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## **CHALLENGES FACED BY LEARNERS IN ESL: A CASE STUDY OF INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE, UNIVERSITY OF SINDH, JAMSHORO, PAKISTAN**

### **Abstract**

*This paper investigates the challenges faced by the ESL learners of Institute of English Language and Literature (IELL), University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. Poised on the qualitative methodology and using a semi-structured interview as the data collection method, the findings reveal detailed factors contributing as the potential obstacles in the learning process of 1st and 2nd years graduate students in ESL classrooms. These factors ranged from teachers' attitude, pedagogical practices, monotonous and irrelevant syllabus, teaching approach, de-motivation, lack of confidence due to the linguistic competence and their previous learning process etc. The learners reported that due to these factors learners encounter the anxiety in the ESL classrooms which hinder their academic progress and cognitive development.*

**Keywords:** English as second language, syllabus, motivation, attitude.

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**Introduction:**

In Pakistan people are either bilingual or multilingual. They speak their native languages, the national languages Urdu and English. The education and language policies of the state give the importance to Urdu and English, neglecting the indigenous languages. In Pakistan two education systems run parallel: government schools and Private schools. In former medium of instruction is learners' L1 while teaching of English as compulsory subject starts from 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Contrary, English is sole language of instruction in private schools and local language are not taught at all. However, after grade 10<sup>th</sup>, the language of instruction shifts abruptly from L1 into English. "The country like Pakistan where English is the essential requirement for higher education and criterion for the legibility of the jobs, the lack the proficiency in English is effecting the educational and professional careers of many who are educated in government schools" (Farida, 2018).

Similar is the position in University of Sindh (UoS), Jamshoro, Pakistan's 2<sup>nd</sup> oldest and largest university in terms of enrolment of students. Majority of the learners of UoS are from government schools and they lack the English language proficiency which create the serious challenges in the learning English as second language (ESL). Farida (2018) enumerates some factors like learners' incompetence in English, lack of facilities, over crowded classes, the use of first language, lack of parents' role, traditional teaching methods and different script, grammar and phonetic system of English from learners' first languages. It must be noted that English belongs to Indo-European language family while local languages of Pakistan belong to Indo Aryan language. The current paper explores and identifies the various challenges the learners of

1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> years of Bachelor degree face in ESL classrooms. For current study the data is collected from the one institute of UoS i.e. Institute of English language and Literature.

University of Sindhi awards 4 years Bachelor (BS) and two year Masters (M.A) degrees. In UoS English is language of instruction. English is also taught as compulsory subject to the learners of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year (13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> grade). UoS has implemented the new ESL syllabus in 2006 under the title of English compulsory subject. The new syllabus is the grammar and language-skills oriented that has replaced the old English syllabus which focused on teaching English through literary masterpieces. The new syllabus is taught three hours per week in the faculties of humanities, social science and natural science. The syllabus of 1<sup>st</sup> year is known as Functional English and its focal point is on English grammar while syllabus of 2<sup>nd</sup> year is known as English compulsory which is focusing on teaching of language skills. The prescribed books are *English Grammar* and *English for undergraduates* written by D. H. Howe, T.A. Kirkpatrick and D.L. Kirkpatrick and published by Oxford University Press, Karachi, Pakistan. Both books divided into the chapters and in the end of each chapter the varieties of exercises are given. In the current paper the term ESL is employed instead of Remedial and Compulsory English.

The assessment system of IELL is based on semester system conducting examination twice in a year. IELL has the responsibility to conduct classes of ESL throughout the universities. To maintain such huge teaching burdens the IELL hires the Teachers Assistant (TA) on the temporary bases and they are responsible to conduct two to three classes per day into the various faculties of UoS.

## **Objectives and Research questions**

The current study is based on the two objectives, first, to identify the challenges the learner of IELL face in the ESL classrooms and, second, explore the causes of those challenges which are negatively contributing in the students' learning process. The research questions of the study are:

1. What challenges 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year learners of IELL face in the ESL classrooms?

2. What are the causes of challenges which are negatively contributing in the students' learning process?

This is the first ever study that highlights the challenges and the difficulties the learners of IELL face in ESL classrooms. This is a valid study enumerating the negative challenges which knock learners' learning development. In the light of the study the administration of IELL and UoS can take the positive steps to achieve the objectives of teaching of ESL.

