

Low Learning Achievements of the Learners in English Language in Elementary Schools of Tribal Areas

MANORANJAN PRADHAN*

Abstract

According to several reports, low learning achievements of learners in English language at the elementary schooling is a major concern and challenge. Despite the interventions and constructive strategies are being taken to promote quality education to all children between 6–14 years of age it is seen that at the end of elementary schooling, students cannot read the textbooks of their junior classes. Some of them even fail to distinguish between capital and small letters. Making spelling and grammatical errors, inability to write correct sentences or a short paragraph on their own, are several challenges in the way of improving students' learning performance. This study is an attempt to learn from the Block Resource Group members, who are master trainers in the block about the factors responsible for the low learning achievements of the learners in English language at the elementary level of schooling. For that, 49 BRG members from Blocks (out of 14 in Koraput—a tribal dominated socio-economic and educationally backward district of Odisha) were taken as sample of the study. Besides, efforts were also made to know the major problems that teachers are facing during teaching English in class, and remedies to alleviate the problem in order to improve the learning achievements of the learners at the elementary level.

BACKDROP

The Position Paper of the National Focus Group on Teaching English for NCF 2005 makes it clear when

it addresses the 'English language question'. English, in India, today, is a symbol of people's aspiration for quality in education and a

*Junior Lecturer, Govt. Women's College, Jeypore, Koraput, Odisha 764 004, India.

greater participation in national and international life. English is introduced in Class I or III by 26 States or Union Territories, out of 35 and seven States or Union Territories introduce it in Class IV or V (NCERT 2005).

Today, English has become a global language with a very high demand in the job market. Across the world, competitive examinations are conducted in the English medium/language. The candidates of several competitive examinations conducted in English can easily collect their study materials from the market. Irrespective of the abundance of English dailies and journals across the country, the performance of school students in the English language, particularly in rural and tribal pockets of Odisha is found unsatisfactory. We shall refer to the observation of Annual States of Education Report (ASERs) regarding the statistics on learning achievements of children in the English language in Odisha.

ASER, 2014 reveals that a large majority of students in Class V are not able to acquire the basic reading skills both in the English language and their mother tongue. Similarly, the report states 25 per cent students enrolled in Class VIII were found incapable of reading textbooks prescribed for Class II. Again, the report reveals 25 per cent children in Class V could read the simple sentence in English. Similarly, in III-V, 59.85 per cent children in 2014 could read Std. I level text or more. But this status was 61.39 per cent in 2010. This implies that there has been no improvement in students' learning. The report says that except Tamil Nadu, there is no significant improvement in the reading skills of the learners at the elementary stage during the last five years in other states.

As shown in Table 1, in Class V, 11.7 per cent children cannot read capital letters, 24 per cent children can read small letters, 29.7 per cent children can read words, but not sentences, and 22.9 per cent children can read easy sentences.

Table 1
Percentage of Children by Class and Reading Level in English
(All Schools, 2014)

Std.	Not Even Capital Letters	Capital Letters	Small Letters	Simple Words	Easy Sentences	Total
I	54.0	19.9	13.7	9.9	2.5	100
II	38.6	18.1	22.8	15.1	5.3	100
III	23.7	19.9	26.3	22.1	8.0	100
IV	16.4	15.9	26.7	26.0	15.0	100
V	11.7	11.7	24.0	29.7	22.9	100
VI	7.0	10.6	21.0	28.6	32.9	100
VII	5.0	6.4	19.2	29.8	39.7	100
VIII	4.8	5.6	17.2	26.6	45.7	100
Total	20.3	13.6	21.5	23.5	21.1	100

Source: ASER-2014

Table 2
Percentage of English Comprehension Level of Children (All Schools, 2014)

Std.	Of those who can Read Words, % Children who can Tell Meanings of the Words	Of those who can Read Sentences, % Children who can Tell Meanings of the Sentences
I	68.0	—
II	62.1	—
III	67.9	54.0
IV	58.9	52.4
V	55.8	55.3
VI	63.8	56.0
VII	68.2	61.7
VIII	64.2	62.6
Total	62.9	58.1

Source: ASER-2014

Keeping in view the performance of students in the English language at school and other levels, several researchers and commissions have shown their dissatisfaction. Tickoo (1996) states, 'Unfortunately, despite repeated recommendations by different commissions constituted by the Government of India, the position of English in the curriculums and methods of teaching have always been in a state of flux. English today is simultaneously a sought after and suspected phenomenon'. (Rout and Behera 2012).

