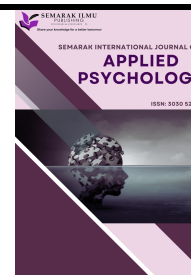




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# Between Silence and Anxiety: Exploring The Psychological Landscape of Esl/Efl Learners in Universities in Malaysia and Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

In multilingual university classrooms across Malaysia and Indonesia, English is commonly used as a medium of instruction. While English is considered a second language in Malaysia, it is taught as a foreign language in Indonesia. Despite its prominence in academic settings, many ESL/EFL learners in both countries continue to experience emotional and psychological challenges, particularly during English-speaking activities. One of the most critical but often overlooked issues is classroom silence, which may not stem from a lack of ability but from underlying anxiety and discomfort. Although previous studies have explored speaking anxiety in language learning, limited research has examined how such anxiety influences verbal participation in multilingual Southeast Asian classrooms. This study investigates the relationship between foreign language anxiety and classroom silence among ESL/EFL undergraduate students in Malaysia and Indonesia. The primary aim is to identify how anxiety contributes to learners' decisions to remain silent during English-speaking activities and to compare these patterns across two distinct sociolinguistic settings. A total of 51 undergraduate ESL/EFL learners participated in the study. Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and independent samples t-tests. The results show that most participants reported moderate to high levels of anxiety, particularly related to pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and fear of negative evaluation. A significant positive correlation was found between anxiety and classroom silence. Although Indonesian learners reported slightly higher anxiety and silence levels, the differences between the two groups were not statistically significant. The findings suggest that classroom silence is not merely a behavioural issue, but one deeply rooted in learners' emotional and cultural experiences. The study concludes that educators should adopt psychologically informed teaching strategies that reduce anxiety and encourage active participation in English-speaking tasks within multilingual undergraduate learning environments.

#### Keywords:

Foreign language anxiety, classroom silence, multilingual learners

## 1. Introduction

In multilingual societies such as Malaysia and Indonesia, English plays a prominent role in both educational and communicative domains. In Malaysia, English is institutionalised as a second

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language and is widely used in government, tertiary education, and business. In contrast, Indonesia classifies English as a foreign language, taught primarily in academic contexts and rarely spoken in daily life. Despite these sociolinguistic differences, both countries have positioned English as a core medium of instruction in higher education, particularly in efforts to promote internationalisation and global academic competitiveness [1].

While institutional policies support English use, ESL learners in these academic contexts often face emotional and psychological challenges beyond grammar and vocabulary mastery. Among the most critical is Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), a situation-specific form of anxiety that emerges during second or foreign language use. It often manifests as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, or test-related stress, all of which hinder learners' classroom participation and oral performance [2,3].

One of the most observable behavioural outcomes of FLA is classroom silence. While silence is sometimes misinterpreted as a lack of interest or disengagement, growing research suggests that it may actually reflect a coping strategy used by anxious learners to avoid embarrassment or failure [4]. In collectivist cultures like Malaysia and Indonesia, classroom silence may also reflect sociocultural values such as politeness, deference to authority, and fear of making public mistakes [1,5].

Studies in Malaysia indicate that undergraduate ESL learners often experience speaking anxiety due to limited vocabulary, fear of judgement, and low self-confidence. Many Malaysian undergraduates choose to remain silent to avoid being perceived as incompetent [6]. Communication apprehension and emotional vulnerability have been identified as predictors of ESL classroom anxiety [7]. When students feel misunderstood by peers or lecturers, they may withdraw from verbal participation altogether [5].

Despite the growth of global FLA literature, comparative cross-cultural studies involving Malaysia and Indonesia remain limited. Some studies focused solely on Malay learners in Malaysia and reported fear of negative evaluation as a dominant factor [8]. However, the intersection of FLA and classroom silence, especially across multilingual contexts with different cultural norms and language policies, is underexplored.