English, being the universal code of communication in all domains of life, is widely taught as second language (ESL) or English as foreign language (EFL). Kachru (1985), in his famous three-circle theory, explains that generally ESL is taught in the former British colonies; while teaching EFL is in the countries which were not the British colonies but due to the increasing importance of English it is taught as foreign language in the academic institutions. However, English being foreign language poses the difficulties to ESL and EFL learners. The linguistics scholars and ESL/EFL practitioners have identified and enumerated the number of the challenges and obstacles the learners ESL/EFL learners of are facing. These challenges are include socio-economic, academic and

psychological contributing negatively in the learning development process.

Brown (2008), evaluating the learners challenges in ESL classrooms, states that the foremost difficulty learners encounter is lack of proficiency in English that hammers learners' confidence and creates the anxiety and de-motivates the learners. In the same vein Liu (2011) states that learners' previous education experiences and learning habits pose the challenges which negatively effecting the learning of a foreign language. Elaborating further Liu (2011) states that learners take time to adopt the new teaching methods. The learners take time to adapt new teaching methods and hence it gashes their cognitive development. In same line Farida (2012), in the finding of her study in Pakistan, states that it is the common observation that school teachers follow the traditional teacher-centered approach emphasizing on translation and controlling the classrooms activities. Additionally the school and colleges teachers use their L1 as the medium of instruction; while in the higher education institution English. This shift of language instruction from L1 to English confuse the learners create the problems for the learners who are enrolled in universities (Farida, 2012).

The study of Dörnyei (2008) pointed out the lack of interaction in-and-outside the classroom as an active factor negatively contributing in ESL classrooms. The interaction between peers-peers and learner-teacher in and outside classrooms enhance the learning language abilities as well as helps to brace the confidence (Dörnyei, 2008). The finding of study of Ahmed (2010) in Egypt discloses that Egyptian learners face the "lack of freedom of expression" as a major contributing negative factor in ESL classroom. Learners are

afraid that teachers may not like to ask the questions or clarification or elaboration (p. 215).

Nunan (1999) gives importance to the curriculum as the dynamic device to motivate ESL learners. Focusing on syllabus, Thomson (2013) states that teachers' focal point is the examination rather than the achievement of the objectives of syllabus. They are stirred up to compete of syllabus and least priority is given to the needs of the ESL learners (Saima at el, 2018). While Abbas (1998), Warsi (2004), Farida (2012) and Khan and Khan (2016) believe that teachers' pedagogical approach and curriculum are flawed and the major obstruction in learning of a target language.

Similarly, the classroom-environment and classroom-management are the latent negative factors in learning the target language. Mostly the over-crowd classroom the teachers are disabled to manage the academic activities and provide the equal learning opportunities to every student and its results that learners are de-motivated (Dörnyei, 1998). The teachers' in-service training is important because teachers' ways of teaching can cause confusion or pressure upon learners and as a result they drop out of school, or, it pushed out due to the pressure (McLaren, 2007).

Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Narayanan et al (2008) focus on the psychological aspects of learners and teachers in the ESL classrooms. They believe that individual's attitude is pivot in learning a new language. In same line Güneyli and Aslan (2009) state that teachers' attitude in the class is a core factor effecting the teaching positively as well as negatively. Ahmed also endorse this statement and states that teachers' negative attitudes created 'difficult and

hardship' and such behaviour is the result of lack of teachers' training (Ahmed, 2010, p. 215).

The scholars like Giles et al. (1977) and Pavlenko (2002) consider learners' socio-economic factor as the key contributor in the ESL classrooms. The results of studies of Kormos (2013) in Chile and Salamehand Sathakathullah (2018) in public sector schools in Dubai confirm that socio-economic factor impact on the learning attitude of the ESL students. The study of Farida (2018) in Pakistan discloses that the higher academic institutions of Pakistan are bifurcated according to their linguistic competence of the learners. She states further that the learners from the privilege social class are good in English communication because they receive education in expensive private English medium schools unlike the learners from poor families who are educated in the government schools where medium of instruction (Farida, 2018). It confirms that "where the in-group identification is weak, in-group vitality low, in-group boundaries open and identification with other groups strong, may assimilate and learn the L2 rapidly" (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 279).

