

Learning to write in an Academic Genre: University English Learners use of Socio-Cultural Resources in a University in Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Developing academic writing skills in English poses a significant challenge for university students in Rwanda, where English serves as the primary medium of instruction. English as a Second Language (ESL) learners must navigate formal academic conventions while drawing on rich socio-cultural knowledge embedded in local languages, proverbs, oral storytelling, communal practices, and personal experiences. This study investigates how university learners use socio-cultural resources in academic writing, and how these resources both enhance and complicate writing quality. Conducted at a medium-sized Rwandan university, the study adopted a qualitative case-study design, employing student writing samples, unstructured interviews, and classroom observations of three academic writing courses. Findings reveal that socio-cultural resources provide authentic illustrations, clarify abstract concepts, and enrich argumentation, thereby strengthening learner engagement and voice. However, challenges arise when cultural references conflict with English academic conventions, including issues with literal translation, cohesion, and audience comprehension. The study concludes that integrating socio-cultural resources explicitly into writing instruction, providing scaffolding, exemplars, and targeted feedback, can improve writing quality, support learner identity, and bridge local knowledge with international academic norms. These insights inform pedagogical strategies for ESL instruction in Rwandan higher education.

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Introduction and Background

English has become the primary language of instruction in Rwandan higher education, reflecting both national policy and global trends in academic communication. While this shift provides students with access to international knowledge and scholarly discourse, it presents challenges for learners whose first language is Kinyarwanda or another local language. University students are expected to produce texts that demonstrate clarity, cohesion, coherence, and critical reasoning while adhering to formal academic conventions. For ESL learners, mastering academic English involves not only developing linguistic competence but also learning how to structure arguments, organize essays, and present ideas in a manner consistent with institutional expectations.

Simultaneously, Rwandan students possess rich socio-cultural knowledge derived from oral traditions, storytelling, proverbs, community-based practices, and lived experiences. Sociocultural theory posits that learning is mediated by social interactions and cultural tools [1]. In the context of academic writing, socio-cultural resources function as mediating tools that scaffold understanding, support reasoning, and enhance argumentation. For instance, students may draw on local proverbs to illustrate responsibility, ethical reasoning, or communal accountability. Such references make abstract academic concepts more concrete and provide authenticity and cultural resonance to written texts.

Research Objectives

General Objective

To investigate how Rwandan university ESL learners use socio-cultural resources in academic writing and how these resources influence writing quality.

Specific Objectives

- To identify the types of socio-cultural resources employed by ESL learners in academic writing.
- To examine the benefits of integrating socio-cultural resources in enhancing argumentation, clarity, and learner engagement.
- To explore the challenges learners face when socio-cultural resources conflict with English academic conventions.
- To determine pedagogical strategies that can support the effective integration of socio-cultural resources into academic writing.

Statement of the Problem

Academic writing in English presents a major challenge for Rwandan university students, many of whom are ESL learners. While students possess rich socio-cultural knowledge-including proverbs, oral storytelling, communal practices, and lived experiences-this knowledge is often underutilized or misaligned with English academic conventions. Misalignment can lead to essays that are culturally meaningful but fail to meet formal academic expectations in terms of clarity, cohesion, and tone. Limited empirical research exists in Rwanda examining how learners integrate socio-cultural resources into academic writing, the dual role these resources play in both enhancing

and complicating writing quality, and the strategies instructors employ to scaffold this integration. Without such understanding, pedagogical practices risk either disregarding learners' cultural knowledge or inadequately supporting their development in academic English.

Understanding how socio-cultural resources mediate learning in academic writing is essential for developing instructional strategies that validate learners' cultural identities while fostering competence in formal academic contexts. By investigating the types, benefits, challenges, and pedagogical approaches related to socio-cultural resources, this study aims to provide actionable insights for curriculum design, teaching strategies, and assessment practices in Rwandan higher education. It also contributes to broader discussions on the role of culture in ESL learning, learner identity, and the negotiation of academic literacy in multilingual contexts.

