

Adult Language Instruction in Liberal Adult Education Institutions in Finland

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Abstract

Extensive research has been carried out on adult education, although no single study exists which adequately covers foreign language instruction in liberal adult education institutions. At adult education centers (AECs) learners differ in many aspects, creating a complex environment for teaching. This paper presents research which was designed to study adult learners' attitude towards the language programs/courses; it describes adults' learning experience at liberal AECs. The research was conducted in 2013 within the operating foreign language courses at the AECs in Turku, Finland. The data was gathered by a semi-structured interview. Twenty three AEC language learners participated in the survey. The main issues addressed in this paper are: a) adult learners' attitude toward the language courses, b) AEC language classroom practices (success factors and obstacles). The current study found that the language courses were in demand. Along with these positive findings the study disclosed that adult learners had some problems that could be solved by educators and administrators' intervention. These problematic areas were: 1) teaching methods and approaches, 2) teaching materials 3) course/ class management 4) teaching resources. The AEC educational environment is extremely diverse and this makes teaching tremendously complex. Only through a constant dialogue between an instructor and learners it is possible to create a productive, satisfying environment.

Keywords: Adult Education, Adult Learning, Adult Language Learners, Foreign Language Instruction

Introduction

Adult education, which has become an important issue in education for more than three decades, is a complicated structured process that imposes special requirements on educators, their roles, teaching styles and characteristics. There are numerous issues to take into consideration in establishing a fruitful learning and teaching environment in adult classes, which have become extremely diverse because of human migration.

Firstly, it is essential to determine who an adult learner is. A chief characteristic of adulthood is the need of self-directing. Adult learners have attributes which can make learning and teaching challenging. Adults may feel uncomfortable because of new teaching patterns and innovative activities. Learners may become critical of these teaching methods due to their earlier learning experiences. Many adult learners are concerned about their intellectual powers which may have diminished with age – they are anxious about keeping their creative powers alive (Naznean, n.d.).

Secondly, it should be acknowledged that adult learners begin with some degree of 'biological handicap' (Ausubel, 1964, p. 421). Their communicative needs are vastly more complex and vital than those of pre-school children. Adults cannot rely on others to provide them with food and shelter

while they are learning. Children have some advantages in pronunciation and mimicry factors, for example, in foreign language learning. Children are more venturesome and less rigid in undertaking new learning tasks. They have less frustrating experiences in academic work, accordingly, they may not experience strong emotional blocks and in particular subject-matter areas. Galbraith (1990, p. IX) admits that 'adults are different from children and youths as learners in many respects' and therefore 'different methods from those of traditional pedagogy would be likely to be more effective with them.'

Thirdly, no adults perceive the world in the same way (Vella, 2002, p. 5). Adult learners differ in many aspects: motivation to learn, responses to learning opportunities, age, their intelligence, personality type (extrovert, introvert), cognitive styles (convergent/divergent thinking), syllabus-bound and syllabus-free ('sylv' and 'sylf'), the need for stimulation; they may have different approaches to learning (serialist and holistic, field-dependent, field-independent), reactions (impulsivity and reflectivity) (Lovell, 1984). Adults need to decide themselves what occurs for them in the learning event, also they need to see the immediate usefulness of new learning, such as skills, knowledge or attitudes they are working to acquire. Thus, the adult learners' characteristics shape the theoretic-

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cal grounds for methods and approaches in adult education. These characteristics, along with the learners' different learning goals and motivation factors, make adult learning and teaching environment unique and attractive for both a learner and an educator.

Finally, there are several motivating and inhibiting factors for adult learners in education process. Houle, in his book *The Inquiring Mind* (1961) identifies three major goals for adult learning. These are the acquisition of specific subject knowledge, satisfying a love of learning, and a desire to be in the company of other adults. Houle (1960) also formulated a typology to classify the motives for adult learning: goal-oriented learners, activity oriented learners, and learning-oriented learners. While talking about motivation of an adult, s/he is no longer forced by the educational system or parental pressure to learn, so the problems of dealing with enrollment do not exist, since people choose to be present in a class. Johnston & Rivera (1965, p. 46) classified the motives for learning as follows: spare-time enjoyment, home-centered tasks, preparing for a new job, helping with the present job, becoming better informed, supporting other everyday tasks, meeting new people, and escaping from the daily routine. Wlodkowski (1985) suggests 6 factors influencing motivation: attitudes, needs, stimulations, emotion, competence, and reinforcement. The two barriers to adult learning are: external/situational and internal/dispositional that adult educators need to be aware of (Falasca, 2011).