While on the one hand, the importance and demand of the English language in the global market is increasing; the quality of English language education in majority of Indian schools is an appalling picture. The paradox of demand and suspicion (Tickoo 1996) mentioned above could be further reflected through the paradox of access depicted by the report of the

National Knowledge Commission (NKC 2007). It states, 'There is an irony in the situation. English has been part of our education system for more than a century. Yet English is beyond the reach of most of our young people, which make for highly unequal access. Indeed, even now, more than one percent of our people use it as a second language, let alone a first language... But NKC believes that the time has come for us to teach our people, ordinary people, English as a language in schools. Early action in this sphere would help us build an inclusive society and transform India into a knowledge society' (NKC 2007, p. 27).

Keeping in view the role and importance of the English language in the present era at all levels on the one hand, and the gloomy picture of Indian schools as regards the performance of their learners in the English language on the other hand, the present study was conducted.

The study endeavours to discover the major factors accountable for the low performance of children in elementary schools in English language education from the Block Resource Group members. These members are master trainers in the English language and have been teaching English for many years in schools at the elementary level.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of the study were—

1. to identify the factors accountable for the low learning achievements of the learners in English language in the elementary schools of the district.
2. to find out the major challenges and problems faced by the teachers while teaching English at elementary level.
3. to study the suggestive remedies given by the BRG members addressing the issues related to the low learning achievements of children in the English language in the schools of Koraput district.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF THE KEY TERMS

- **Low Learning Achievement**

Low learning achievement means the lack of minimum competencies or foundation knowledge which is needed for the class (es) in which students are enrolled or studied. For example, to enrol and sustain

in Class IV, one should have minimum foundation knowledge or competencies to understand the concepts in various textbooks like language, mathematics, social studies, environmental studies, etc. But according to several research studies and reports, particularly in the govt. schools, most children at the elementary level do not possess minimum competencies. Even students in Class V cannot distinguish between capital and small letters; students in Class VIII cannot read English textbooks of their lower classes. The students of these categories are operationally called students with low learning achievement.

- **Tribal Areas**

The districts where population sizes of the Scheduled Tribe communities are comparatively higher, are considered as the tribal dominated districts. For example, according to the Census of India, 2011, the ST population constitutes about 22.85 per cent of the state population (Odisha), but in nine districts of Odisha including Koraput—the sample district, the population of ST category was 45 per cent or more. Keeping in view the dominance of the ST population, Koraput (sample district) can be called a tribal dominated district.

- **BRG Members and their Perception**

BRG stands for Block Resource Group. They can also be called master trainers at the block level. Experience a teachers who are teaching the English subject in primary schools at least for the last five years and having fluency and leadership qualities were selected as BRG members for the training. It is a regular practice of DIET to identify Resource Persons at the block and district level by organising several activities, training programmes and during monitoring to primary schools. The purpose was to train BRG members who will in turn train teachers at the block and cluster level, in the English subject in both, content and pedagogical areas.

DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

- The study was conducted on the views of the 49 BRG members of the English language only.

- All the BRG members belonged to Koraput district.
- It was confined to 13 blocks of one tribal dominated district of Odisha-Koraput.
- The sample size was small for a broad generalisation.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The design of the study comprises population, sample, methodology, data collection procedure, data analysis and discussion.

Population and Sample

All the Block Resource Persons in the English language of Koraput Odisha were the population of the study. As per the instruction of the District Project Coordinator, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)*, Koraput, only four BRGs had to attend the training from each block. 49 BRGs from 13 blocks were the samples of the study who attended the training. The distribution of the sample is presented below in a tabular form.

