

Investigating Malay Language Writing Proficiency Level Among Upper Secondary School Students

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Abstract

This paper aims to present the findings of a research on writing proficiency in Malay language of upper secondary schools students in Malaysia. The research is designed to compare writing patterns of urban and rural students from four different zones. The focus of analysis is divided into three aspects, namely, language used, discourse and idea conceptualization. In language used, the focus is on sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation while discourse looks at interesting phrases used by students. The ideas in the writings have been evaluated holistically by looking at the clarity, maturity and relevance of ideas presented. The respondents of this research are selected from five different zones; Kedah (northern zone), Kelantan (eastern zone), Negeri Sembilan (central zone), Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia). The total number of respondents is 1461 students. Generally, the findings of the research show that the writing proficiency of the students is at a satisfactory level. However, there are differences in the students' writing performance within the zones.

Keywords: language learning, writing, school, error analysis, literacy.

Introduction

Traditionally, writing skill is one of the skills emphasized in learning a language. This is parallel with previous notions on literacy. Kern (2000) says that literacy traditionally is seen as the ability to read and write. These two skills are often emphasized at the beginner and intermediate levels of language learning and followed by literature and cultural knowledge at advanced level.

However, the current perspective on literacy has shifted or transformed. Reading and writing are no longer considered as the determining factors in gauging one's literacy level. Scholars from disciplines such as rhetoric, writing, educational psychology, sociology, linguistic and cultural theory challenge the notion of literacy that concentrates solely on reading and writing as limiting and suggest a more dynamic concept of literacy that incorporates cultural aspects in reading and writing practices in language learning (Kern, 2000). Even though there has been a paradigm shift in the notion of literacy, it is felt that efforts in improving on the two skills should still continue to better equip a language learner in becoming a literate person. This paper, however, will focus on one of the skills in literacy, specifically writing skill.

Writing in General

Writing is a big responsibility for a writer because writing is not only a hobby but it is also considered a profession. Besides that, writing is also a form of communication that people use to communicate as long as they are literate. Oral communication, on the other hand, is not as complicated as written communication, because one needs to be efficient in writing in order to be an effective communicator (Awang Sariyan, 2004). For a writer to be able to write effectively, he or she must be able to aim his/her writing at the needs of the target group. Thus, this requires different skills such as academic writing or narrative writing skill (Tindal & Marston, 1990). Furthermore, when a written piece of work is considered good writing, the product should also be able to show the development of knowledge and suitability of language register according to the discipline and the level of target readers. Development in writing involves the presentation of ideas, the correct use of language, grammar, elaboration and the ability to develop them into a paragraph (Abdullah 1996; Kementerian Malaysia, 2000).

Besides that, clarity, coherence and focus of the writing are also elements of good writing, and many writers, especially students failed in their writing due to lack of these elements (Carroll, 1990). Faridah Serajul Haq, Nooreiny Maarof and Raja Mohd. Fauzi Raja Musa (2001) in their study with a group of secondary school students evaluating narratives in terms of the dimensions of ideas, organization, voice, word choice, fluency and writing convention indicated that students have problems in writing conventions but did better for ideas and organization.

Another reason why students are unable to write to the expected benchmark set is the lack of general knowledge in order to expand and elaborate the issue discussed in their writing (Jamaludin Haji Badusah & Mohamed Amin Embi, 2006) and this is due to students' lack of reading (Abdullah, 1996; Howie 1989). Even if students are writing in their mother tongue or in their instructional language, such as Malay language, the language of instruction in the Malaysian education system, it can be seen that those students are not proficient in their writing (Zamri & Zarina, 2001; Bukari Kadam, Sabariah Samsuri, Rosmini Md. Salleh & Zamri Mahamod, 2008). The obvious problems faced by students are related to language accuracy including spelling, punctuations (Sabar Hj. Mohamad, Esa Mohamad and Zamri Mahamod (2008),

morphology and syntax (Awang Sariyan, 1980; Nor Zaiton Hanafi, Nor Azura Mohd Salleh & Zamri Mahamod, 2008).