This paper focuses on adult language learning and instruction in liberal adult education, a form of education which does not lead to a qualification, 'Liberal adult education is not degree-oriented, nor is its content regulated by law; instead, educational goals and content are decided upon by the administrators of educational institutions and organizations' (Anderzén, 2012, p. 6). Liberal adult education institutions are: adult education centers, folk high schools, summer universities, study centers, and sport institutes. Adult education centers (In this article the acronym 'AEC' will be used) are municipally owned adult education institutions. The focus of education is on various fields of art, handicrafts and languages, and courses are held in multiform studies (individual and/or in small/big groups).

I. Adult Language Learning

Adult language learning occurs either as an independently managed process or in an institutional framework. According to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning (RELTL)* (Byram, 2004, p. 9) adult language learning has begun to play a significant role in modern world. In the list of the countries included in the RELTL the Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Sweden, and Finland are mentioned along with Australia, Canada and the USA. The concept of adult language learning is difficult to define. The degree of ambiguity results in productive flexibility in methodological and didactic terms. This ambiguity is conditioned by the numerous criteria, such as distinction in age, personal characteristics, social responsibilities, language and cultural awareness, etc. This kind of variety creates increased demands on teachers in adult education. As the consequence of the teaching, teachers and institutions should cater for the

average, to serve as many learner groups as possible and offer differentiated teaching to adult learners with specific characteristics.

At first it is practical to identify particular emphases in teaching adults: in adulthood there are opportunities of determining autonomously aims, methods, and contents. Learners' needs as well as the conditions of institutions should be taken into consideration. The limitations in terms of content and methodology are conditioned with the fact that adult language teaching depends on the language teaching provided in schools. Changes in the ways of thinking about language and education and focus on practice have signified a sizeable success in the modernization of adult education. Moreover, many teachers in adult education concurrently work in schools, which causes more difficulties in approaches, as they may bring school teaching approaches into adult education.

What is the goal of a language course in liberal adult education centers? In addition to the subject-matter goals which are described by CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) language courses should aim at gaining affective goals according to the levels – individual students' attitudes, feelings and values concerning learning in general. The affective domain (Krathwohl, Bloom, Masia, 1964) includes the manner in which we deal with things emotionally, such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivations, and attitudes. In addition to this setting, specific subject teaching methodology, in this case foreign language teaching methodology comes in and more physical, cognitive, psychological aspects are involved in the process of learning and teaching. So far, however, there has been little discussion about how foreign language learning occurs at AECs. To sum up this section, there are a number of peculiarities about adult language instruction in AECs:

- There are no distinct subject-matter goals in language teaching at AECs and the general goal is defined by CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001) level description (A1, A2, B1, etc.).

- Most of the teachers are those who come from schools, with school teachers' qualifications and are not aware of peculiarities of adult education. They bring school practice in AECs.

- The teachers' objective is to cover the designated textbook or material, which is chosen by an instructor within a specific period (Mikeladze, 2014).

- Linguistic competence is a necessity for a language teacher, it has not yet been possible to professionalize the training of teachers for adult language learning or implement it institutionally in academic activity (Byram, 2004, p. 10).

- At liberal adult education institutions, language teachers cater for the average in order to serve as many learner groups as possible and to offer something to everyone.

- Most language courses do not include tests or final exams to measure goal accomplishment or evaluate progress.

- Teachers may exert a considerable influence over the development of positive attitudes, feelings and values in adult foreign-language learners. It is significant to do so, since students' negative attitude can diminish learners' interest in the language course.

- Adult foreign language learners come into educational activity with a greater volume and different quality of experience in education.

- In adult education centers, language classroom adult learners differ in many aspects.

- Adult learners choose the foreign language courses themselves and are free to move from one level to another without any exams; they can take one and the same course several times and become fluent at that specific level

- Adult learners may practice autonomy to some extent, but they cannot completely take charge for their own learning if they do not know the language they are learning.