Table 1
Distribution of Sample

S. No.	Blocks	No. of BRG	Social Category in terms of Caste (s)				Teaching Experience (in Years)		
			UR	OB	SC	ST	Below 10	11-20	21-30
1.	Jeypore	03	01	02	-	-	01	01	01
2.	Koraput	04	04	-	-	-	01	-	03
3.	Kotpad	04	01	01	01	01	03	01	-
4.	Nandapur	04	01	02	01	-	03	01	-
5.	Kundra	04	01	02	-	01	-	03	01

6.	Borriguma	04	04	-	-	-	-	01	03	
7.	Laxmipur	04	02	01	-	01	-	04	-	
8.	Boipariguda	04	02	02	-	-	02	-	02	
9.	Bandhugam	03	01	01	01	-	02	01	-	
10.	Lamtaput	03	02	-	01	-	01	01	01	
11.	Semeliguda	04	02	-	01	01	02	01	01	
12.	Dasmantpur	04	-	02	01	01	-	04	0	
13.	Narayanpatna	04	02	02	-	-	01	03	-	
	Total	49	23	15	06	05	16	21	12	
	Grand Total	49	49				49			

Data Collection Procedure

A five-day training programme for the capacity building of the BRGs in English Language Training Package for Primary Teachers of English was organised by the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET), Koraput at Jeypore, Odisha. The module, prepared by the English Language Training Institute (ELTI), Bhubaneswar, Odisha is meant for capacity building of teachers who are teaching English at the elementary level up to Class VIII. The module is specially prepared for focussing on the current context of teaching English in Odia medium in the primary schools of rural and tribal areas. As per the instruction of the Directorate of Teacher Education and SCERT, Odisha, four Block Resource Group members from each block were invited to the training. The purpose was to train the BRG members who will in turn train teachers at the block and cluster levels, for better teaching and organising learning activities in the English subject at the

Elementary level. Out of 14 blocks in the district, 49 BRG members from 13 blocks participated in the training. Due to some local problem, Pottangi block could not participate. To know the opinions the of BRG members, a self-prepared questionnaire was administered for data collection, after formal inauguration and self introduction.

- The self-prepared questionnaire consists of three parts. Part I was for data relating to personal information of the BRG members (reflecting their name, age, gender, caste, designation, educational qualification, total experience in years as teachers of English and RP, the block they belong to and their contact number. Part II, consisted of three open-ended questions— (1) write a short paragraph about your school. (simply to know about their schools and writing skill), (2) state the major problems or challenges you are facing while teaching English to your students at the

primary level, (3) suggest remedies to improve the performance of your learners in English language, (4) it carries 21 questions in the form of statements. The teachers were asked to mark or tick the five point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree and Strongly Disagree) relating to the issues, challenges and problems responsible for the low learning achievements of the learners in English subject at the Elementary level.

- Focus group discussion, with selected BRG members from all the sample blocks, a few State Resource Persons who were training them and researchers from ELTI, Odisha, was conducted on major problems, challenges and remedies for low learning achievements of the students at the primary level, particularly in the schools of Koraput district.

Data Analysis Procedure

The required data, collected for the present study was analysed in the descriptive way using mixed research methodology (both qualitative and quantitative). Simple statistical techniques like percentage and frequency distribution were employed for the study.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Addressing the objectives of the present study, the participants were asked three open-ended questions and 21 questions to be simply ticked

against a five point scale. The purpose of the three open-ended questions was different in nature. The first question asked the teachers to write a short paragraph about their own school. The purpose was to know the location, faculty position, physical facilities, etc., available in the school and to identify the writing skills of the teachers. All participants responded to question 1 by writing a short paragraph within the stipulated space provided to them. As the teachers (sample) are teaching the elementary children, an attempt was made to assess their handwritings, spelling errors, grammatical mistakes (use of capital or small letters at the proper place, tense, preposition, articles used, gender, number, etc.), slip (careless error), margin and space problem (left and right sides, gap between two words or sentences, etc.), contextual writing, paragraph problem (unity and order not maintained), etc.

The inefficiency of teachers can also be a major factor responsibility for low learning achievements of the learners in elementary schools in the tribal pockets of Odisha. On evaluating their short paragraphs, it was observed that the handwritings of around 50 per cent teachers were not good. The writings of some teachers could hardly be read. But most of the BRG members were able to write correct sentences, maintaining proper sequence and connectivity. However, almost all the teachers failed to maintain proper space between two words or sentences. They were not

sensitive to context. So, they failed to write context-based relevant information in the paragraph. They should be conscious enough to know what they have been asked to write, what's to be written and where, while writing a paragraph on a particular topic or context. Besides, some common spelling and grammatical errors (perhaps due to slip which can be avoided through revision or reading) were also identified. Above all, the writing skill of the teachers was satisfactory. But, they have to follow the basic steps while writing paragraph or short essay (e.g., Think, Write, Revise and Re-write).

