Students' Perceptions of Distance Language Learning in Vocational Training

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact in almost all areas of human activity around the world with education being unquestionably affected as well. Universities and Vocational Training Institutes have been forced to close their doors in an effort to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. To ensure pedagogical continuity, distance learning courses have been recommended as immediate alternatives. The purpose of this contribution is to investigate how students of Vocational Training Institutes perceive distance education and effectiveness of online foreign language teaching. To this end, a quantitative research based on an online survey was conducted, which included 206, students of five (5) public Vocational Training Institutes and different specialties. The questions were intended to examine the participants' views on the use of platforms and the collaborative tools, the utility of the educational materials and activities proposed, the learning outcomes in the target language, and, the benefits and limitations of distance synchronous language learning.

Keywords: distance learning, language learning, students 'perceptions, vocational training

Introduction

From the beginning of the COVID-19 global crisis, educational institutions around the world closed, following hygiene protocols, and started delivering online courses. Therefore, educators were forced to create virtual classrooms so as to guarantee pedagogical continuity (Krystalli, 2020). The impact of this crisis on the quality and conditions of learning has been immense (Unesco, 2020). Although many are reluctant to admit it, we are fully entering the era of distance learning, which presents both advantages and challenges for learners, ie. motivation, engagement and perseverance, for teachers, ie. course design and mentoring of learners (Karsenti, Poellhuber, Roy and Parent, 2020). To assure the quality of foreign language in the vocational field, teachers of language for special purposes had to adapt to the new circumstances and revise their teachings methods in order to offer relevant learning content and activities to their students. It is clear that beyond goodwill and even mastery of

technological tools, it can be difficult to change training strategies, while respecting the (techno) pedagogical design initially thought (Verchier, & Lison, 2020: 128). Switching lectures from a face -to- face to a virtual one may be challenging as it demands a great deal of effort (Krystalli, 2020). This change becomes more difficult in institutions where students have previous experience. This is the case of public Vocational Training Institutes (VTI) in Greece where courses were traditionally delivered face-to-face. For this reason, we found it intriguing to investigate the students' views of online foreign language teaching as it was not their choice but a solution of necessity chosen in order to continue their studies during the pandemic. The conclusions that will emerge from this research will be useful in the future, when designing an online foreign language course.

In this article we aimed to answer the following key questions:

- What are the participants' views about the utility of the collaborative tools used, the learning materials and the activities proposed during the French online course?
- Which delivery method do the participants prefer for language learning?
- What are the participants' opinions about online assessment?
- What changes or added components do participants suggest for a future online French course?

Distance Education and Language Learning

Distance education (DE) started as an alternative for many individuals whose lifestyles, location, or time constraints prevented them from attending face-to-face educational programs (Chamorro, 2018). The first two generations of DE aimed at producing and distributing educational materials with the means allowed by the technology of the day, but without paying attention to the lack of interactive communication between students and teachers (Katz, 2002). During the last two decades, third generation of online teaching and learning, have seen significant changes due to the advancement of the internet and digital technologies. The World Wide Web has made information access and distribution of educational content available to a large fraction of the world's population and helped to move DE to the digital era (Fidalgo, Thormann & Kulyk, et *al.,* 2020). As a result of the development of enhanced third generation distance learning, systems which include interactive digital technologies, learning activity has been redefined to include teacher–student interaction (Katz, 2002). Thanks to this relationship with the digital technologies, DE or distance learning is also called e-learning or online learning (Krystalli, 2020). DE is defined as any type of educational activity in which the participants are at a distance from each other--in other words, are separated in space. Participants may also be separated in time but this is not always the case (asynchronous vs. synchronous learning?) (iNACOL, 2011). Hartnett defines online learning as "a form of distance education mediated by technological tools where learners are geographically separated from the instructor and the main institution" (2016, 7). The term "online learning" is used interchangeably with Virtual learning, Cyber learning and e-learning (iNACOL, 2011). Among the benefits of distance online education mentioned in the literature, the most important is the ability to overcome temporal and spatial restrictions of traditional face-to-face instruction (Bates, 2005). Another important benefit of this form of learning is greater equity of access. As Hartnett (2016) argues online learning gives the possibility to people previously excluded from education due to personal or financial issues, disabilities or lack of time and course availability, to participate in education. Online courses typically take place in a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) or LMS (Learning Management System). "The