The study of Boss (2007) confirms that ESL learners demonstrated negative attitudes towards the target language and culture. Highlighting the reasons of this social issue, Snow (1992) states that ESL learners are in constant fear that their personal and cultural identity will be underestimated affecting their ethnic pride. Boss (2007) believes that the less exposure of a foreign language and culture negatively contribute in learning of target language.

The over all result of the challenges learners face in ESL classroom cause demotivation and anxiety among the students (Brown, 2008). Further, Liu (2011) found that the

students' motivation was positively correlated with their English proficiency. Lack in linguistic competence demotivates learners and they feel embarrassment and confusion in the ESL classroom (Liu (2011).

While some scholars enumerated the challenges negatively affecting the target language learning, a number of scholars suggest the remedies to purge these challenges. In this regard the socio-cultural constructivist approach of Vygotsky (1978) is considered as a pivot for the development of cognition. It emphasizes the importance of socialization and social environment as the advantageous tools in the construction and appropriation of knowledge because it works to transfer and transform the language and socio-cultural learning. To enhance the communicative competence among the ESL learners Vygotsky (1978) suggests 'scaffolding' notion which is focusing on the learning of L2 in the classroom through peer-interaction under the teachers' supervision. It positively enhances the learner's cognitive abilities and learner can understand, interpret, communicate and repeat or reformulate his message in the ESL classroom. In the same line, Cummins (1981) suggests two steps to overcome the challenges; first: *interpersonal* and second: *academic*. Initially the ESL learner should be exposed to simple expressions, like greeting, asking directions, simple sentences and in the latter stage, which is the advance academic level, academic language must be exposed to the learners. This stepwise academic development will improve the gradual cognitive abilities (Cummins, 1981). Likewise, Schwarz and Terrill (2000) suggest that ESL teachers must focus on learning of language-skills and their regular practices to enhance the necessary and expected progress. Pande (2013) also support



this view and state that understanding of the target language cannot be possible without teaching the four skills.

Similarly, the psycholinguistic consider that teachers must develop the positive attitude toward English language learning. Boss (2008) suggests that learners should be exposed to the blended learning (learning using electronic media, mobile, videos etc.) for the sufficient exposure of daily interaction communication as well as foreign culture. Learners may cram or memorize the common expressions of daily interaction (Boss, 2008). To generate positive perceptions of English culture, teachers must sentient the significance of English as the international code of communication (Nero, 2005). It is important to determine possible steps for learner's self-image, confidence and motivation in classrooms (Boss, 2008).

To explore challenges faced by ESL learners in Pakistan a few studies are conducted. The research of Farida (2010) investigated the problem ESP learners of Business Administration, University of Sindh. The finding suggests that curriculum and teachers pedagogical practice are the main de-motivational constitution in ESL learners. The study of Khan et al (2017) investigated the obstacles ESL Pre-University Students learners faced in District Mianwali (Pakistan). Their findings suggested that learners are not motivated nor realised the importance of English in this remote area.

The current research is based on the qualitative approach. To understand and analyse the problems and difficulties of the learners face in the ESL classrooms qualitative approach is an appropriate choice because it provides the wider scope to interpret and expose the implicit

facts which in certain situations is hard to explore in the quantitative approach, thus it provides the extensive range in digging out the solutions of the problem (Creswell, 2007). The semi-structured individual interview was data collection method. Interview is containing 20 questions envisaging the academic, psychology and social domains. The questionnaire is focusing the learners psychological: issues, attitude toward learning English, teachers' attitude motivation or demotivation, anxiety; academic: syllabus, teaching method, linguistic competence; socio-culture: cultural shock, alien cultural presentation etc. The assortment of the queries helped to explore the various factors creating difficulties that learners faced in learning Remedial English in IELL.

As explained earlier the target population of the current study is the mixed-gender students of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year (13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> grades) of bachelor degree gram of IELL. The researchers personally contacted 100 learners and interviewed from 83 willing participants, 44 from 1<sup>st</sup> year and 39 from 2<sup>n</sup> year. After their consent the 10-15 minutes interview were conducted.