The second question was to mention the major problems and challenges they are facing while teaching English to children in their schools. Responding to the question, they said the following major issues and challenges.

- The children have a strong perception that English is a very difficult language, so it is difficult to learn it on their part.
- They are not interested to learn English language due to several reasons.
- Severe impact of their regional language or mother tongue is a challenge for developing speaking skills with correct pronunciation.
- Most of the learners cannot read their prescribed English textbooks individually.
- Some learners do not participate in group activity.

- They hesitate to ask their teachers regarding their study. Even they do not like to clarify their doubts.
- Students know the answers of the questions asked by their teachers but are not ready to speak, due to excessive shyness and fear.
- Poor word power or stock of vocabulary is a major challenge.
- Inadequacy of teaching-learning materials in schools is also a constraint.
- Irregular attendance of learners in schools discourages teachers to take any initiatives for innovations for these better learning.
- Some state that an overcrowded classroom environment is a challenge to giving individual attention to each child in terms of checking their notebook, giving individual attention, etc. (more than 50 students are also seen in some classes)
- Multi-grade class (a teacher has to manage more than one classes) is a great challenge which adversely impacts the quality of education.
- Excessive workload of teachers is also a concern to focus on the academic improvement of children.
- Single teacher schools cannot help the students for better learning achievements.

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR LOW LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

To know the factors responsible for low learning achievements of

the children in English language in elementary schools of Koraput (a tribal dominated socio-economically and educationally backward district of Odisha), the teachers were asked to give their views, responding to 21 questions in a questionnaire form. The responses of the teachers were critically analysed, as below.

Only two questions concerning material and human resources were asked to the participants. Out

of this, 14 per cent BRG members (primarily teachers) strongly agreed and 57 per cent agreed on the non-availability of sufficient teaching-learning materials to teach English in schools as a factor accountable for low learning achievements of the learners in English language in primary schools. In short, about 71 per cent Block Resource Group members think poor infrastructural facilities, in terms of essential TLMs,

Table 2
Institutional Issues

S. No.	Factors Responsible	SA(%)	A(%)	UD(%)	DA(%)	SD(%)
1.	Sufficient TLMs are not available to teach English language in schools	14	57	06	Nil	23
2.	Adequate number of language teachers are not available in schools	39	49	02	Nil	10

SA—Strongly Agree, A—Agree, UD—Undecided, DA—Disagree, SD—Strongly Disagree

Table 3
Issues related to Learners

S. No.	Factors Responsible	SA(%)	A(%)	UD(%)	DA(%)	SD(%)
1.	Children are the first generation learners	46	26	08	06	14
2.	Impact of home language is a potential factor	34	44	04	10	08
3.	Poor attendance of students in schools	18	62	12	08	Nil
4.	Parental support to students is not satisfactory	34	52	04	02	08
5.	Children are not interested to learn English	08	18	08	44	22

SA—Strongly Agree, A—Agree, UD—Undecided, DA—Disagree, SD—Strongly Disagree

is discouraging teachers to promote quality education in English language which brings about poor performance of the learners. Whereas, 6 per cent BRG members could not take their decision and 23 per cent strongly disagreed to the issue as a factor of degrading learning achievements of the learners in English subject at primary level. Similarly, around 88 per cent BRG members confessed that deficit of language teachers is a major challenge for promoting quality education in English subject while 10 per cent strongly disagreed.

Responding to the issues responsible for the low learning achievements of the learners at the elementary level, the BRG members said most of the learners in tribal areas are first generation learners. So, they cannot get proper guidance and support in their families. Of course, 20 per cent teachers disagreed to

the issue but 72 per cent teachers supported, while 8 per cent could not say anything. Similarly, 78 per cent participants said the impact of home language is a potential factor which causes low performance in the foreign language, while 18 per cent do not feel it as an obstacle for learning the English language. On the other hand, 80 per cent teachers agreed that poor attendance of students in schools is a major cause of low learning achievements of children in English. Similarly, almost all teachers agreed to the issue that lack of parental support is a major challenge in the way of better learning achievements of children in the English subject at the elementary level. Responding to the question of whether children are uninterested in learning English, 66 per cent participants disagreed, 26 per cent agreed and 8 per cent could not give their view.