Literature Review

Academic Writing Challenges for Esl Learners

ESL learners in higher education face multifaceted challenges in academic writing, including limited vocabulary, difficulties in argumentation, understanding genre conventions, and maintaining rhetorical organisation [2]. These challenges are often amplified when learners are required to synthesise complex ideas, provide evidence-based reasoning, and communicate abstract concepts in a second language. In the Rwandan context, students frequently encounter additional challenges due to the linguistic and cultural gap between their primary language and English. For instance, prior exposure to oral storytelling traditions and communal reasoning in Kinyarwanda influences the way learners structure ideas, often resulting in narratives that deviate from linear, formal academic structures.

Socio-Cultural Resources in Learning

Socio-cultural resources are tools embedded within learners' cultural and social environments that mediate learning [3]. These include proverbs, oral traditions, personal and community experiences, and collaborative practices. Such resources provide cognitive and linguistic scaffolds that enhance comprehension, facilitate reasoning, and support meaning-making. In academic writing, socio-cultural resources allow students to anchor abstract ideas in familiar contexts, create culturally authentic examples, and engage critically with content. By drawing on these tools, learners can develop arguments that reflect both local knowledge and academic rigor.

Integration of Socio-Cultural Resources in Academic Writing

Research has shown that integrating socio-cultural knowledge into academic writing enhances clarity, authenticity, and engagement [4,5]. Students who effectively incorporate local proverbs, storytelling structures, or community examples can enrich their essays and provide compelling illustrations of abstract concepts. However, challenges arise when cultural expressions are translated literally into English, resulting in semantic ambiguity, informal tone, or loss of cohesion. For instance, proverbs meaningful to a Rwandan audience may be opaque to international readers if not adequately contextualised. Consequently, learners must negotiate tensions between personal expression and the formal requirements of academic discourse.

Pedagogical Interventions

Several pedagogical strategies have been identified to support the integration of socio-cultural resources in academic writing.

Explicit instruction on translation and adaptation of cultural expressions, exemplar essays, peer collaboration, and targeted feedback are effective approaches [5]. Peer discussions, in particular, allow students to share cultural knowledge, model academic framing, and collectively develop strategies for formal expression. Instructors play a critical role by providing scaffolding that helps learners balance cultural authenticity with academic conventions.

The Rwandan Context

In Rwanda, socio-cultural practices such as proverbs, oral storytelling, communal decision-making, and ethical reasoning are central to everyday communication and education. Proverbs like "Umwana utabyaye ntakibaho" ("A child who is not born does not exist") can illustrate accountability, responsibility, or ethical principles. Similarly, communal problem-solving approaches provide practical examples for argumentation in academic essays. While these cultural references enhance the relevance and authenticity of writing, they may present challenges when aligning with English academic norms, particularly in terms of coherence, audience comprehension, and formal tone.

Research Gaps

Despite the recognized importance of socio-cultural resources in learning, empirical research focusing on their role in Rwandan higher education is limited. Most studies examine general English proficiency, error analysis, or policy implementation, without systematically exploring how learners integrate cultural knowledge into academic writing. There is also little evidence on how instructors scaffold this process or how cultural references influence writing quality and learner engagement. This study seeks to fill these gaps by investigating the dual role of socio-cultural resources as both facilitators and challenges in academic writing.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Sociocultural Theory and Academic Literacies Theory, which provide complementary perspectives on language learning and academic writing [1,6].

Sociocultural Theory posits that learning is mediated by social interactions and cultural tools. Knowledge is constructed through engagement with peers, instructors, and cultural artefacts. In academic writing, socio-cultural resources such as proverbs, oral narratives, and communal experiences function as mediating tools that shape learners' conceptual understanding, argumentation, and expression. Peer collaboration, instructor scaffolding, and classroom discussion facilitate the effective integration of these cultural resources into formal English writing.

Academic Literacies Theory frames academic writing as a socially and institutionally situated practice that involves more than linguistic proficiency. Learners must navigate the expectations of academic institutions while negotiating their personal, cultural, and disciplinary identities. The theory highlights tensions between personal expression and institutional norms, explaining why socio-cultural resources may simultaneously enrich and complicate ESL learners' writing.