Furthermore, accuracy in writing is also caused by writing strategies used by students. When students write, they have a tendency to change, transfer, sentence structure, morpheme, and words that are inappropriate in their writing (Corder, 1981) and those in turn, will lead to errors in their writing. Committing errors is a part of the process in writing that is experienced by all language learners before they become competent writers. Therefore, it is important to analyse the students' writing errors to understand areas they are weak at so that as educators, we can help students to develop their writing skills.

The Study

This paper is based on a research conducted on Malaysian secondary school students and looks at the students' writing performance in Malay language. This research covers five areas or zones in Malaysia; north (Kedah), east coast (Kelantan), central (Negeri Sembilan) and in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). The objectives of this study are to investigate Malay language writing proficiency level among secondary school students and to understand the factors that contribute to students' writing performance. This paper discusses students' writing performance from all the five zones. Besides that, the level of students' performance in writing in relation to zone, gender, race and language used will also be discussed.

The research involved 1,600 Form Four students from the five zones mentioned. Students from each zone are selected randomly by teachers from the schools. These students have taken their PMR examination and one of the compulsory subjects in the examination is Malay language. The students race composition are as follows; 877 (57.6%) Malays, 154 (10.1) Chinese, 54 (3.5%) Indians, 66 (4.3%) Ibans, 30 (2.0%) Kadazans and 342 (22.5%) from other ethnic groups. These students are from different educational streams: science, accounts, arts and technical and other streams (such as applied science and agriculture). Each student is required to write an essay. However, only 1,523 essays were returned; 703 (46.1%) science stream students, 242 (15.9%) accounts stream students, 408 (26.8%) arts stream students, 44 (2.9%) technical stream students and 127 (8.4%) students from other streams of study.

The Procedure

The students were given a stimulus-based writing task. This writing task mirrors the task given in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) Examination. The essay is a guided essay in which the students were required to develop their writing based on pictures given. Each picture depicts a different activity. The students were required to write a 150-to-200-word essay in Malay language. The topic was familiar to them as they had discussed this topic earlier with their teachers.

This group of students has been taught the seven types of stimulus in the syllabus such as diagrams, cartoon illustrations, plan, advertisements, an extract and notes earlier in the classroom.

The stimulus-based writing task used for this study is based on a set of cartoon illustrations of four activities that the students could carry out during their free time. Based on the pictures given, the students were required to explain and elaborate on the activities namely a picnic, camping, outdoor games and reading. From the teacher's syllabus, the objectives of stimulus-based writing exercise are to test the overall understanding of the students on the stimulus, such as to gauge their ability in making interpretation, to test their ability in analyzing the stimulus and lastly to test their knowledge on current issues. Upon closer inspection, it seems that various competencies are emphasized in assessing the students' writing. This is in tandem with the current perspective on literacy which sees literacy as beyond basic competencies such as reading and writing.

The marking scheme for the stimulus-based writing indicates that a good writing must fulfill the conditions that have been set, namely it should fulfill the task stated in the question, should have adequate important points, should have relevant ideas expressed in an orderly manner. Furthermore, the writing should use correct grammar, variety of vocabulary and correct vocabulary, correct spelling and punctuation, and a complete discourse which includes interesting expressions. The students' writings are examined and graded based on the marking scheme that has been determined. The purpose is to look at the reasons and link between students' abilities and mistakes made in the writing exercise.

The grading of writing task is based on SPM marking scheme; Excellent (26-30 marks), Distinction (20-25 marks), Satisfactory (15-19 marks), Less-Satisfactory (10-14 marks) and Minimal Achievement (01-09 marks). However, for the purpose of this study and data analysis, a different structure of the marking scheme was developed. They are Excellent (20-30 marks), Satisfactory (15-19 marks) and Weak (01-14 marks). The results are then transferred to SPSS and categorized as 3 = Excellent, 2 = Satisfactory and 1 = Weak. These data are then analyzed using descriptive analysis.

A set of questionnaire was distributed to the students to obtain the students' background information such as their language proficiency level, Malay language results in PMR, social background, academic streams, language used at home and others. The data gathered from the questionnaire were then cross-tabulated to understand the factors that might have contributed to students' writing performance.

Findings

This section starts by discussing the writing proficiency level among secondary school students. The second part will discuss the factors that contribute to students' writing proficiency which will focus on language used, discourse and idea conceptualization. In language used, the focus is on sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation while

discourse looks at the use of interesting phrases. The ideas presented in the writings are evaluated holistically by looking at the clarity, maturity and relevance of ideas presented.