Table 4
Factors Associating Teachers and Pedagogy

S.No.	Factors Responsible	SA(%)	A(%)	UD(%)	DA(%)	SD(%)
1.	Teachers using traditional methods of teaching	38	40	02	08	12
2.	Poor vocabulary stock of teachers	26	42	16	10	06
3.	Emphasis is on students attendance, not participation in learning activities	24	46	12	04	14
4.	Teachers do not give individual attention to the learners	32	38	04	14	12
5.	Teachers take class without planning and preparation	08	40	02	18	32
6.	Teachers need orientation for development of competencies in teaching English	44	46	Nil	04	06

7.	Work loaded teachers cannot get time for innovations	28	40	08	16	08
8.	Teachers are concern about completion of syllabus/course	14	42	02	24	18
9.	Wrong pronunciation of teachers in English	22	50	08	12	08
10.	Teachers teach for the sake of teaching	10	40	24	16	10
11.	Irregular correction of home work	22	38	06	22	12
12.	Teaching English can be joyful through activity method	60	40	Nil	Nil	Nil
13.	Teaching English language is a difficult task	10	16	26	02	46

SA—Strongly Agree, A—Agree, UD—Undecided, DA—Disagree, SD—Strongly Disagree

Associating the issues of teachers and pedagogical aspects, 13 questions were asked to the BRG members. Responding to the first question, 78 per cent participants agreed that till now the teachers are using traditional methods of teaching in their classes, while 20 per cent discarded it. On the other hand, they were asked whether poor stock of vocabulary of teachers is a factor affecting the performance of the learners in English at the elementary schooling. 68 per cent supported the issue and 16 per cent disagreed, while the rest 16 per cent could not take any decision. Similarly, 70 per cent BRG members said teachers at the elementary level focussed on students' attendance, instead of active participation of the learners in learning activities, but 26 per cent did not agree with the issue. Like that, 70 per cent said teachers do not give individual attention to the learners which adversely impacts

students' learning. Responding to the question on the teachers' preparation to take the class, 50 per cent responded in the affirmative while 48 per cent said that they do not go to the class with planning and preparation. On the other hand, 90 per cent BRG members are in favour of need-based training and orientation to the teachers for developing their competencies and for capacity building. Besides, 68 per cent said owing to heavy workload, the teachers cannot think and give time for innovation. Whereas 56 per cent said completion of syllabi is the prime objective of teachers 42 per cent teachers did not agree with the statement. On the other hand, 72 per cent teachers said that wrong pronunciation of teachers who are teaching English is a major concern bringing low achievements of learners in English subject at the elementary level. Irregularity in evaluating

home task of the learners is also a factor responsible for low learning achievements of the learners in the tribal and rural schools of Odisha. Responding to a statement regarding the methods of teaching, almost all teachers (100 per cent) admitted that in order to make the classroom environment joyful, activity-based learning (ABL) is the best method. Giving their view on whether teaching English language is a difficult task, 26 per cent participants agreed, 26 per cent remained undecided and the rest 48 per cent disagreed.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the learning achievements of children in the English language at the elementary level, the following suggestions and recommendations are suggested by the stakeholders (experienced teachers, headmasters, Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators and education authorities, working in the rural pockets of Odisha). The major suggestive remedies are as follows.

1. The four major skills of learning any language are listening, speaking, reading and writing (in short L-S-R-W). Listening is the primary receptive skill on which development of other skills depends on. But, the teachers in government schools give more emphasis on reading and writing instead of listening and speaking. In fact, they directly start English teaching from writing the alphabet and reading

books. But it is a fact that one cannot learn to read and write well in a language unless one first learns to listen and speak a language. So, special attention should be given at the primary level to develop the listening and speaking skills in English in the primary schools before teaching learners how to read and write.