To observe ethical considerations the participants verbally as well as in writing were provided the assurance of confidentiality. They were informed that data would be used for academic purposes only and strict code of anonymity will be followed. Participation was on voluntary bases. Participants were informed that they have right to withdraw, rescind or to skip any question. During the data collection the participants were given due attention and respect and communicative validity was established by using L1, national language Urdu and English.

The findings of the data analysis indicate that majority of the students are interested in ESL classrooms, however, they face some serious challenges that hamper their academic progress and cognitive development in learning of the target language. The findings reveal a number of socio-economic, academic as well as psychological challenges that negatively contribute in the learning of English as second language.

The data analysis of current study reveals that foremost challenge the ESL learners of IELL reported is their lack of proficiency in English. Elaborating the reasons the learners correlated this flaw to their school and college education where medium of instruction was L1. This confession was rendered by the students who received their education from government schools. One learner reported:

*My schooling and college teachers were poor in English speaking and translated English [text]. We [were] never allowed to speak [in] English in classroom. They [teachers] focused on reading and writing only.*

Contrary, learners who received their schooling in private English schools do not face such issue. This is a more socio-economic problem than the academic. As explained earlier that in Pakistan the government and private education systems runs parallel. In private schools English is the sole medium of instructions and local language are not taught at all. Contrary, in government schools medium of instruction is L1 and English is introduced in grade 6<sup>th</sup>. However, after grade 10<sup>th</sup>, abruptly the language of instructions shifts from L1 into English. Farida, based on her findings in Pakistan, states that the such situations indicate Pakistan's unbalanced and lopsided social structure and "this has the effect of

slashing the higher educational and professional careers of many students who lack proficiency in English” (2018, p. 29).

Addressing the learners above quoted complaint, I, being the faulty member of IELL, avow that teachers consistently assess the prior knowledge of the learners but it is almost impossible for IELL teachers to conduct a test and divide learners into the groups according to their English linguistic competence. It needs time, facilities and infrastructure which demands a great budget that IELL cannot afford. However, some professional suggestions can help to cop up this challenge. Gibson (2003) suggests an active interaction between learners and teachers inside and outside the classroom as an additional assistance to mitigate the learners’ hesitation in speaking in target language. It is also a good practice to arrange small informal social events for interaction in the target language for augmenting learners’ confidence (Farida, 2018). Abdullah (2015) suggests that ESL teachers can “create a language-rich classroom” and provide the opportunities of informal peer-peer and peer-teacher interaction talk inside and outside the classrooms as well as teachers’ have socialization with learners in the target language outside classrooms to surmount this burning issue (p. 372).

Similar complaint is registered by another learner:

*Students, who are good in English, always active in classrooms activities and teachers also give importance to them. I cannot speak fluent English so I am passive in the classroom tasks. Teachers never noticed me.*

Cummins (1981) and Farida (2018) state that learners who are linguistics proficiency in power-code (e.g. English is power code in Pakistan) generally dominates the classroom

activities. It is correlated with the social inequality when Elite group, who are fluent in official languages, dominates the under-privilege groups through language (Fairclough, 2001). Farida has stresses "the socialization between the linguistically weak and strong groups"; because daily interaction will help learners to know correct use of target language in the given situation (Farida, 2018, 271).

Data analysis indicates that some learners have reservations on teachers' attitude and their lack of interest in the classrooms. They complaint that teachers give less priority to teaching English as compulsory subject and compare to teaching of major subjects. Generally they conduct lecture without preparation. In the same vein one learner grumbled against a TA (teacher assistant):

*Teaching the grammar is the biggest challenge for my teacher. He is not clear about the grammar rules. He lacks English speaking skill also. I am afraid to say that he does not try to improve his professional abilities.*

It is fact that generally the subject of ESL is taught by the Teachers Assistants (TA) who are hired by IELL on daily wages. I assume that due to this is the reason the TAs may be not enthusiastic, however, it is important to have version of teachers which is, is not in the purview of the study.