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term online language learning (OLL) can refer to a number of learning arrangements: A Web-facilitated class, a blended or hybrid course, or a fully virtual or online course" (Blake, 2011, 9). Several studies have focused on the effectiveness of the methods used and activities proposed in an online second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) course. Research has demonstrated that effective online language learning depends on the learning environment, pedagogical materials, Web-based task design, and individual learner differences (Blake, 2008). Based on findings from previous research, Vorobel and Kim (2012) suggested five key features that make online foreign language courses effective: clear instructions, student-teacher interaction, student-student interaction, use of audio text, and development of all communication language skills. In VTI the objective of FL learning is students is to acquire skills and competencies that can meet language needs specific to the area of a specialty. Therefore, in course language for specials purposes the methodology, the content, the objectives, the materials and the assessment practices must stem from specific, target language used based on an identified set of specialized needs (Trace, Hudson & Brown, 2015).

Methodology

Research design and methods

This research was conducted at five (5) public VIT in Thessaloniki, Greece, between January and February 2021. One of them is supervised by the Ministry of Tourism while the others by the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of distance learning VTI students and the effectiveness of online foreign language teaching, specifically the French language, that is taught as a compulsory course. In order to collect in-depth information an online survey was conducted to collect the data. The survey was created with Google Forms. Participants were asked to answer an online questionnaire which contained 9 closed-ended questions and 3 open-ended questions. The research involved 206 students from 4 different specialties, ie. Culinary Technician-Chef, Bakery & Pastry Art Technician, Executive Officer in Management and Finance in the field of Tourism, Executive in Air Transport Services. Participants were taught French as a foreign language two (2) hours per week during the winter semester. Classes were carried out entirely online and synchronously, via two platforms: . Zoom and Teams. Additionally, learning materials and quizzes were provided asynchronously via E-courses Management Systems for the VIT, and were supervised by the Ministry of Education and Research. Microsoft Teams was used for the distribution of education materials in the VIT supervised by the Ministry of Tourism.

The questionnaire's closed-ended questions aimed to outline the profile of the participants, (gender, age and specialty), and get information on the utility of the collaborative tools and the learning materials used to the course. Students were asked to rate the activities proposed as tools of motivation and express their opinion on online assessment. Additionally, participants were asked to indicate the impact of online learning on the learning outcomes and the progress they have made in the development of specific communication linguistic skills in the target language during the semester. The three open-ended questions aimed to collect data on students' views about foreign language distance learning, online assessment as well as students' suggestions about the structure and content of an online language learning course.

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Data collection and analysis

The participant sample used in the study was evenly split across males and females, as shown by the first question (table 1). The majority of participants (152 people) are 18-25 years old, while 22 participants are over 40 years old, 18 are between 26-30 years old, 9 are between 31-35 years old and 6 are between 36-40. In terms of specialties the sample is distributed as follows (table 1): the majority of the participants (108) study Culinary Art, 56 study Bakery and Pastry Art, 33 of the participants study Management and Finance in the Field of Tourism and only 9 out of 206 study in the field of Air Transport Services.

Table 1: Participants Profile

Variable Label	Percentages		N
Gender	51% female 49% male		206
Age	73% 8,7 % 9 3 11	18-25 years 26-30 years 31-35 years 36-40 years > 40 years	206
Specialty	53% 27% 15,5% 4,5 %	Culinary Art Bakery and Pastry Art Management and Finance in the Field of Tourism Air Transport Services	206