2. In the government schools (Odia medium schools in Odisha), learning English language starts from Class III. But, English medium schools, it is started from Nursery classes, providing one or two years of pre-primary education in English. This practice of these schools helps the children to develop their listening and speaking skills as they perfectly focus on these two primary skills, least focussing on writing and reading. So, pre-primer activities may be started in Class I or II after training teachers at the school level (books are prepared and supplied by ELTI with clear instructions on giving necessary training to all teachers), which may help the learners to develop listening and speaking skills in the English language.
3. It is observed that the speaking skill (in English language) of children in Odia medium schools is comparatively poor. It is due to three important reasons—fear and shyness of children, no learning environment at home and

- overemphasis on structure and grammar by teachers. In English medium schools, the students are allowed to speak freely without any fear and hesitation. But in Odia medium schools, while on the one hand, the learners do not get ample scope to speak, on the other hand, the teachers compel them, directly or indirectly, to speak complete sentences with correct structure and grammar. So the attitude of teachers should be changed. Once, the children are allowed to speak freely and gradually, the grammatical or structural mistakes may be checked.
4. The teachers who are teaching English should be empowered through frequent orientation, workshop and training, particularly by organising interesting learning activities to develop the four basic skills of language learning of the learners at the primary level. So, it will be helpful to the teachers to use less of the stereotyped chalk-talk method, and adopt learner(s)-friendly innovative pedagogy. On the other hand, the learners too will be interested towards learning English without fear and become skilled by actively participating in several activities organised in the class, instead of sitting and doing their assignments alone.
 5. Ample scope and complete freedom to be given to the teachers to develop their own teaching strategy instead of the time-bound and book-specified learning practices. So, the teachers can develop new and need-based activities keeping in view their learners' interest, ability and resources available in schools.
 6. The schools should be equipped with adequate and relevant teaching-learning materials (audio, visual and audio visual) to teach the English language comfortably. The materials should be developed keeping in view the contents of the textbook and bases of children.
 7. Keeping in view the Student-Teacher Ratio (STR) as per RTE, adequate number of teachers should be appointed, justifying their subject specialisation. For example, if a school needs three teachers according to STR, so, one teacher should be from humanities, one from languages and another from the science background. So, they can do justice to all children in all subjects. But, the reality is that while in some schools, all are from the science background, in other schools, only those from arts background are teaching. Besides, education authorities say there is no need of specialisation at primary schools. Each teacher can teach any subject. But it is always better to have a teacher specialising in a subject to teach it to the students. So, this issue

can be re-examined or taken into account even at the level of primary schooling.

8. While developing textbooks in English language, instead of simply giving importance to the teaching experience of the writers, focus is to be given to their expertise in the subject and the class for which the textbook is being prepared. For that, experts from the English Language Training Institute (ELTI), child psychologists, expert artists, the practitioners (teachers teaching at the elementary level) from different regions may be involved.
9. The interventions to strengthen elementary education like SAHAJA/UJWALA programme in Odisha should be perfectly implemented providing remedial teaching to poor performers in English language through interesting activities.
10. The schools should provide ample scope and privilege to the children to speak, share and communicate with peers, teachers and other stakeholders freely and confidently without fear and pressure, so they can develop their communicative skills better.
11. Co-curricular activities like debate, essay, elocution, extempore speech, slogan writing, role play, drama, poster preparation, project

works relating to different socio-cultural issues are to be organised in the English language, so the learners can develop their outlook and get exposure.

12. Besides, educational games like vocabulary games, grammar games, etc., may be employed during classroom transition, so the learners will be able to develop positive attitudes and interests to learn the English language.

CONCLUSION

The low learning achievement of learners at the elementary schooling in the English language is a major challenge not only in the tribal pockets of Odisha but throughout rural India. There is an urgent requirement of schools with well-equipped, congenial learning environment. The fear among the learners and the attitudes of the parents and teachers towards the English language as a difficult subject, needs to change. To achieve this, regular orientation programmes for the teachers to teach English through organisation of various activities like chain drill, showing pictures, riddles and grammar and vocabulary games, role plays, dialogue, etc., are required. Besides, regular monitoring by education authorities and DIET faculties is useful to assess the accountability of teachers and to provide needful academic supports to them respectively.

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