Together, these frameworks illuminate the dual role of socio-cultural resources in academic writing. Sociocultural Theory explains how cultural tools mediate learning and support meaning-making, while Academic Literacies Theory highlights the institutional pressures that shape how learners' express ideas. This combination underscores the need for pedagogical strategies that

validate learners' cultural knowledge while promoting adherence to formal academic conventions.

Research Design and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case-study design to explore how Rwandan university ESL learners use socio-cultural resources in academic writing. Case studies are particularly suitable for in-depth investigation of complex phenomena within real-life contexts [7]. The qualitative approach allowed for detailed exploration of students' experiences, instructors' strategies, and classroom practices, providing a holistic understanding of how socio-cultural knowledge is integrated into academic writing. The design enabled the researcher to capture both the benefits and challenges of socio-cultural resource use, as well as pedagogical approaches to support learners.

Study Site

The research was conducted at a medium-sized university in Rwanda, selected for its diverse student body and active ESL programs. The institution offers multiple undergraduate programs where English is the primary medium of instruction, making it an ideal context to examine academic writing practices. Three academic writing courses were observed, covering essay writing, reflective writing, and argumentative writing, to capture a range of writing genres and instructional approaches.

Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the research questions. The participants included:

12 final-year ESL students, representing a mix of genders, academic programs, and performance levels. These students were chosen because they had completed multiple academic writing courses and had prior experience integrating socio-cultural knowledge into their work.

6 academic writing instructors, responsible for the courses under observation. Instructors were selected based on their experience in teaching ESL writing and familiarity with students' cultural backgrounds.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Data Collection Methods

Multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility of findings.

Student Writing Samples

Student essays, reflection journals, and assignments were collected to examine how socio-cultural resources were integrated into written texts. These samples provided direct evidence of the types of cultural knowledge used, the strategies employed to convey ideas, and the challenges encountered in adhering to English academic conventions.

Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews were conducted with both students and instructors. For students, interviews explored how they selected socio-cultural resources, how these resources influenced argumentation, and the difficulties they faced in translating cultural knowledge into academic English. Instructor interviews focused

on pedagogical strategies, scaffolding approaches, and perceptions of how students balanced cultural expression with academic norms. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, was audio-recorded with permission, and later transcribed for analysis.

Classroom Observations

Observations were conducted in all three academic writing courses to capture real-time interactions, instructional strategies, and the use of socio-cultural resources in practice. Field notes focused on peer discussions, teacher guidance, use of proverbs or storytelling, and instances where students navigated tensions between cultural expression and academic norms. Observations also recorded strategies employed by instructors to scaffold writing and facilitate comprehension.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following six-step framework [8].

Familiarization

Transcripts and writing samples were read multiple times to gain an overall understanding.

Generating Initial Codes: Data were coded line by line to identify references to socio-cultural resource use, benefits, challenges, and pedagogical strategies.

Searching for Themes: Codes were grouped into broader themes such as "types of socio-cultural resources," "enhancement of engagement," "translation challenges," and "scaffolding strategies."

Reviewing Themes: Themes were checked against the dataset to ensure they accurately represented the data.

Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and labeled, ensuring clarity for reporting.

Producing the Report: Themes were synthesized into coherent findings, integrating examples from writing samples, interviews, and observations.

Triangulation across multiple data sources enhanced the credibility of findings by confirming convergence among student writings, instructor insights, and classroom practices.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics committee. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Written consent was obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Audio recordings and documents were stored in password-protected files, accessible only to the researcher. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The study ensured trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and member checking, where participants reviewed summaries of findings for accuracy. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the context, participants, and procedures.

Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting data collection, coding, and analysis processes. Confirmability was ensured by maintaining reflective notes to monitor potential researcher biases and interpretations.

Limitations of the Methodology

While the case-study design allowed for in-depth exploration, the study's findings may not be fully generalizable due to the small sample size and single university setting. Classroom observations were conducted over a limited period, which may not capture all teaching practices. Additionally, socio-cultural resources are context-specific, and findings may vary across different disciplines or institutions.