Given that most students in Malaysia and Indonesia speak multiple first languages (L1s) and often acquire English as a second or third language (L2/L3), their classroom experience is shaped by complex sociolinguistic and psychological dynamics. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the psychological landscape of ESL learners in universities in both countries, with specific attention to how foreign language anxiety contributes to classroom silence. Through a quantitative lens, this research aims to generate new insight into learner psychology and promote emotionally responsive ESL pedagogy in multilingual undergraduate learning environments.

### *1.1 Research Objectives*

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To determine the levels and types of foreign language anxiety (FLA) experienced by multilingual ESL learners in Malaysian and Indonesian universities.
2. To examine the relationship between FLA and classroom silence among these learners.
3. To explore the emotional and psychological factors that contribute to learners' silence during English-speaking activities.
4. To compare patterns of FLA-related classroom silence between ESL learners in Malaysia and Indonesia.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the levels and dominant types of foreign language anxiety (FLA) experienced by multilingual ESL learners in Malaysian and Indonesian universities?
2. What is the relationship between FLA and classroom silence among these learners?
3. What emotional and psychological factors influence learners' decisions to remain silent during English-speaking tasks?
4. Are there significant differences in FLA-related classroom silence between ESL learners in Malaysia and Indonesia?

## 1.3 Hypotheses

This study adopts a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and classroom silence among multilingual ESL/EFL learners in Malaysian and Indonesian universities.

Based on prior literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- $H_1$  (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a statistically significant relationship between foreign language anxiety and classroom silence among multilingual ESL learners.
- $H_0$  (Null Hypothesis): There is no statistically significant relationship between foreign language anxiety and classroom silence among multilingual ESL learners.

In this study:

- The independent variable is *foreign language anxiety (FLA)*.
- The dependent variable is *classroom silence*.

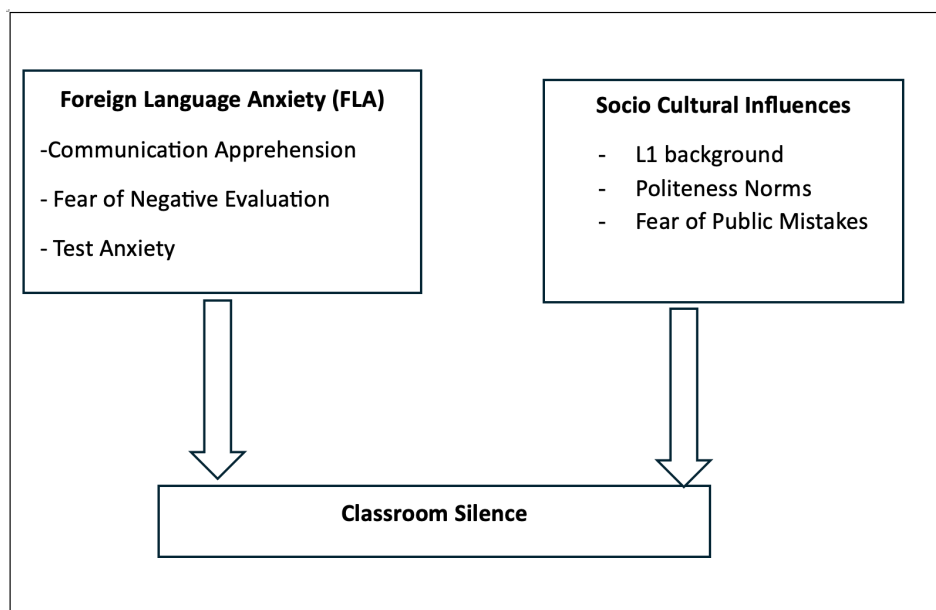
Additionally, the study will explore whether there are statistically significant differences in FLA-related silence between ESL learners in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Quantitative data will be analysed using:

- Pearson correlation to test the strength and direction of the relationship between FLA and classroom silence.
- Independent samples t-tests or ANOVA, where appropriate, to compare group differences based on country.