In question 4 participants were asked to evaluate the utility of the collaboration tools in the foreign language online classes. In the virtual classroom, we used breakout rooms for speaking and written mediation activities. Students worked in small groups and collaborated to complete their activities during a breakout room session. They then shared their screens to present their work to the rest of the classroom. Research has demonstrated that interaction, facilitates language learning and motivates students to continue improving their language skills (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2020). Therefore, fostering positive group dynamics can be surely relevant to promoting motivational condition in classrooms (Jeong, 2019). The chatbox was used to provide short answers. Screen sharing allowed teacher to navigate the web when required. Participants indicated that sharing screen and files was useful enough (137 participants out of 206). 90 participants found the breakout rooms useful, while 67 preferred the whiteboard and 48 the chat (fig. 1).
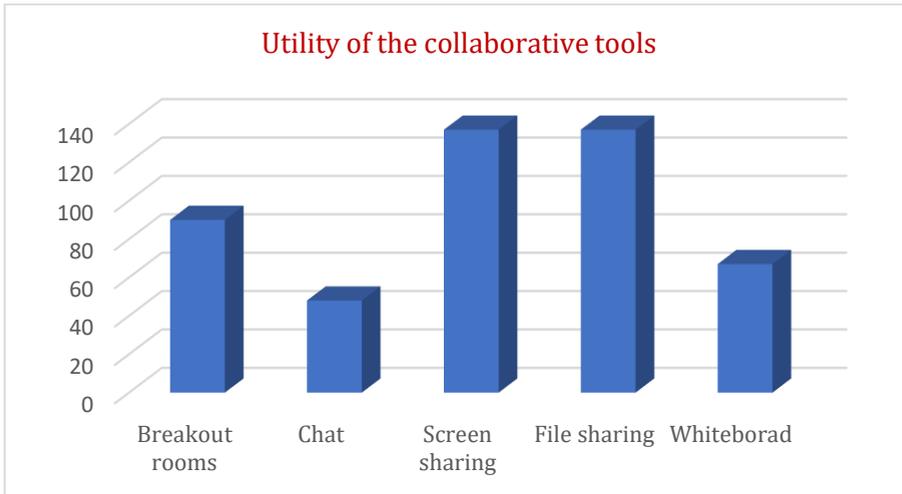
Figure 1: Utility of the collaborative tools

Question 5 aimed to explore which communicative language activity, do participants think they developed most during online learning. As we can see in Figure 2, participants argued that they most developed receptive activities, with 65 participants arguing that they have improved more reading skills and 46 listening skills. Students answer selection was justified by the fact that the majority of interactive online activities and quizzes suggested to students, were comprehension type of activities. Few participants believe that they have improved in productive activities, 37 believe that they have progressed in writing and 30 in speaking. This is mostly because they were reluctant to speak the target language during the lessons. This also explains the small number of students (only 10 out of 206) who believe that they have improved in oral medication. As for the written mediation only 18 participants made progress during the online classes.
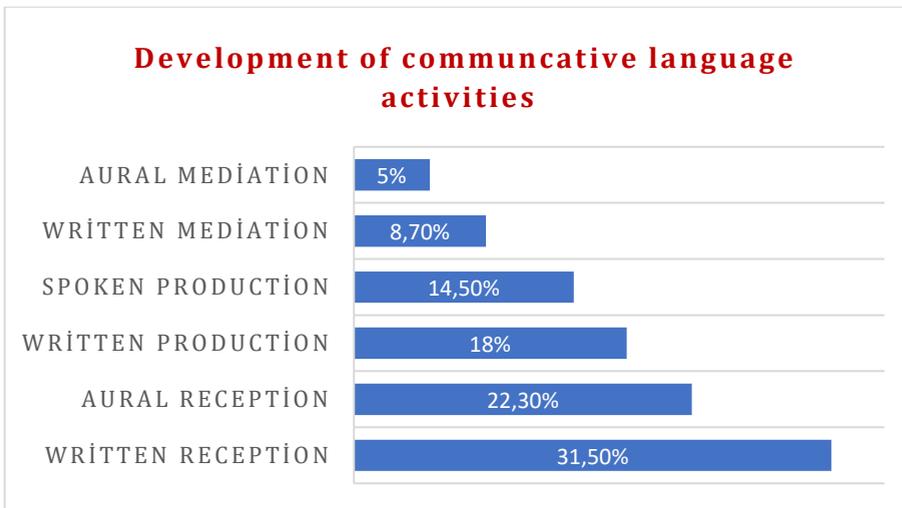