Writing proficiency level

The essays were examined and classified into three levels; Excellent (20-30 marks), Satisfactory (15-19 marks) and Weak (01-14 marks). The marking and classification of essays are made by examiners who are experienced teachers. Marks are awarded according to the levels and later analysed.

Data indicate that majority of students are on satisfactory level (61.9%), and excellent level (25.5%). Findings show that although Malay language has been taught since primary school and it is the national language, students are still not proficient in the language. These students need more help to improve their writing skill, and these findings also support the worries that some academicians have concerning the declining state of Malay language proficiency of the students.

Bearing in mind that these students have completed Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) (Form 3) and sat for the Malay language paper, it is interesting to examine whether the students' achievement in PMR Malay language paper is related to their writing proficiency in Form 4. The data reveals a very interesting result. Within the excellent students in PMR (grade A in Malay language paper), only 40.8% remained on excellent level and 51.4% on satisfactory level, whereas within the satisfactory level in PMR (grade B and C) 69.3% continues to be on the same level and 15.9% have moved to excellent level. As for the weak students in PMR (grade D and E) 67.3% have increased their level of writing proficiency to satisfactory, and 7.7% to excellent level. The data proves that PMR results have no relation with the present students' performance.

With regard to school zones, results from the analysis reveal that students in the excellent category are from the eastern zone (Kelantan) which is 37.8%, whereas Sarawak has the least number of students in this category (9.5%). As a matter of fact, most students from Sarawak are on the satisfactory level. The data also shows that students from Negeri Sembilan are weak in writing in Malay language, which is 38.2% from the overall percentage of weak students from all zones.

As mentioned earlier, the students are from different academic streams; science, accounts, arts, and technical. When further analyzed, the data reveals that students from the Science stream are in the excellent category (67.4%); most probably this is due to the number of students in science streams, which cover the largest number of students in this study. However, when the overall results were analyzed, it is found that only 17.3% of the science stream students are in the excellent writing category and 25% of them are on the satisfactory level. A startling discovery is within the arts stream students; it is found that the students did not do well in writing. 72.5% of them are on satisfactory level and only 13% are on excellent level. This shows that we may have been incorrect in assuming that arts stream students would do better in Malay language writing. The assumption is based on the nature of these students' learning environment. Most subjects in art streams

are taught in Malay language and require the students to write in Malay language. In other words, these students have been exposed to the language and this environment would have provided them with some guidance or given them more opportunity to learn the language compared to students from other streams, and thus they should not have any problems writing in Malay language. Thus the findings show that the students' weakness in writing has no relation to level of language exposure in class.

Looking more closely at the level of writing proficiency, the data reveal that students from almost all races are on satisfactory level. However, within races, Iban students obtained the highest percentage on satisfactory level (83.3%) and Malay students obtained the highest percentage on excellent level (30.3%). When the students' races were compared against the writing marks, the data show that Malay students scored the highest percentage on the excellent level (68.4%). The study further looks into the relationship between the students' performance and the language they use at home. 70.2% of the students communicate in Malay language at home, and within that number only 25.6% of the students are on excellent level. This indicates that the language used at home does not play an important role in the students' writing performance. For example, among the Malay students, 97.9% of them communicate in Malay language at home, however only 30.3% of them are on excellent level. Similarly, among the Kadazans, 86.7% of them use Malay language at home but only 26.7% are on excellent level.

Going for extra tuition has been a trend in Malaysia as parents and students believe that extra tuition can help improve the students' academic performance in examinations. When the students were asked if they had attended tuition for Malay language, only 9.8% attended, and within this group only 18.1% are in excellent level, and 14.1% are still weak in writing, compared to those who did not attend any tuition class, 26.5% are excellent in their writing and only 7.5% are weak in their writing. This study shows that going for extra tuition has no direct co-relation with the students' level of writing proficiency.

Factors that contribute to students' writing proficiency level

This study further investigates the factors that contribute to the students' writing proficiency by examining important components in writing assessment. The components are language used, discourse and idea conceptualization. In language used, focus is on sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation errors, whereas in discourse, elements such as interesting phrases are focused on. The other important component is idea conceptualization which looks at clarity, maturity and relevance of ideas. This section discusses findings based on quantitative descriptive analysis and qualitative descriptive approach.