## 1.4 Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an integrated psychological and sociolinguistic framework to explore how Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) contributes to classroom silence among multilingual ESL learners in universities in Malaysia and Indonesia. The model emphasizes the influence of both individual emotional factors and sociocultural-contextual variables.



**Fig. 1.** Conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and classroom silence among multilingual ESL learners in Malaysia and Indonesia universities

The framework proposes that FLA manifested through communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety contributes directly to learners' silence in academic settings. This silence is not always a reflection of linguistic incompetence but often a strategic or emotional response to anxiety-inducing situations.

In addition, cultural and emotional factors such as learners' first language (L1) background, norms of politeness, and fear of public mistakes are theorised to shape how anxiety is experienced and expressed. These sociolinguistic elements may intensify the psychological effects of FLA, especially in multilingual classrooms where students constantly navigate between language systems and cultural expectations.

This conceptual model thus supports the study's broader aim: to understand how FLA and sociocultural dynamics interact to influence verbal participation in multilingual undergraduate learning environments.

## 2. Literature Review

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has received significant scholarly attention over the past two decades, particularly in multilingual and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. It was first conceptualized as a unique psychological construct involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation [1]. Subsequent research suggests that enjoyment and anxiety may coexist in language learning, revealing a complex emotional landscape faced by learners [2].

In Southeast Asia, studies have observed that Indonesian university students often experience speaking anxiety linked to limited vocabulary and pronunciation self-consciousness [9]. Peer collaboration has been found effective in reducing speaking-related FLA in Malaysian classrooms [10]. Cultural expectations also play a major role in shaping learners' classroom behaviours. For example, verbal reticence among Indonesian EFL learners has been attributed to collectivist norms and the hierarchical nature of classroom interactions [11].

Malaysian multilingual learners adopt several coping strategies, such as avoidance, mental rehearsal, and internal translation, to manage anxiety during English-speaking tasks [12]. These

strategies reflect how learners psychologically navigate their emotional and linguistic constraints. Cultural silence is frequently misunderstood as a lack of competence, when in fact it may represent a socio-affective response to anxiety-inducing environments [13].

Recent studies [14-16] have emphasized the importance of integrating cultural and emotional dimensions into ESL pedagogy across Southeast Asia. These findings support the rationale for conducting a comparative study involving learners from Malaysia and Indonesia.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

This study employed a cross-sectional, comparative quantitative survey design to investigate the relationship between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and classroom silence among multilingual ESL learners in Malaysia and Indonesia. A quantitative approach was chosen to allow for objective measurement of psychological constructs such as anxiety and silence patterns using established Likert-scale instruments. The cross-sectional nature of the design enabled data collection at a single point in time, while the comparative element allowed for meaningful analysis between the two national cohorts. This design was deemed suitable for answering the study's research questions and testing the proposed hypotheses through statistical analysis, including correlation and group comparison methods.

#### *3.2 Participants*

The participants of this study consisted of undergraduate ESL learners from universities in Malaysia and Indonesia. A total of 51 students completed the online questionnaire, with 25 respondents from Malaysia and 26 from Indonesia, ensuring equal representation from both countries.

Participants were selected using convenience sampling, targeting university students who were currently enrolled in programmes where English was used as a medium of instruction. This sampling strategy was practical due to the cross-border nature of the study and the need for online distribution.

All participants were multilingual learners who had acquired English as either a second (Malaysia) or foreign language (Indonesia). The age range of respondents was between 18 and 25 years, and the majority were from non-English-speaking households. No identifying personal information was collected to ensure anonymity and ethical compliance.

The diversity in linguistic backgrounds, cultural contexts, and educational systems between the two countries provided a rich comparative basis for examining the psychological and emotional dynamics of foreign language anxiety and classroom silence in ESL learning contexts.