- Adult learners become ready to learn those things that they need to know, they are life-centered on their orientation of learning and the most potent motivators are internal pressures (Knowles, 1990, p. 59-61).

One of the distinctive problematic issues of adult language instruction at AECs is the ambiguity of the definition of foreign language teaching of adults; Adult language instruction at liberal adult education institutions raises key questions to be answered, for instance, if the instruction is organized so that adult learners experience satisfaction, if adult learners want to continue with their study of foreign languages, what classroom practices are fruitful for adult learners, etc.

II. Research Goal and Design

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the attitudes of adult language learners towards the language programs/courses at liberal adult education institutions. This research is expanded to include learners' evaluation of their roles and determine what factors influence the successful language program according to an adult language learner's view in an AEC language classroom. The following questions guided my research:

- What is the attitude of adult language learners (ALLs) toward the language programs?

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of these language courses according to ALLs?

- What can be changed in these language programs according to ALLs?

This research was defined as a descriptive survey. The instrument to collect the data was an interview, which was a combination of standardized open-ended interview and closed quantitative interview (Cohen et al., 2007; Patton, 1980: 206). The sequence and exact wording of questions

were determined in advance. The answers were not taped, but they were written down; thus, the study is based on the self-reported data. The interviewees' answers were coded and the quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS.

The interviews were conducted during the months of October and November, 2013 within the operating foreign language courses at Turku Adult Education Center (TAEC), Arbis Adult Education Center (AAEC), and Aurala Community College (ACC) in Turku, Finland. The population for the research comprised adults who were taking foreign language courses at the moment of research. The average length of each interview was 30 minutes and they were conducted in AECs of the sample. The interviews followed the standard format of questioning. According to learners' desire three interviews were in Russian, twenty interviews – in English.

III. Material

The questions for the interview were divided in 3 categories: 1) personal data, 2) description of the language course 3) learner's attitudes and feeling about the foreign language course. In the first category questions about age, gender, nationality, educational background, employment and marital status were grouped. The second category consisted of the questions about the language course, level, experience and reasons for choosing the course, strengths and weaknesses and changes of the course, influence of the target language, effective and ineffective classroom practices. In the third category there were questions about the learner's interests, satisfaction level and how the course meets the learner's needs. Here the organizational questions, such as attendance rate and amount of learning outside of the classroom, were incorporated.

IV. Participants

The sample consisted of 23 adults who were taking language courses at liberal adult education institutions. The sample was randomly selected from language courses currently operating at adult education centers in Turku. The sample of 23 interviewees included 12 males and 11 females. The average age of the interviewed adults was 44.8. At TAEC 19 participants of language courses gave interviews, 2 - from AAEC, and 2 - from ACC. The participants belonged to the following age group: 11 interviewees - to the first age group (20-39 years old), 4 - to the second age group (40-59), and 8 in the third age group (above 60). 8 respondents were married living with their families and 15 had different statuses (being in relationship, single, widow, etc.) living alone or with a partner. The educational background of participants was diverse: 8 respondents with BA degrees, MA degrees - 5, PhD students or PhD professors - 4, Vocational/other - 6. Eleven interviewees were employed, 7 - unemployed and 5 of them were retired. The nationality of respondents was diverse. Most of the foreigners were interviewed in Luuppi (Immigrants' education department at TAEC). About 56.5% of the respondents were Finns (13). There were 2 Russians and others from Africa, Europe and

1 from Australia.

V. Results

Eight participants were taking the language course the first time, however for the rest 15 (65.2%) this was the second or third course. Some participants were enrolled in more than one language course simultaneously. At the time of the interview the participants were taking the following language courses: 6 of them (26%) – Finnish beginner, 3 (13%) - Finnish A2 (intensive), 3 (13%) - French intermediate, 3 (13%) - Russian Intermediate, 2 - Italian (Language course level-B1/B2), 2 - Spanish Beginner, 1 - Dutch beginner, 1 - Swedish (Language course level B2), 2 - Italian for travelers/holiday makers. Nine respondents reported that they had very basic language skills and knew just few words before starting the course. Twelve participants had more than a basic knowledge and 2 respondents did not speak the target language at all.