Language used

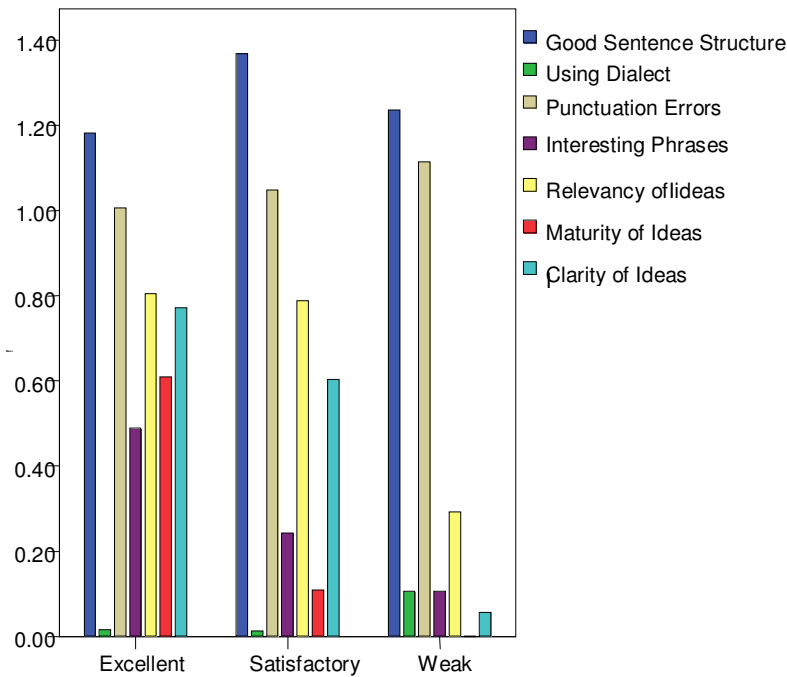


Chart 1: Marks for Writing

Chart 1 shows an overview of students' writing performance versus the factors that contribute to the students' writing performance. In general, all students are able to write in good sentence structure (71.7%). This proves that they have no problem in constructing sentences. However, one obvious problem faced by the students is punctuation. The punctuation in this context includes spelling, capital letters, the position of prefix "di" and suffix "lah" and "kan" and simplification of word. Chart 2 shows that most students have committed the same errors in their writing, even the students on the excellent level make mistakes in punctuation (25%). With regard to conceptualization of ideas, it is revealed that students in the high performance category are able to conceptualize ideas better. Essays that are considered excellent must incorporate interesting phrases, relevant, matured and clear ideas. Most weak essays in this study fail to demonstrate relevance (70.7%), maturity (100%) and clarity of ideas (94.5%). In addition, they also fail to include interesting phrases (89.4%). This indicates that essay writing practices in class should be more focused on construction of ideas as it is an important feature.

The study further investigates the students' writing performance and compares it with the location of schools to investigate whether the location of schools plays any role in the students' performance in terms of sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation errors. Chart 2 shows that there are no major differences in students' performance between urban and rural schools. Rural school students could produce relevant ideas (55.5%), and clear ideas (59.2%) in their writing but they could not produce mature essays (32.7%). It is not surprising to find that students from rural schools like to use

dialects (71.4%). These students use dialects at home and may get the impression that words that they use at home are the standard variety and hence, acceptable in formal writing. This indicates that the influence of dialect or mother tongue is stronger in rural schools compared to urban schools in the students' writing.