#### *3.3 Research Instrument*

The primary data collection tool was a structured, self-administered questionnaire designed to quantitatively measure levels of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and classroom silence. The instrument was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) originally developed by Horwitz *et al.*, [1]. Additional items were drawn and adapted from studies on classroom silence and speaking-related anxiety [2,4,7].

The questionnaire consisted of four main sections:

### **Section A: Demographic Information**

This section gathered basic participant details including country of study, gender, age, native language(s), and programme of study.

### **Section B: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) Scale**

Likert-scale items adapted from FLCAS [1], Yahaya and Madzlan [7], and Teimouri *et al.*, [8] were used to assess emotional responses to speaking in English.

Sample item: *"I feel nervous when I have to speak English in front of others."*

### **Section C: Classroom Silence Scale**

Items in this section explored reasons for classroom silence, based on Maher [4] and Susilawati [5].

Sample item: *"I remain silent in class because I am afraid of giving the wrong answer."*

### **Section D: Sociocultural and Emotional Factors**

This section included items reflecting cultural communication norms, such as deference, avoidance of confrontation, and discomfort with code-switching [5,6].

Sample item: *"Often when I speak in English, I get stuck because the word I need only exists in my native language."*

### **Scoring and Scaling**

All items used a five-point Likert scale:

- 1 – Strongly Disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Neutral
- 4 – Agree
- 5 – Strongly Agree

The instrument was pilot tested with 10 learners for clarity and reliability and then distributed via Google Forms for digital accessibility.

### **3.4 Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected using an online survey, distributed through Google Forms. This method ensured accessibility across geographic locations and facilitated the inclusion of participants from both Malaysia and Indonesia.

Survey links were shared via university mailing lists, WhatsApp academic groups, and social media platforms. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

The survey was open for three weeks. A total of 51 valid responses were collected (25 from Malaysia, 26 from Indonesia). Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled in programmes using English as a medium of instruction.

To ensure data quality:

- Only fully completed questionnaires were included in the final analysis.
- Responses were screened for inconsistencies or duplicates.

- A pilot test (n = 10) was conducted before the full distribution to evaluate the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire items. Responses were collected anonymously, and participation was entirely voluntary. The study adhered to basic ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time.

To ensure the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire, a Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) analysis was conducted on the Likert-scale items in Sections B, C, and D. Each section measured a distinct construct: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), Classroom Silence, and Emotional/Cultural Factors, respectively.

The analysis yielded the following results:

Construct	Section	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Interpretation
Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)	Section B	0.939	Excellent internal consistency
Classroom Silence	Section C	0.901	Excellent internal consistency
Emotional and Cultural Influences	Section D	0.946	Excellent internal consistency

Based on established reliability benchmarks, alpha values above 0.90 indicate excellent internal consistency, thereby confirming that the items within each section reliably measured the intended psychological and behavioural constructs [17]. These findings validate the use of the adapted questionnaire for examining foreign language anxiety and classroom silence in a multilingual ESL context across Malaysia and Indonesia.

#### 4. Results and Findings

This section presents the results of the quantitative data analysis drawn from 51 valid responses (25 Malaysian and 26 Indonesian ESL undergraduate students). The analysis addresses the four research questions outlined earlier. Statistical techniques employed include descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and independent samples t-tests to evaluate the relationships between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and classroom silence, as well as cross-country differences between Malaysia and Indonesia.

Findings are organized thematically according to each research question, supported by relevant tables and statistical interpretations.

##### **RQ1: What are the levels and dominant types of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) experienced by multilingual ESL learners in Malaysian and Indonesian universities?**

Descriptive statistics for Section B (Foreign Language Anxiety) revealed moderate levels of FLA across respondents. The most prominent anxiety factor was:

- Pronunciation related worry (Mean = 3.02, SD = 1.21)  
This suggests learners were especially self-conscious about how they sound when speaking English.