Figure 2. Development of communicative language activities

Question 6 asked students to indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is the minimum and 5 is the maximum) the usefulness of the educational materials provided by the teacher during the online course. The materials used during the classes were the following: YouTube videos, online dictionaries and grammars, audio and written documents in French, online terminology glossaries and online magazines and newspapers. By providing access to learning materials available on the internet, new technologies can satisfy the individual needs of students (Krystalli, Arvanitis, Panagiotidis, 2020). From the findings emerged (fig. 3), the majority of participants highly appreciated the materials provided, 57% indicated level 5, while 29% consider the materials to be useful at level 4 and for 14% of the participants materials are useful at level 3.
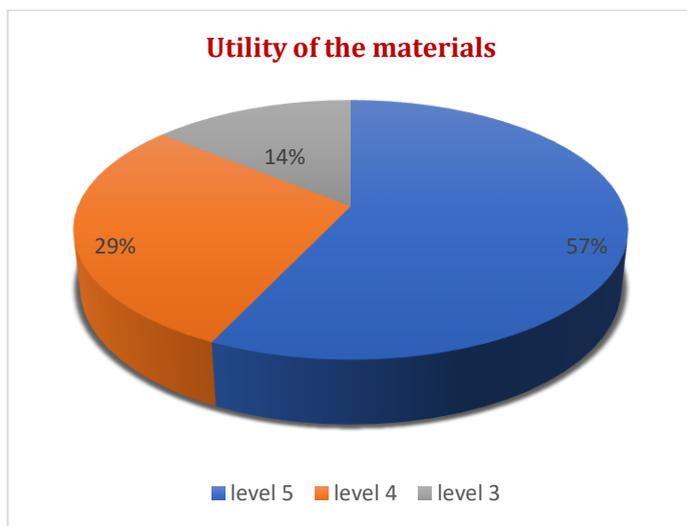

Figure 3: Utility of the materials suggested during the course

In question 7, participants were asked to choose which type of the most frequently suggested activities they found more motivational. More specifically, to increase engagement and motivation, throughout the semester we suggested different types of interactive activities and quizzes to students, created with Class marker and Worldwall. The interactive activities and quizzes aimed to promote a better understanding of various linguistic phenomena. Additionally, participants were asked to record their productions and upload their mp3 files to e-classes. Finally, in order to practice the terminology of each specialty, we suggested several written mediation activities. According to findings, the activities that were most appreciated in terms of motivation, were the interactive online activities (51%) and the online quizzes (32%). This preference is probably due to the possibility of immediate feedback and self-assessment offered by the applications used to create online activities and quizzes. Self-assessment and immediate feedback allowed students to judge the quality of their work and effort as well as the level of the knowledge acquired (Krystalli, Arvanitis, 2018). Participants found the aural production activities (11%) and the written mediation activities (6%) significantly less motivational.
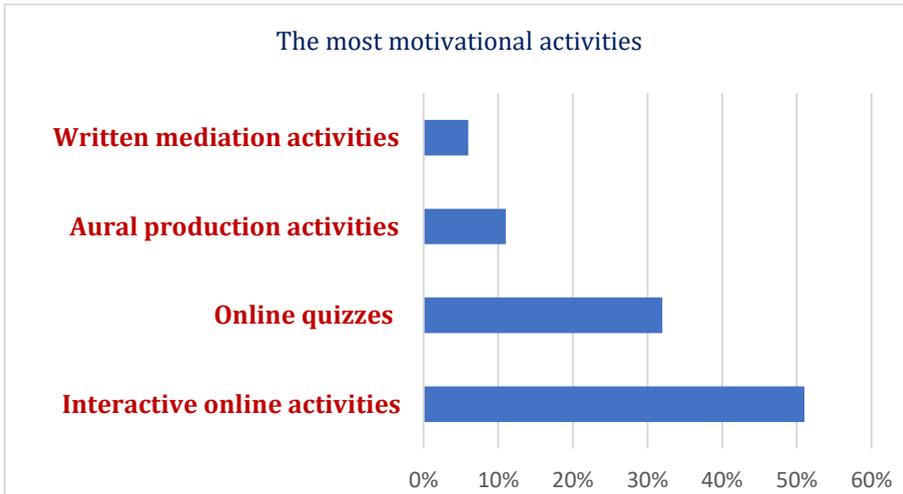
Figure 4. Activities that enhance students' motivation