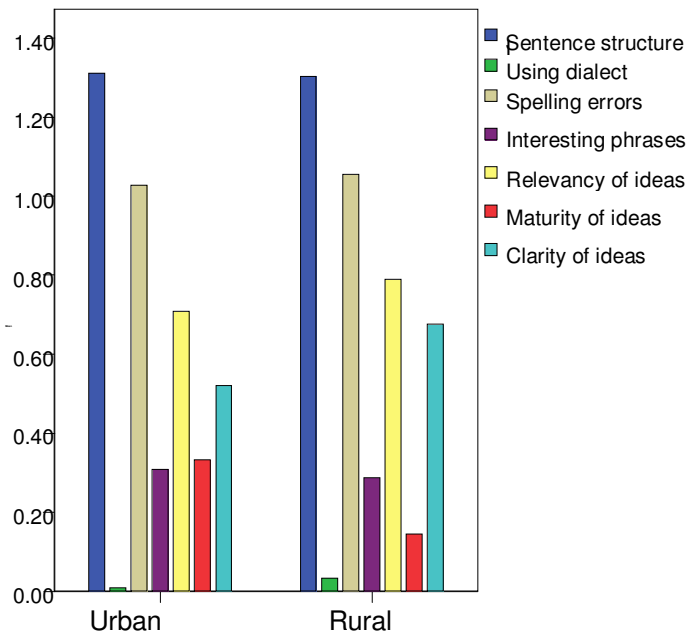


Chart 2: Location of schools

General Spelling Errors

Errors in spelling can impact students' writing. Although most errors detected in the essays have little effect on reader's comprehension, the errors could affect writing coherence. Types of spelling errors found are capitalization, prefix "di", suffixes "lah" and "kan", spelling, and abbreviations.

Capitalizations

Misuse of capital letters in sentences are very obvious. Errors made at the beginning of sentences could be due to students' carelessness or lackadaisical attitude as they could have assumed that capitalizations are not very important in writing. When capitalization errors are detected in the middle of a sentence, there is a high possibility that the students might have been confused between a noun and a proper noun. Eventhough the errors may not have an acute negative impact on the essays, nevertheless this type of mistake must be taken seriously by students and teachers. Below are examples of errors made by the students:

068	...kita akan tertekan. jadi gunalah...; di tepi pantai. ia boleh...; di hutan. kerana ...; (+ 6 kesalahan lagi)	Beginning of a sentence
084	...dan Alam Sekitar kepada...	Not a proper name
008	Banyak Iklan ...	Not a proper name
008	...dan mengemas rumah. banyak lagi aktiviti... ...dan lain-lain. aktiviti ini dapatpengatahuan kita. mengisi masa lapang...	Beginning of a sentence
015	di sekeliling kita. dengan melakukan ...	Beginning of a sentence
038	siaran Hiburan ...; ...rakan-rakan Juga...; ..ia Juga...;	Not a proper name

Prefix “di” to indicate actions and positions/directions

Another error discovered in the writings is the prefix “*di*”. In Malay language, this prefix is used to indicate an action and preposition as discussed by Maslida Yusof (2009). As a marker for an action, the prefix “*di*” must be positioned close to the word, whereas as a preposition, “*di*” must be positioned apart from the word. This error is found in the students’ essays probably because they were confused by the functions of “*di*”. For examples: *dipadang* (at the field), *dirumah* (at home), *dimasa* (at that time), and *dikalangan* (among). The use of the prefix “*di*” in those examples should be separated from the main word, whereas “*di kasihi*” (to be loved) should be positioned close to the main word because it is a verb.

Suffixes “lah” and “kan”

The use of suffixes “*lah*” and “*kan*” in Malay language at the end of a main word should be attached to the main word to form a correct word/ spelling. However, many students made mistakes. Examples of the mistakes are:

hargai lah, semesti nya; tangan lah; merosak kan, harus lah...; merehat kan; menerang kan; ...bergembira lah...; melaku kan...; terutama nya...; amat lah; jadikan lah ...;

Spelling

Although the students were taught Malay language formally since they were in standard one, they still could not spell correctly. One of the errors detected in the essay is adding or omitting alphabets in certain words. For example in the word “*kabar*”, the alphabet “*h*” is omitted, whereas in “*berkhelah*”, the alphabet “*h*” is added. These mistakes could be attributed to the pronunciation of the words. In the word “*khabar*” the [h] is not pronounced but is needed in the spelling. The same mistake happens in “*berkhelah*” where “*h*” is omitted.

Other spelling errors detected are *mengarapatkan, berfaedak, memaina, di terpeng pantan, menanben makanan* and *sanang*. These spelling errors could be influenced by the

students' dialects. The students might have spelled the words according to the way it is pronounced in their dialects.

Besides that, English words are also found in some essays, such as "*impaks*", "*stress*" and "*guitar*". The words were borrowed from English, however they were spelt according to the Malay language spelling conventions. This can be assumed that the students could not differentiate the spelling conventions between Malay language and English.