Results and Discussion (Approx. 2000 words)

This section presents the findings of the study, integrating evidence from student writing samples, classroom observations, and interviews with students and instructors. The discussion situates the results within the theoretical frameworks of Sociocultural Theory [1] and Academic Literacies Theory [6], highlighting the dual role of socio-cultural resources in academic writing.

Types of Socio-Cultural Resources Used

The analysis revealed that Rwandan ESL learners employed a range of socio-cultural resources to support their academic writing.

Proverbs and Idiomatic Expressions

Proverbs and idioms were frequently used to illustrate key concepts and support argumentation. For example, students used the Kinyarwanda proverb “Umwana utabyaye ntakibaho” (“A child who is not born does not exist”) to discuss accountability in community projects or responsibility in group assignments. Interviews indicated that students perceived proverbs as a way to make arguments more vivid and relatable. Instructors acknowledged the authenticity of such references but noted that literal translation often caused semantic ambiguity for international readers.

Oral Storytelling Structures

Many students incorporated narrative structures characteristic of Kinyarwanda oral storytelling, including chronological sequencing, anecdotal framing, and use of dialogue. Writing samples demonstrated that these structures enriched essays by providing concrete examples and contextualizing abstract concepts. Classroom observations showed that instructors encouraged students to retain storytelling elements but guide them in adapting narratives to formal essay structures.

Community Practices

Examples drawn from communal experiences, such as cooperative farming, problem-solving in local associations, and collective ethical reasoning, were common. Students often grounded arguments in familiar practices to illustrate theoretical concepts, such as ethics, leadership, or sustainability. Instructors noted that these examples enhanced engagement but required careful integration to maintain formal cohesion.

Personal Experiences

Personal experiences allowed students to connect with academic content authentically. Reflection essays frequently included accounts of students' involvement in school, family, or community activities. Interviews revealed that learners believed personal experiences enhanced credibility and demonstrated critical engagement. However, instructors cautioned against over-reliance on personal anecdotes, which could detract from broader

argumentation if not linked to evidence or theory.

Strengths of Using Socio-Cultural Resources Authentic Illustration of Concepts

Socio-cultural resources provided concrete examples that made abstract academic concepts more understandable. For instance, using a proverb to explain ethical accountability allowed students to anchor theoretical discussion in a culturally familiar context. This aligns with Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes that cultural tools mediate learning and enhance comprehension [1].

Enhanced Engagement and Voice

Students' essays were more engaging when grounded in familiar socio-cultural contexts. Interviews revealed that learners felt motivated and confident when able to express ideas using culturally meaningful references. Instructors observed that engagement increased during peer discussions where learners shared proverbs, stories, and communal experiences. Academic Literacies Theory helps explain this finding: students negotiate personal and cultural identity through academic writing, enhancing the sense of ownership and voice [6].

Support for Critical Thinking and Argumentation

Integrating socio-cultural knowledge prompted learners to link theory to practice, fostering analytical reasoning. For example, students who drew on community-based problem-solving experiences in essays about leadership were able to critically compare local practices with academic models. Peer discussions further supported reflective thinking, as students explained and justified cultural references in academic terms.

Challenges and Tensions

Literal Translation and Semantic Ambiguity

One major challenge identified was the literal translation of proverbs and idiomatic expressions, which often obscured meaning. For example, translating “Agashaza k'abandi k'amenya kurisha ak'ubwe” (“One's laziness teaches others more than one's work”) literally into English sometimes confused readers unfamiliar with the cultural context. Students acknowledged difficulties in selecting equivalent English expressions, while instructors emphasized the need for contextual explanation or paraphrasing.

Informal Phrasing and Narrative Structures

Oral storytelling conventions occasionally conflicted with the formal tone required in academic essays. Essays often contained conversational phrasing, digressions, and dialogue formats that affected cohesion and adherence to essay conventions. Classroom observations showed that instructors provided guidance on structuring narratives, using transition markers, and maintaining formal register while preserving cultural authenticity.