The analysis of current data reveals that learners have reservations on size of classroom and teachers' management. It is fact that large class size is a major challenge to ESL teachers through out world. Unfortunately, teachers are not trained; hence, they have less knowledge about the classroom management. To handle the big classes, teachers generally rely on grammar translation method and teacher-centre approach to control the class. However, students' of IELL

believe that teacher-centre approach is depriving them from learning opportunities. It is indicated from one learner's interesting remark that alluding learners' perception about teaching method:

*My classroom is reserved for my teacher's show case. Classroom is just like a theater and teacher like an actress, delivering a monologue and we [students] are passive audience to listen and watch her. It is thwarting our learning process.*

This is the indication that classroom management seems the biggest issue in IELL context. Teachers conform to grammar translation method and lecturing to enhance the control and manage the discipline but it creates the distance between the teachers and learners. This issue cannot be treated without teachers' training. They must be trained how to slash teachers' talking time and tries to develop a friendly environment as well as a close relationship with the students. Teachers must frame the strategies ensure the involvement of every learner in the classroom activities in order to ensure them that they are equally important for the teachers.

Data analysis reveals learners' opinion on feedback. They moaned that after the completion of classroom tasks teachers hardly give feedback on their language progress. One learner criticised in the following words:

*Teacher points out our mistakes and errors in the end of the year in examination copies while whole year no feedback is given to us on our academic progress. There is not any established system of feedback or error correction. I guess it is not part of teaching method in IELL.*

In some cases this complaint is genuine that due to the time constraint and large size of the classes generally teachers cannot give feedback to every individual. However, the

scholars suggest a number of the approaches. For example Ferris (1999) recommends quickly 'treatable errors' (tense, verb, affixes etc.) can immediately be addressed in the class while for 'untreatable errors' including preposition or unidiomatic expressions etc., teacher can use the black board, if not on regular bases than on alternative days. It is up to the teachers whether they render feedback on major or minor language errors but it should be pointed out so their errors may not be fossilized (Farida, 2010).

Findings show that one of the common condemnations by the learners was ESL syllabus that it is less interesting and replication of exercise. A learner from 2<sup>nd</sup> year alleged:

*Our syllabus is too much lengthy to be finished in a year. The boos of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> years include a lot of chapters and each chapter contains bundle of repetitive exercise. Syllabus is not according to our needs.*

Similar was the complaint of another learner:

*I am interested to see the exercises focusing on the daily interaction but speaking and writing skills are the neglected in syllabus. In 1<sup>st</sup> year it is over focusing the grammar and in 2<sup>nd</sup> year the sole focus is on vocabulary.*

To some extent we agree with learners complaints. In the light of teaching English in IELL, we observed that the prescribed books of ESL syllabus containing monotony of exercises. The grammar book in 1<sup>st</sup> year contains grammar exercises which are similar in nature and while book of 2<sup>nd</sup> year is over-emphasizing on vocabulary learning which, to large extent are replicated. Such stereotypes of syllabus and duplication of tasks are "ineffective in language learning" because learners are bored and loose the interest (Widdoson, 1983, p, 26).

In the same vein one student, whose linguistic proficiency in English was high, alleged:

*We are students of bachelor degree in language and literature. Syllabus, teach us noun pronoun balaa... blaa... or pictures to describe. We have done this in our primary school.*

Some learners have same opinion that books are not according to their academic level. Unfortunately, syllabus of English is designed by outsider and participation of teachers is zero. Neither publishers nor authors of the books contact teachers who are implementers of the syllabus. Teachers do not have the power to abolish the syllabus of the institution. In the light of the zero presentation of teachers, the accusation of the learners can hardly be justified. The lack of teachers' participation creates a vacuum between needs of learning and objectives of syllabus (Farida, 2010). It would be better that before designing a syllabus the teachers of the institutions may be given participation into the syllabus advisory and designing committee because teachers are the authentic source to guide about the level, needs and interest of the learners (Widdoson, 1983).