Attitudes towards the language course

To the question that required them to comment on the extent to which the language course met their needs, 12 interviews (52.2%) rated it with maximum 4, saying that it did very much, 8 respondents (34.8%) just stated that the language course met their needs, rating with 3. Only 3 respondents (13%) were not sure if the course was any help, rating with 2. All respondents expressed that they had more interest in the target language. As for the language course, 69.6% (16) of the participants admitted that they were interested very much, whereas 30.4% (7) are just interested. 19 interviewees positively responded about the group environment in the language course, stating that it was favorable to learning. Nineteen participants admitted that the language course was positively influencing their life, two of them were not sure about this influence and two of the interviewees did not feel any kind of target language influence on their life. Fifteen participants (65.2%) usually discussed language course matter with their friends or family members. An equal number of the interviewees 17.4% (4) did not talk about course matters with anyone else or rarely did it. 69.6% of the interviewees (16) enjoyed friendship in the group, whereas 26.1% (6) did not have any kind of relationships with the group mates. All of the respondents consented that they would recommend the language course to a friend or someone else.

Reasons for taking language courses

About 30.4% of respondents (7) described language as the subject of their interest and love. Most of them wanted or planned to travel to the target language country. 21.7% (5) participants were studying language to get a job with this new skill. 17.4% (4) participants were interested to maintain the language they once were able to talk and to brush up vocabulary. The same number of participants was interested in continuing their education and advancing their career. One of the participants was not sure why he/she was learning the language at the moment i.e. the goal was not clear. For another participant the aim was to get integrated in the target language society through the language. A similar reason

was reported by a participant who wanted to take the language exam to get the country's citizenship.

Language Course Content

The majority (60.9%) of the participants (14) was taking the language course to learn how to speak (specifically this language skill) in the target language, 17.4% of the participants were motivated to learn all language skills - reading/speaking/writing/listening. The answers of other respondents reflected individual needs and interests of the learners. 73.9% of the respondents (17) communicated more in the target language and were certain that their language acquisition was progressing. 17.4% (4) did not communicate more, but still they thought they were communicating better. Only 8.7% (2) reported that they did not communicate more and the communication was not better. 69.6% of the students (16) strongly agreed with the statement "I love this language course" and 30.4% (7) – just agreed.

Discipline and learning routine and assessment

All participants were absent for some amount of the classes: 60.9% (14) were able to attend at least 70% of the classes, 34.8% (8) attended more than 70% of the classes and only one person admitted that he had to miss lots of the classes because of his work. 87% of the interviewees (20) reported that they enjoyed most of the classes and 13% (3) – not so much. 60.9% of the interviewees (14) reported studying at least 70% outside of the classroom. It included doing homework, learning vocabulary or reading passages. 34.8% (8) did more than 70%, and only one participant – less than 70%. 73.9% of the respondents (17) wanted to have some kind of a test to know which level they are and how well they coped with the learned material, while 26.1% (6) of the participants did not want tests, because they thought they knew how they were progressing.

Positive factors

The adult learners were asked to reflect on the strong sides of the language courses. The strengths of the classes embrace all aspects that attracted the learners and made them think that the language course met their needs. The respondents gave more than one characteristic of a course. The answers were analyzed and categorized. The following features were outlined for language courses: a teacher, methods, class hours, class environment, a textbook, content, group size, group members, course pace, classroom, length of the course, and use of computer technology in class.

The majority of the interviewed adult learners thought that the strong side of the course was the teacher. The respondents gave the description of a teacher's type they liked:

- the teacher finds ways to 'push' students and motivate them
- the teacher uses the target language most of the time
- the teacher will explain material until all students understand it

- the teacher is very nice, empowering students
- the teacher gives information on cultural aspects

Eight respondents found the classroom practices agreeable. The adult learners enjoyed most of the interactive approaches, such as speaking activities and pair-work, however, the answers were controversial, which was conditioned partly by the difference between adults' age, life experience, interests, etc. (See table 1). Seven respondents emphasized the content of the course they enjoyed: grammar teaching, 'things that happen in the world for discussion, music, resources for independent study, articles for reading at home, cultural topics, modern texts and issues for discussions.