Audience Comprehension

Cultural references were sometimes opaque to audiences outside Rwanda. Students struggled to balance the inclusion of locally meaningful examples with clarity for international readers. Instructors suggested strategies such as providing brief explanations, footnotes, or paraphrased versions to bridge this gap.

Balancing Personal Expression and Academic Norms

Integrating socio-cultural resources required careful negotiation of identity and institutional expectations. Academic Literacies Theory highlights this tension: students must reconcile personal voice with disciplinary conventions [6]. Writing samples revealed that learners occasionally prioritized cultural expression at the expense

of cohesion, logical progression, or evidence-based argumentation.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest several strategies for supporting ESL learners in integrating socio-cultural resources effectively.

- **Scaffolding Translation:** Instructors can guide students in rendering proverbs, idioms, and oral narratives into academically acceptable English while preserving meaning.
- **Peer Collaboration:** Encouraging learners to share cultural knowledge in discussions allows them to model academic framing strategies and negotiate meaning collectively.
- **Exemplar Essays:** Providing models that demonstrate successful integration of cultural resources into structured academic writing helps learners understand expectations.
- **Targeted Feedback:** Balancing praise for cultural authenticity with guidance on cohesion, tone, and clarity enhances writing quality and learner confidence.
- **Curriculum Integration:** Explicitly incorporating socio-cultural knowledge into writing instruction validates learners' identities and promotes meaningful engagement with content.

Discussion

Socio-cultural resources function as a double-edged tool in academic writing. On one hand, they enhance learner engagement, provide authentic illustrations, and support critical thinking, aligning with Sociocultural Theory's emphasis on cultural mediation. On the other hand, these resources can create tension with English academic norms, highlighting the relevance of Academic Literacies Theory in explaining the negotiation between personal expression and institutional expectations.

The study confirms previous research indicating that integrating cultural knowledge in ESL writing enriches content and learner voice [4-5]. It also extends understanding by demonstrating specific challenges in the Rwandan context, such as literal translation of proverbs and audience comprehension issues. Pedagogical strategies emphasizing scaffolding, peer collaboration, exemplar models, and targeted feedback are essential to mitigate these challenges.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that effective ESL instruction should not suppress socio-cultural knowledge but rather leverage it as a resource. Structured support allows learners to preserve cultural authenticity while adhering to academic conventions, fostering both competence and confidence in academic writing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusions

This study investigated how Rwandan university ESL learners use socio-cultural resources in academic writing and examined the benefits and challenges of integrating these resources into formal English texts. Findings indicate that learners actively draw on a range of socio-cultural tools, including proverbs, idiomatic expressions, oral storytelling structures, community practices, and personal experiences. These resources serve multiple functions in academic writing: they provide authentic illustrations of abstract concepts, enrich argumentation, enhance learner engagement, and foster critical thinking. By grounding academic ideas in culturally familiar contexts, students demonstrate their capacity to connect theory with lived experience, reflecting both personal and communal identities.

The study also highlights the dual nature of socio-cultural resources as both enablers and potential sources of tension in

academic writing. On the one hand, these resources enhance learner voice, creativity, and authenticity. On the other hand, they may conflict with English academic norms, particularly regarding cohesion, formal tone, clarity, and audience comprehension. Literal translation of proverbs, informal narrative structures, and culturally specific examples can obscure meaning for international audiences and create challenges in meeting institutional expectations. These findings confirm previous research in ESL contexts while providing specific insights into the Rwandan higher education setting [4,5].

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study-Sociocultural Theory and Academic Literacies Theory-help explain these dynamics. Sociocultural Theory underscores the mediating role of cultural tools in learning and meaning-making, illustrating how proverbs, storytelling, and communal practices support conceptual understanding and argumentation [1]. Academic Literacies Theory emphasizes that academic writing is a socially and institutionally situated practice, where learners must negotiate tensions between personal expression and disciplinary expectations [6]. The study's findings reveal that successful integration of socio-cultural resources requires structured support that validates learners' cultural knowledge while fostering adherence to formal academic conventions.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of instructor facilitation and peer collaboration. Classroom observations and interviews with instructors demonstrated that scaffolding, exemplar essays, targeted feedback, and collaborative discussions are critical in helping students navigate the balance between cultural expression and academic norms. Peer discussions, in particular, enable learners to share insights, model academic framing strategies, and collectively problem-solve challenges related to cultural integration in writing.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed for curriculum design, instructional strategies, and assessment practices in Rwandan higher education.