Using abbreviation

There are also students who have used abbreviations in their essays. Using abbreviation is considered an error in writing and marks will be deducted when assessing students' writing. Some examples of abbreviations found in the students' writings are "*otot2*" and "*perkara2*". In Malay language, reduplication is to indicate plurality but instead the students used the numeral "2" to indicate plurality. Other examples of abbreviations that are identified as errors in Malay language are "*nak*", "*t'luang*" and "*tak*". The spelling of these words was contracted based on how they are used in spoken language. On the other hand, using abbreviation according to the sound is a trend among school children especially those who have been using the short message system (SMS) in sending messages via handphones. As a result, students may have thought that it is acceptable to use SMS spelling system in their writing. Therefore, they just transferred the SMS way of spelling to formal writing. The influence of short messages impact to development of students' writing even further in future.

Discourse

This study looks at use of *interesting phrases* in the students' essays. In the Malay language marking scheme, interesting phrases are considered as an important component that students must have in their writing to obtain good marks. Using idiomatic expressions, *pantun*, slogans, engaging expressions, an extract, wise sayings, the *hadith*, poetic vocabulary and meanings sourced from *Al-Quran* should be included in their writings as these will help them secure good marks in writing. The data show that 67.3% of the students did not use any interesting phrases in their essays. Out of 25.5% on the excellent level, only 12.5% have included interesting phrases in their writings. That is only about 50% of the excellent writings. As for the satisfactory level, most of the essays do not have any interesting phrases. Only 15% out of 61.9% of those on the satisfactory level have used interesting phrases. This is less than half of the essays. In all the zones, students from Sarawak use the least amount of interesting phrases (1.6%). However, when both urban and rural schools are compared, the data show no difference in performance in both school types. Both have about the same percentage of interesting phrases (13.9% - urban and 14.4% - rural) usage. The interesting phrases that are often used in the students' writing are idioms. Only a few students have used slogans. The example of slogans used by students are as below:

Pemuda bangsa Negara; pemudi tiang Negara
Membaca itu jambatan ilmu

As for idioms, most students have used almost similar idioms. This is probably because of the topic of the essay which is "Aktiviti masa lapang/ Activities during free time". Students might have been taught the same type of idioms related to the topic because from the data (essays) it shows that most of them used the same idioms for the same situation. For example, five (5) out of six (6) essays picked from the same school have used the same idiom "masa itu emas" (time is gold) to indicate the importance of time. Another idiom regularly used by the students is "umpama katak di bawah tempurung", which means that one should not isolate oneself.

Below are some idioms regularly used by the students:

"bagai aur dengan tebing"

"Katak di bawah tempurung"

"Bersatu kita teguh bercerai kita roboh"

"Bagai anjing dengan kucing"

"Bulat air kerana pembetung, bulat kata kerana muafakat"

"Terlajak perahu boleh berundur, terlajak kata kita hancur"

Conclusion

From the findings of this study, we can conclude that the students' writing proficiency generally fall in the satisfactory category. The students' weaknesses can be divided into a few categories, however the most obvious weakness in essay writing among the Form Four students is the maturity level of ideas in their essays. The development of ideas is not on par with the standard of Malay language expected of their age. In addition, at this stage of learning, students should have been able to think more critically and able to give mature examples to support their points or ideas in their essays. Maturity of writing is seen to be closely linked to the ability in developing ideas.

An excellent piece of writing is a writing that is able to demonstrate the use of discourse, such as diversity in language used which includes interesting phrases. However, most students in this study were not able to do so. It is very clear that the students have memorized interesting phrases and idioms given by their teachers. As a result, the same idioms have been used by most of the students.

Lastly, the proficiency level of writing in Malay language among school students need to be looked into more seriously. This study shows that the main weakness of the students' writing is their inability to write maturely and critically. The students were not able to establish mature and critical thinking skills in their writing. Thus, students should be exposed to different types of reading materials, such as newspapers, magazines, and current issues to build up their general knowledge. Exposure to current issues may help them to develop their critical thinking skill. Thus, when students have the experience and knowledge of current issues, they will be able to discuss issues in their writing intelligently.

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