Other frequently reported sources of anxiety included:

- Nervousness due to limited vocabulary (Mean = 2.88, SD = 0.97)
- Panic when required to speak without preparation (Mean = 2.63, SD = 1.33)
- Perceived inferiority compared to classmates' fluency (Mean = 2.55, SD = 1.06)

These results indicate that while FLA is not extremely high, it is consistently present and shaped by self-perception and speaking competence concerns.

### **RQ2: What is the nature of the relationship between FLA and classroom silence among multilingual ESL learners in these institutions?**

To examine the association between learners' anxiety levels and their tendency to remain silent during English-speaking activities, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. Total scores from Section B (FLA) and Section C (Classroom Silence) were computed for each participant and tested for linear correlation. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted between total FLA scores (Section B) and classroom silence items (Section C). The results showed a significant positive correlation ( $r \approx 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that:

Higher levels of Foreign Language Anxiety are associated with increased classroom silence. This confirms the theoretical assumption that students often choose to remain silent as a coping mechanism in response to language anxiety.

### **RQ3: What emotional and psychological factors influence learners' decisions to remain silent during English-speaking activities?**

To explore the deeper emotional and psychological dimensions of silence in the ESL classroom, descriptive statistics from Section D of the questionnaire were analysed. This section included items related to self-perception, linguistic confidence, shyness, and cultural beliefs about classroom behaviour. These factors are critical in understanding non-linguistic barriers to verbal participation. Descriptive analysis of Section D (emotional and cultural factors) highlighted several key contributors to silence:

- Fear of being overshadowed by more fluent peers
- Feelings of shyness or embarrassment due to misunderstanding
- Difficulty expressing thoughts in English due to reliance on mother tongue

These findings suggest that emotional discomfort and linguistic insecurity, rather than lack of knowledge, drive much of the silence observed in ESL classrooms.

### **RQ4: Are there significant differences in FLA-related classroom silence between learners from Malaysia and Indonesia?**

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Classroom Silence between Malaysian and Indonesian ESL learners. Although Indonesian students reported slightly higher average levels of both anxiety and silence, the differences were not statistically significant.

- Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA):  $t(100) = -0.99$ ,  $p = 0.326$
- Classroom Silence:  $t(100) = -1.15$ ,  $p = 0.257$

These findings suggest that while the sociolinguistic contexts differ with English being a foreign language in Indonesia and a second language in Malaysia the psychological experiences of ESL learners in both countries remain largely comparable. The lack of significant differences indicates that shared educational and cultural dynamics in Southeast Asia may lead to similar affective responses in language classrooms.

## **5. Discussion**

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research questions and prior literature. The focus was on exploring the psychological experiences of multilingual ESL learners in Malaysian and Indonesian universities, with particular emphasis on the role of foreign language anxiety (FLA) and classroom silence.

### *5.1 Levels and Types of Foreign Language Anxiety (RQ1)*

The results showed that participants reported moderate levels of FLA, especially related to pronunciation difficulties, limited vocabulary, and the fear of making mistakes in public. These patterns are consistent with established frameworks that identify communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation as key features of foreign language anxiety [1]. Speaking-related anxiety continues to present a substantial challenge for ESL learners, particularly those from linguistically diverse backgrounds [2,7].

### *5.2 FLA and Classroom Silence (RQ2)*

A significant positive correlation was found between FLA and classroom silence. Learners experiencing higher anxiety levels were more likely to remain silent during English-speaking activities. This supports the understanding that silence may function as a psychological defence mechanism in language learning contexts [4]. In both Malaysian and Indonesian classrooms where norms often prioritize correctness and deference students may choose silence to avoid the risk of error. Silence, therefore, should not be interpreted merely as disengagement, but as an anxiety-driven response to performance pressure [5].