Table 1. Efficient and inefficient language practices according to the survey

| Efficient classroom practices | Inefficient classroom practices |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation • Grammar activities • Vocabulary activities • Pair-work • Speaking activities • Games • Listening task • Reading task | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Songs ▪ Checking homework ▪ Teacher reading a text ▪ Large group activities ▪ Listening to authentic material ▪ Showing a film without subtitles ▪ Lecturing ▪ Listening to other group members' questions ▪ Pair-work ▪ Grammar activities |

Nine adult learners liked the group atmosphere and having group friends. The participants liked that the class was a social event; people of different educational backgrounds and professions participated in this event in a relaxed atmosphere. They regularly enjoyed the feeling of working in a group and studying together. One of the most important positive features of the course reported by one of the adult learners was that there was no competition in class. Few adult learners disclosed the following aspects of the language course as attractive conditions: group size, class hours, course pace and the textbook.

Negative factors

The interviewees reflected on the weak aspects of the course. The 'weak' aspects of the course were identified as anything that may have caused discontent, displeasure or irritation amongst the adult learners. The respondents gave

several negative features of the course. The answers were analyzed and interpreted. First of all, it is important to mention the disagreeable comments that were obtained on the teacher, the course pace and the length of the course. The adult learners reflected on the teacher's role that caused a negative impact in a language classroom:

- the teacher used the target language all the time
- the teacher talked most of the time
- students were not allowed to take part most of the time
- the teacher tried to do her best, but she did not help students personally
- the teacher never discussed the course matter with learners
- there was little demand from teacher's side
- the teacher kept distance between her and students, which made class environment artificial or 'cold'

Those students who were taking an intensive language course reported that the course pace was very fast, e.g. 'Sometimes the pace is fast, and the material to study is a lot, or the grammar is difficult to follow', 'I am a weak student and the course is too fast for me.' They were supposed to complete one textbook in two months. On the other hand, those adult students who were taking an extensive language course were not satisfied with the duration of the course and said that a class once a week was not enough for language learning, and the pace was too slow.

Four respondents revealed that they did not like the discipline of other students in a group. In the group the language level was different which made pair-work activities a cumbersome experience for some students, 'Few participants, all different levels and it is difficult for all of us'. One of the foreign students reported that in pairwork 'it does not work with me that the person does not speak English' or 'when there is a pair-work/group-work activity it is too noisy.' One of the comments was on the fact that the group environment is not motivating. Other negative factors were on the physical environment, about the size of a classroom 'Sometimes if class is full then the space is not enough' and classroom desk arrangements or fixed furniture in class. Some preferred to have classes in the evening. Two adult learners explained that learning only depended on them, and they learned more themselves than on the course. One of the adult learners specified that the teaching methods were not different from the old ones and that more internet/ YouTube and TV resources should have been used in teaching.

Proposed changes

Twenty-one interviewees stated that they wanted to have some changes in the language course and they proposed what could be improved.

- Improve teaching methods by increasing the amount of practice in the class, making classes more interactive, adding reading tasks, translation and discussions, assigning more homework to adult learners;

- Change the content of the course: including specific vocabulary, e.g. vocabulary for job interviews, colloquial phrases, grammar instruction, and an orientation class at the beginning of the course;
- Create the following levels of the courses
- Encourage students' discipline
- Create a concrete goal for the course (as one of the adult learners complained; 'only the language framework is given and learning is messy. Confidence is going down')
- Give an orientation class on grammar basics (such as: parts of speech, sentence structure, etc.) and how learners might feel when they meet obstacles
- Form smaller groups to make learning easy and pleasant
- Choose the appropriate pace for the group, neither too fast nor too slow. The teacher will need to judge the pace of the class depending on the abilities of the participants
- Give voluntary tests to learners to monitor their progress
- Improve teacher-student interaction
- Change a textbook, use a variety of resources
- Offer more classes at different hours
- Alter the arrangement of tables in the classroom
- Use modern technology in the language classroom
- Make the teacher more interested in learners' achievements.

Ten students disagreed with the idea to have tests or any kind of assessments in the course. Thirteen adult learners were eager to have a test, although they stressed that the test should be voluntary.