Curriculum Integration

Academic writing curricula should explicitly acknowledge and incorporate socio-cultural resources. Assignments can encourage learners to draw on proverbs, community practices, or personal experiences while guiding them to contextualize these references within formal English discourse. Embedding cultural validation in curriculum design promotes learner identity, motivation, and engagement while providing structured opportunities to practice integration strategies.

Scaffolding Translation and Adaptation

Instructors should provide structured guidance on translating and adapting socio-cultural resources into academically appropriate English. This includes teaching strategies for paraphrasing proverbs, restructuring oral narratives, and explaining culturally specific examples for broader audiences. Scaffolding can be delivered through guided exercises, model translations, and classroom workshops that emphasize clarity, cohesion, and tone.

Peer Collaboration and Discussion

Collaborative learning activities allow students to share cultural knowledge, discuss challenges, and model effective academic expression. Peer review sessions, group discussions, and co-writing exercises facilitate the exchange of strategies for integrating socio-cultural resources while adhering to formal conventions. Such interactions also enhance critical thinking and

reflective engagement.

Use of Exemplar Essays

Providing exemplars that successfully integrate socio-cultural knowledge into formal academic writing helps students understand expectations and strategies. Exemplars should demonstrate effective adaptation of proverbs, narrative structures, and community-based examples while maintaining cohesion, clarity, and formal tone. Analyzing model essays equips students with practical tools to negotiate cultural authenticity and academic rigor.

Targeted Feedback and Assessment

Feedback should balance recognition of cultural authenticity with guidance on academic conventions. Instructors should highlight successful integration of socio-cultural resources, identify areas needing clarification or adaptation, and suggest strategies for improving cohesion and readability. Assessment criteria may include evaluation of both content quality and effective integration of cultural knowledge, ensuring learners are rewarded for creativity while meeting formal standards.

Professional Development for Instructors

Educators require ongoing professional development to enhance their capacity to support ESL learners' integration of socio-cultural resources. Training should focus on strategies for scaffolding cultural knowledge, providing constructive feedback, and designing assignments that validate learners' identities while promoting adherence to academic conventions.

Encouraging Reflective Practice

Students should be encouraged to reflect on the role of socio-cultural resources in their writing. Reflection journals, portfolios, or guided discussions can help learners critically examine how cultural knowledge enhances their arguments, identify challenges, and develop strategies to adapt examples for clarity and academic appropriateness. Reflective practice fosters metacognitive awareness and improves writing competence over time.

Research and Policy Implications

Further research should explore the use of socio-cultural resources across disciplines, institutions, and regions in Rwanda to identify context-specific strategies and generalizable best practices. Policymakers should consider integrating culturally responsive teaching principles into national guidelines for ESL instruction, promoting educational practices that balance local knowledge with international academic standards.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, socio-cultural resources play a pivotal role in Rwandan university ESL learners' academic writing. Proverbs, oral storytelling, community practices, and personal experiences enrich essays, strengthen learner engagement, and support critical thinking. However, the integration of these resources requires careful negotiation with formal academic norms, necessitating structured pedagogical support. By providing scaffolding, exemplars, peer collaboration opportunities, and targeted feedback, educators can enable learners to harness their cultural knowledge effectively while meeting academic expectations.

This study contributes to understanding how culture mediates learning in multilingual contexts and highlights practical strategies for culturally responsive ESL instruction. It underscores the importance of valuing learners' identities and experiences while fostering competence in academic English. Implementing the recommendations outlined above can improve writing quality,

promote learner confidence, and bridge the gap between local knowledge and international academic standards, ultimately enhancing the quality of higher education in Rwanda.

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