Another common complaint against syllabus is that teachers show interest to finish the syllabus and neglect the objectives. In this regard one learner's objection is quoted here:

*My teacher's intension seems to finish the syllabus rather to develop our English language skills. She rushes to finish whole syllabus, without evaluating our learning progress.*

This is a genuine complaint of the learners. Though the axioms of ELT/ ESL and EFL is the academic development of the learners in target language but it is observed that teachers, without rather focusing on the objectives of the syllabus; rush



to finish the syllabus which is an unavoidable obligation upon the teachers by the institutions (Moore, 2003). Unfortunately a “ready made” syllabus is imposed upon the teachers (Farida, 2010). To solve this issue one suggestion is that teacher, being ‘an architect and facilitator’ can design the material from the prescribed books according to the needs of learners. According to Brown (2008), teacher can design activities ‘to practice the language in a contextualized situation’ and students should achieve “the overall purpose or goal by the end of the year” (p. 149). Widdowson suggests that teachers can finish the syllabus into the stages by ‘specification of content’ (1983, p. 26). In this regard Yalden (1983, p. 16) proposes that before the start of a syllabus first, teachers “identify the communicative competence” and second “decide what can be taught systematically and what can be taught non-systematically, what can be approached in a linear fashion and what cyclically”. This might reduce the risks of the irrelevancy of the syllabus. Teachers should also consider these basic three questions before commencement of syllabus: first, “how language is acquired; second how language is learned; and, third, how language is to be used” (Yalden, 1983, p. 16).

The overall result of the challenges are negatively contributing and creating demotivation and anxiety. It was the opinion of majority of the learners that due to the above mentioned social, psychological and academic challenges they are de-motivated and their language learning abilities are trimmed down. “The learners with low proficiency in English are not only de-motivated and lose the confidence but the peers with high linguistic competence in English snatch the participation opportunities and hijack the classroom

activities" (Farida, 2018, p. 272). They cannot achieve their goals in ELS classroom this belief pushing them towards the anxiety.

To address this issue is the basic duty of every teacher. They must work out to develop the Intrinsic motivation (motivation from within the student) and extrinsically motivated (motivation student studies and learns for other reasons) (Dornyei, 1998). Using the positive energy teachers create the friendly environment and convey each learner a feeling that they are important. A well-planned lesson is essential and a briefing of teachers in the classroom about the objectives of the syllabus in beginning of a new academic year. This can make learner to understand their tasks in the class. This will motivate and uphold their self-confidence. To curb the anxiety teachers make learners to realise their positive qualities of learning a language and highlight learners' positive aspect of their personality (Dornyei, 1998). The axiom of language learning can only be achieved when students are motivated.

The findings and discussion of the current study highlighted the challenges learners of IELL face in their ESL classrooms. Data analysis reveal that the learners are exited to learns English as second language. However, majority of the learners encounter the academic difficulties in their learning process. Moreover, the social and psychological issues also mallet their learning process. Findings indicate that most problems of the learners are teacher- oriented, like, teaching methodology, teachers' attitude, classroom management etc. It is a fact that teacher education courses failed to adequately prepare them for dealing with classroom management (Yalden, 1983). It is recommended to build up strong

foundation the teachers from the schools must be trained in ELT especially in government schools so the universities may receive the learners who possess the strong linguistic competence. University cannot teach from the beginning rather advance level curriculum is taught. The findings reveal that foremost challenge learners face is the lack or low proficiency in English. Learners complain they lack proficiency in English and they have associated this deficiency to the economic positions of their families. It is not surprising the low English proficiency generates a variety of academic problems but unfortunately teachers hardly address this issue. The low proficiency in English is not only de-motivating the learners to participate in the classrooms activities. It is also related to the education policy of the state because government schools failed to provide the quality education, specially, English. Government should revise the education policy and focus on the early education. This is the indication of there is dire need to appoint the trained and teachers and government need to take serious action for providing the quality education to every citizen. Furthermore, this study exposed the challenges and some suggestions and recommendations can guide to the administration of IELL and syllabus committees to take some positive actions in order to mitigate the learners' issues in the ESL classrooms.

Finally it is stated that this study collected data from ESL learners of IELL hence it is providing the limited information about the perspectives of learners only. Ideally, to comprehend the challenges and their solutions it could have the opportunity to take the views of the teachers of IELL regarding the complaints against them. However, it is

contemplated that this study did indeed produce reliable and authentic data because ESL learners are the target to learn and use English as second language.

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