The purpose of questions 8 and 9 was to explore students preferred delivery method of the French language learning. As part of their answer, participants had to state the reasoning behind choosing a specific delivery method. We found that 123 students preferred in-person classes, 64 preferred hybrid classes and only 19 students preferred online classes (fig. 5)
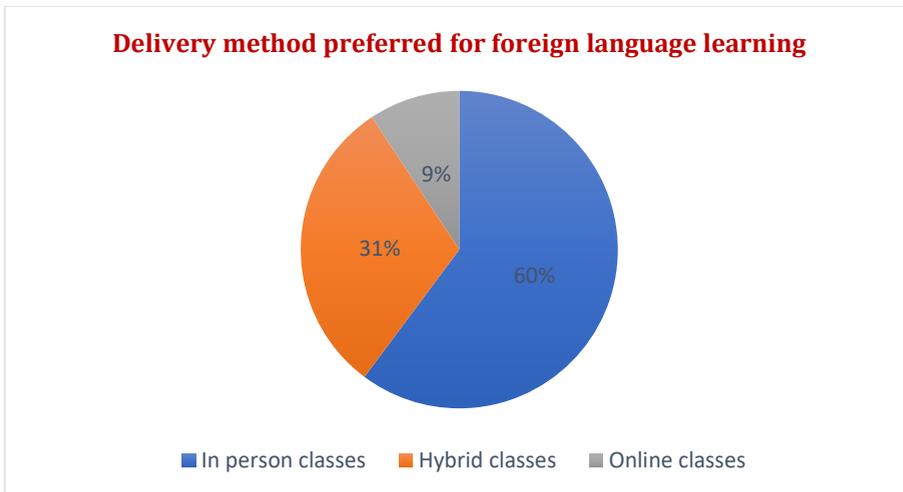

Figure 5. Delivery method preferred for foreign language learning

In question 9, an open-ended question, participants provided a justification for their choice made in the previous question. The reason for preferring in-person classes was the ability to socially interact with both classmates and teachers. Participants also argued that internet connection problems and poor sound and screen image quality, during online classes, had a negative impact in their concertation. For this reason, they think that face-to-face teaching is more effective. Participants who had a positive attitude towards virtual teaching, appreciated the use of the collaboration tools and referred to several benefits of online classes such as the

possibility to select the study location and save time and money, since online education decreases travel time. Many participants argued that they would prefer hybrid courses that combine online and face-to-face learning. They think that blended teaching has many advantages with the primary ones being flexibility as they could work in their own pace, organizing their time independently.

Moreover, they argued that during face-to face classes students had the opportunity to ask questions while better grasping concepts and linguistic phenomena.

In question 10 the participants were asked to choose whether they prefer online assessment or the traditional written assessment for the foreign language course. According to the findings (fig. 6), the majority of the students (153 out of 206) prefer online exams while 53 students prefer paper-based exams. In the following question (11) students were asked to explain the reasons of their choices. Participants indicated that online tests and quizzes are more motivating because of instant feedback that helped them reflect on their learning. Additionally, many of them argued that they prefer to see their results and errors immediately after a test, while in the paper-based exam it usually took a long time for the feedback to be released by the examiner. Many participants preferred online quizzes since they are shorter and therefore less stressful. Participants preferring paper-based exams, argued that they are forced to be more prepared and focused in the classroom. Some participants argued that paper-based exams are more reliable because students cannot easily cheat. Many referred to the technology issues saying that they are not familiar enough with the software used in online examinations? Finally, participants referred to internet connection problems as an important drawback of online tests.
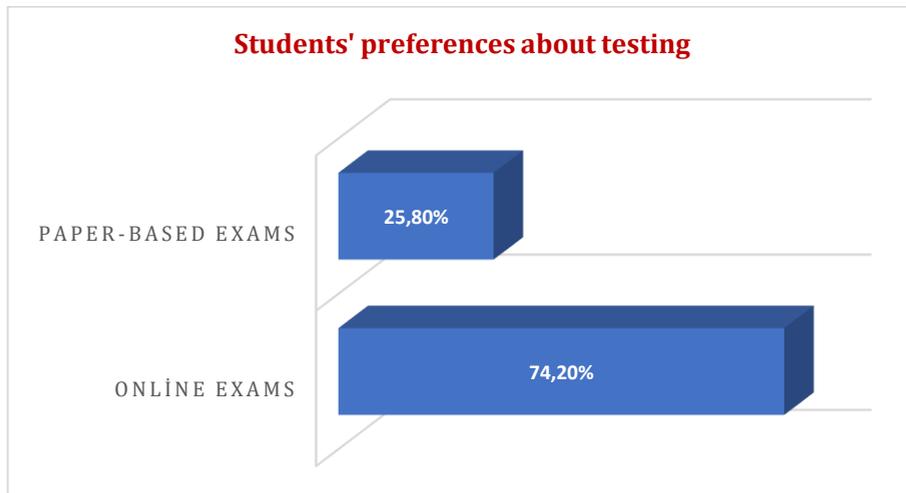