VI. Discussion / Conclusion

The current study found that liberal adult education institutions involved in the study are popular with the interviewed language learners. The information about language courses, offered by these institutions, is available through different sources, for instance the printed advertisement, the internet and word of mouth. The language courses are in demand; many adults take the courses for the first time and for others the courses have become a hobby. The variety of language courses are aimed at meeting the need of a multinational environment creating a new product on the market. The positive findings of the study were the following:

- Many adults start learning new languages in their adulthood

- After they begin taking the language course, they continue it to the next level
- The satisfaction with the courses is high
- The group environment in the language courses is favorable for learning
- Language learning positively influences learners' lives
- Adults learn a language for two main reasons: love or interest in this language, or getting new opportunities in career with this language. Some adults learn languages because they want to communicate in the target language
- Adult learners love their language courses, enjoy most of the classes and are observant of their progress
- Adult learners generally like fellow members of their group and enjoy studying together in a relaxed atmosphere

Along with these positive findings the study disclosed that adult learners have some problems in language courses that could be solved by educators' and administrators' intervention. The changes that were suggested by learners (in the previous section) can be clustered thematically: changes regarding 1) teaching methods and approaches, 2) teaching materials 3) course/ class management 4) teaching resources. Contrary to the nature of liberal education, some adult learners wanted to take a test, have more homework and a demanding teacher. Some adults dislike the difference in language level during the classroom activities; if more attention is paid to solving the problems like the group/classroom size, an orientation session at the beginning of the course, then, naturally 'weaker' learners may prefer to be in the same group with adults who have similar language abilities. Thus, the question of course pace will partially be solved.

Table 2. Major findings of the current study

| Adult learners |
|---|
| - 87% of the interviewees reported that they enjoyed most of the classes |
| - 60.9% were able to attend at least 70% of the classes. |
| - 73.9% of the respondents wanted to have some kind of a test to know which level they are and how well they coped with the learned material. |
| - 60.9% of the participants were taking the language course to learn speaking in a target language. |

- 73.9% of the respondents communicated more in the target language and were certain that their language acquisition was progressing.
- 87% of the interviews reported that the course matched their needs.
- 65.2% of the participants usually discussed language course matter with their friends or family members.
- 69.6% of the interviewees enjoyed friendship in the group.
- 91.3% of the interviewees stated that they wanted to have some changes in the language course.

Within the survey a portrait of a 'great' adult educator was created. An adult educator should have a qualification in the subject and knowledge of the country's culture. He/she should practice a balanced approach in speaking the target language, be friendly and sincerely interested in learners' achievements. He/she should regularly motivate and support learners, be open to learners' needs and discuss the course matters with them, e.g. the goal of the course, content, resources, etc. An adult educator should be interested in learners' opinions and be patient.

It is important to improve foreign language teaching methodology in liberal adult education institutions. The educational environment is extremely diverse what makes teaching tremendously complex. Based on the findings, more learner-centered approaches should be applied in AECs by Weimer's model (2002): the balance of power between a teacher and learners is established in the classroom; students should be involved in choosing content material; the role of the teacher should change from a knowledge conductor into a facilitator/guide, the responsibility for learning should be placed upon learners, the purpose and processes of evaluation are defined by the learners. Only through constant dialogue between instructor and learners it is possible to create productive and satisfying environment. Based on the study, the following recommendations can be elaborated for foreign language courses at liberal adult education centers:

- Improve the teaching methodology and establish an orientation session for learners
- Annually conduct teacher training on teaching methods; consider adult learners' feedback with adult educators
- Improve the dialogue among all parties involved in delivery of the courses
- Conduct more research on implementing the learner-centered approach.

Limitations of the study

Finally, a number of important limitations need to be considered. First, more adult learners expressed willingness to give interviews at the beginning, but for some reasons the respondents did not reply to the invitation emails for the interviews. Presumably the barrier was the interviewing language. Second, the study is self-reported data – it may contain several potential sources of bias that should be noted as limitations. The author considers as a shortcoming of the study that interviews were done not in respondents' mother tongue. The interviewees had problems with understanding some questions correctly and it was necessary to simplify the questions. A further study could assess more adult learners to describe their experience in language learning at liberal adult education centers.

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