### *5.3 Emotional and Psychological Influences (RQ3)*

Data also indicated that students frequently felt shy, lacked confidence compared to their peers, and were discouraged when unable to express their ideas fluently. These affective challenges are known to inhibit oral participation in language classrooms [3,8]. Additionally, many learners struggled with mental translation, particularly when English equivalents for culturally embedded concepts were unavailable. These findings highlight the role of psycholinguistic strain and underscore the importance of addressing emotional barriers in ESL instruction.

### *5.4 Cross-Cultural Comparison (RQ4)*

While Indonesian participants reported slightly higher levels of anxiety and silence, the difference was not statistically significant. This suggests that although English functions differently in the two countries foreign language in Indonesia, second language in Malaysia the psychological effects on learners are similar. Cultural influences and classroom expectations across both settings appear to

shape students' language use in comparable ways [3,5]. This reinforces the idea that affective factors transcend national language policy and are instead embedded in deeper sociocultural norms.

## **6. Implications and Recommendations**

### *6.1 Pedagogical Implications*

The findings of this study underscore the significant influence of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) on ESL learners' speaking behaviour in multilingual classrooms. Participants in both Malaysia and Indonesia reported moderate levels of anxiety, frequently resulting in classroom silence. These insights carry several pedagogical implications:

- Promoting a psychologically safe classroom environment: Teachers should actively foster low-stress, supportive learning spaces that minimize the fear of negative evaluation. Strategies may include the use of formative feedback, collaborative speaking tasks, and the normalization of mistakes as natural elements of language learning [1, 2].
- Integrating anxiety-reducing strategies into speaking instruction: Activities such as pre-speaking scaffolding, peer support, role plays, and the use of anonymous tools (e.g., written responses before verbal sharing) can gradually help learners build confidence.
- Recognizing silence as an affective indicator: Educators should avoid interpreting student silence as a lack of competence or motivation. Instead, silence should be treated as a potential emotional response tied to both cultural expectations and psychological discomfort [3, 4].

### *6.2 Institutional and Cross-Cultural Considerations*

- Providing tailored support for multilingual learners: Institutions in both countries should consider developing targeted workshops, counselling services, or language support units that address emotional barriers to learning and promote communicative resilience.
- Training teachers in basic language learning psychology: ESL instructors should receive professional development in identifying anxiety symptoms and responding with pedagogical sensitivity. Equipping educators with tools to support students emotionally can enhance learner engagement [5].
- Acknowledging shared regional dynamics: The absence of statistically significant differences in anxiety and silence patterns suggests that regional sociocultural norms influence classroom participation. Thus, policies and teaching practices can be designed from a Southeast Asian lens, informed by shared cultural-linguistic experiences [6].

### *6.3 Recommendations for Future Research*

- Future studies may benefit from a longitudinal design to explore how FLA and silence evolve over multiple semesters or academic years.
- Employing a mixed-methods approach combining surveys with classroom observation or interviews could deepen insight into learners' lived experiences.
- Further examination of demographic or academic variables (e.g., gender, major, language background) may provide a more nuanced understanding of how anxiety manifests differently across learner profiles [7,8].

## 7. Conclusion

- This study examined the psychological dimensions of classroom silence among multilingual ESL learners in Malaysia and Indonesia, focusing on the influence of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Using a quantitative approach with 51 undergraduate participants, the study found that FLA particularly anxiety related to speaking, fear of negative evaluation, and linguistic insecurity was a significant factor in learners' decisions to remain silent in class.
- While Indonesian students reported slightly higher levels of anxiety and silence, the difference was not statistically significant, suggesting similar affective challenges across both contexts. Cultural norms, linguistic background, and emotional factors were shown to shape students' willingness to communicate, confirming the need to view classroom silence not as disengagement, but as a response to internal stressors.
- The findings have important pedagogical implications. ESL educators must adopt more psychologically informed teaching practices and support systems to reduce anxiety and encourage verbal participation. Additionally, future research should continue to explore the emotional realities of language learning, especially in multilingual Southeast Asian environments.
- Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of knowledge that views language learning as not just cognitive, but deeply emotional, social, and context dependent.

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