer sessions as well as having tests and doing public speaking.

RQ3: Is there a relationship between learners' onset of learning English and speaking anxiety?

A descriptive analysis was carried to find out the relationship between learners' onset of learning English and speaking anxiety. Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the participants according to onset of learning English.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for the FLSAS of the participants

	Onset	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	F	P
Preparedness	1	132	3,6439	,65682	,05717	2,027	,112
	2	10	3,9250	,40910	,12937		
	3	5	4,0000	,79057	,35355		
	4	12	3,3333	,68534	,19784		
	Total	159	3,6494	,65731	,05213		
Question Answer	1	132	2,7980	,84684	,07371	,279	,840
	2	10	2,7333	,92696	,29313		
	3	5	2,6000	1,11555	,49889		
	4	12	2,9722	,64288	,18558		
	Total	159	2,8008	,84120	,06671		
Testing	1	132	3,3845	,78476	,06830	3,165	,026
	2	10	3,8250	,51438	,16266		
	3	5	3,0000	1,15920	,51841		
	4	12	2,8750	,66144	,19094		
	Total	159	3,3616	,79139	,06276		
Discussion	1	132	2,4375	,78291	,06814	,749	,524
	2	10	2,2500	,64550	,20412		
	3	5	2,8500	,67546	,30208		
	4	12	2,5417	,68119	,19664		
	Total	159	2,4465	,76430	,06061		
Public Speaking	1	132	2,8485	1,02253	,08900	,711	,547
	2	10	2,9000	1,04881	,33166		
	3	5	2,2000	,57009	,25495		
	4	12	2,9167	,90034	,25990		
	Total	159	2,8365	1,00394	,07962		
Error Correction	1	132	2,4110	,73238	,06375	,576	,632
	2	10	2,7000	,89598	,28333		
	3	5	2,2500	,63738	,28504		
	4	12	2,3958	,71873	,20748		
	Total	159	2,4230	,73667	,05842		

As can be seen in Table 3, the majority of participants started to learn English in primary school. One-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate the difference among the four groups of participants in terms of foreign language speaking anxiety. The results revealed a significant difference in terms of 'testing' anxiety among the participants who started learning English at primary school, secondary school, those who started learning English at high school, and those who started to learn English at university ($F=3,165$ $P= ,026$). The Bonferroni test was used in order to figure out whether there was a difference among different

groups. A significant difference was found out between the students who started to learn English at secondary school and university. According to Bonferroni test, testing anxiety of students whose onset of learning English was secondary school was higher than the students whose onset of learning English was university. ($P = ,029$). On the other hand, starting to learn English earlier or later did not play an important role in the participants' level of speaking anxiety in terms of other anxiety types such as speaking, preparedness, question-answer, discussion, public speaking, and error correction.

Conclusion and Discussion

Findings indicate that learners at tertiary level suffer from speaking anxiety in English due to various factors such as speaking, preparedness, question-answer, testing, discussion, public speaking, error correction. The study revealed interesting results for a Turkish EFL context though not very different from previous studies. As all other studies in this specific area, high anxiety levels were found for the specific aspects of speaking skills, particularly testing of speaking and speaking with the teacher and in front of the classroom, which is a result that resonates with those of Liu (2006). The higher level of anxiety reported for these aspects is quite understandable in that Turkish EFL context offers a language teaching, which is considerably based on traditional teaching practices performed by a teacher who is seen as the source of information and the authority in the classroom who can freely and strictly control students with little or no attention to their psychological and educational needs. In addition, assessment is basically a one-shot test-centered system where student learning is measured through tests of "pass or fail". We believe these relatively outdated practices of teaching and assessment of speaking are the major causes of the reported anxiety levels. There is a lack of formative assessment practices where students' performance and learning level is assessed in a way that does not pose anxiety as in alternative assessment practices. Since students are expected to speak accurately, they pay more attention to forming grammatical sentences, which is mentally challenging as a result of continuous monitoring (Krashen, 1985). It could be this that inhibit their free speaking without any worries of accuracy.

As a result of the exposure to such previous assessment and teaching practices, students develop a sustaining anxiety especially in test-based language teaching communities. The students whose onset were earlier reported that they had higher anxiety levels, which we hypothesize to be correlated with the long-term exposure to these summative assessment practices. On the other hand, those whose onset were relatively later reported that they had less anxiety, which could be related to the relatively developed mental ability to overcome anxiety of language learning or testing. If students are long exposed to language teaching and assessment practices, which do not allow students to feel less anxious, these feelings may become fossilized and harder to cope with. However, if students experience anxiety at relatively later ages, they may also find an opportunities to develop ways of overcoming the possible negative effects.

On the other hand, research reveals that some aspects of speaking skills are achieved differently by male and female students. In line with Park and French (2013), Huang (2004), Naghadeh et al. (2013), and Şener (2015) female students reported higher anxiety levels in more aspects of speaking compared to males. This is a critical finding, but it is hard to account for because there could be cultural, pedagogical, social reasons behind this tendency. However, language teachers should keep this in mind and encourage females to speak through careful scaffolding when necessary. They can also develop females' self-efficacy over speaking by making persuasive talk with them and create opportunities of speaking under less threatened circumstances which include group and pair work. The findings in this study do

not necessarily mean that all females experience speaking anxiety, so language teachers need to identify such students who have anxiety and develop constructive ways to support their development of speaking skills. However, there are other studies that contradict with the results of this study. While Na (2007) found that male students are more anxious than female students. Aida (1994), Chiang (2012), Luo (2014), Çubukcu (2008) found no relation between anxiety and gender.

As revealed by the result of this study, A1 level students experienced more anxiety than A2 level students in terms of 'error correction' anxiety, while there is no significant difference among other proficiency levels. The findings of the study resonates with those of Luo (2014) and Balemir (2009) who found no relationship between speaking anxiety and proficiency level.

Speaking is a language skill that develops with difficulty that most learners might experience. The way speaking is tested is also another factor that inhibit its development. It is generally correlated with anxiety while performing speaking activities. Therefore, regarding teaching speaking, language teachers must consider:

- females and males have varying degree of speaking performances.
- students at lower levels may experience more anxiety while speaking.
- assessment practices play a critical role in developing speaking anxiety.
- long exposure to anxiety-generating teaching practices could be detrimental to overcoming anxiety.

It is clear that teachers' classroom teaching preferences and beliefs play a major role in the anxiety levels likely to be experienced by that students. Therefore, they need to be aware of this critical role and adjust their interaction with students and teaching-assessment practices accordingly. Teacher-oriented student anxiety can be prevented through carefully designed training sessions where teachers are encouraged to understand and reflect over students' inner world.

Further studies

This research focused on the EFL learners' anxiety which is particularly interconnected with speaking. Several quantitative tools were used to elicit a set of data. However, further research could also investigate the same topic through the use of qualitative tools such as interviews, reflective writing, and observation, which would allow for deeper understanding of the students' psychological experiences in relation to speaking.

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