Figure 6: Students' preferences about testing

Regarding the last question (question 12), students' suggestions for a possible future online language course were the followings: more group work, more subtitled videos and oral interaction activities in the virtual classroom, less grammar activities and, an increase teaching hours. Participants have put forward pertinent suggestions and proposals that we should be taken into consideration when developing future online courses. First of all, group work maximizes the benefits for students in the classroom. As Alfares (2017: 248) argues "it

can be used to improve oral activities for language learners, to complete tasks that need discussion among learners, to share reading and listening activities, and to write cooperatively with other learners". As for the second suggestion, research has demonstrated that the use of subtitled videos help learners to better understand foreign language as they combine image, sound and text (Yang, 2020). Regarding participants' suggestion to increase teaching hours, we would like to underline that two teaching hours a week for learning a foreign language is not sufficient either in the traditional classroom or the virtual one. After all, the increase of teaching hours is the constant demand of foreign language teachers in Greece.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions about online language teaching in VTI. Students of five different public Institutes and four different specialties, attending French classes as an FL course during the winter semester 2020-21, participated in the research. These courses traditionally take place in-person, so the virtual classroom was not a choice but a necessity imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. French language in VTI is taught as a compulsory course. Our research tool was an online questionnaire of 12 questions given at the end of the winter semester. During online classes, students were provided with online interactive activities and quizzes based on multimodal texts and mainly captioned videos. The results of study showed that students preferred this type of activity more than others that were suggested to them. Actually, the combination of image, text and audio helps better understand linguistic phenomena in foreign language, especially when it comes to low level language proficiency as in this case that students were at A1 level. Visual learning is essential and effective and, should be used to complement and reinforce a more abstract approach to a subject (Pezzino, 2018). According to findings, the majority of students are not in favor of distance language learning and prefer face-to-face teaching of a foreign language, however a large percentage of students prefer online assessment (74%). With online assessments, students have the possibility to repeatedly practice similar questions and, at the same time, obtain immediate feedback. This is an important benefit in a constructivist teaching that helps people learn through exploring new things, making errors and reflecting on those experiences (Pezzino, 2018).

The students made interesting suggestions that language teachers should take into account when designing distance learning courses. The majority of participants, when asked what component should be added to an online FL course, chose group work. Previous research has found that mutual learning achieved within a group, where group members share their knowledge, contributes to a successful learning experience with better learning outcomes (Jeong, 2019). Therefore, since collaborative learning is considered to be effective in DE as well as in -person, we should propose more task-based group work and take advantage of the breakout rooms. Additionally, breakout rooms sessions facilitate interactions among students and enhance motivation (Hartnett, 2016).

We therefore conclude that instructional design, content, learning materials and type of activities positively or negatively affect students' perceptions of distance language learning. Thus, further research might focus on frameworks, learning scenarios, and task-based motivational and engaging activities in virtual classrooms as well as on the effective use of the collaborative tools.

New forms of teaching and interactions with students were formed/developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the distancing measures many teachers develop distance or hybrid courses online. We strongly believe that the end of the pandemic will mark the beginning of a new era for distance education improved thanks to the lessons we learned during the three semesters of compulsory online teaching. Moreover, the rapid increase in research demonstrates the academic community's interest in effective distance learning in a Digital Society.

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