Blended learning as efficient method of language acquisition

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Abstract: Economic and social changes within the European Union provide new opportunities and challenges. Nowadays young people need to gain a wider scope of skills including language knowledge and intercultural abilities to succeed in the globalized economies and increasingly diversified societies. The acquisition of the necessary knowledge and skills is more effective in the school environment where the innovative approach and creativity are supported. The paper focuses on the authors' experience of the use of ICT as the support of Brno University of Defence students' self-study to achieve the required language level. It could seem easy for the students to pass the exam corresponding to B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference in four language skills, but the contrary is true. In relation to the student's entrance language level and the relatively small amount of lessons, it was necessary to search for the appropriate way how to motivate students and provide them with study materials which regarding to their content and structure can efficiently contribute to this task's accomplishment. The authors decided to use the blended learning method, i.e. the combination of the face-to-face teaching with the electronic study supports. The course designers concentrated primarily on creating materials aimed at practising receptive skills – reading and listening comprehension – which are the prerequisite for passing the language exam. In addition, the activities were supplemented with the set of tests and links to suitable sources for improving the remaining two productive skills. The paper describes the research oriented at getting the feedback from the course users, their incentives and comments as well. The research method was the questionnaire survey in which 135 course participants took part. The participants responded to the study supports, the electronic environment, and the course design mostly positively. However, there occurred several critical remarks as well. The results of the research will be implemented not only into lessons, but they will become the essential component of the further research in this area.

Introduction: blended learning

Blended learning implementation in tertiary education has dramatically increased over the last decade. Blended learning is a part of an ongoing convergence of two archetypal learning environments (Graham, 2006). On the one hand, there is the traditional face-to-face environment, on the other hand, there is distance environment supported by digital technologies. Kahn and Linquist claim: "Blended learning is a fairly new term but the concept has existed for decades in distance education" (Kahn and Linguist 2002). According to Graham, in the past, traditional

face-to face learning typically occurred in a teacher-directed environment with person-to-person interaction in a live synchronous, high-fidelity environment. Distance learning (blended learning) systems emphasized self-paced learning and learning materials interactions that typically occurred in an asynchronous, low-fidelity (text only) environment (Graham, Bonk 2006, 5).

Future implementation of distance/blended systems means a balanced combination of face-to-face and distance environments, synchronous and asynchronous learning (Figure1).

Figure 1: Progressive convergence of traditional and distance environments allowing development of blended systems
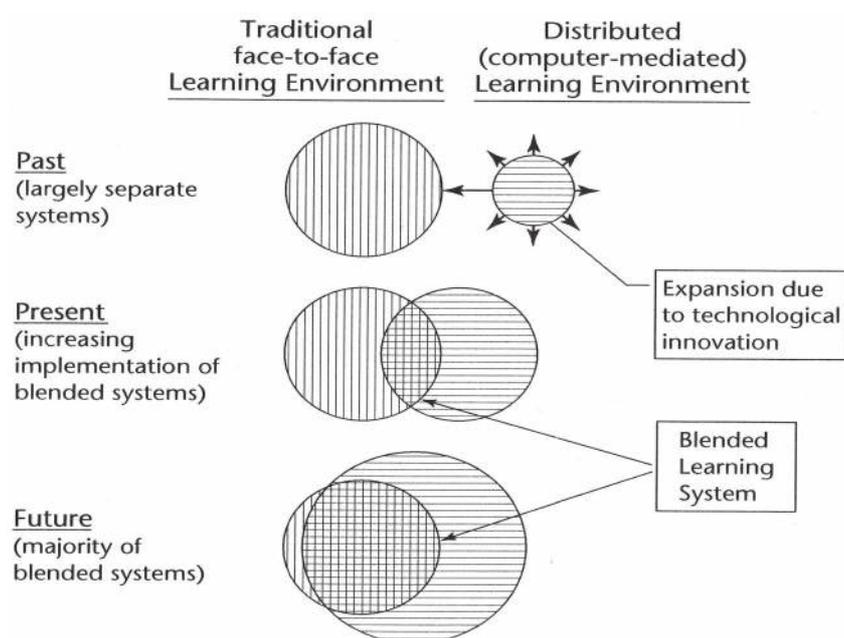
Source: Graham, Bonk 2006

According to Education Elements (2013), which develops blended learning technologies, successful blended learning occurs when technology and teaching inform each other: material becomes dynamic when it reaches students of varying learning styles. In other words, blended classrooms can reach and engage students in a truly customizable way. Optimally, blended learning combines online delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom interaction and live instruction to personalize learning, allow thoughtful reflection, and differentiate instruction from student to student across a diverse group of learners (Cechova and Rees 2013). Today there is no doubt as to whether or not technology should be employed in the educational process. Former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, in introducing the National Grid for Learning, said, "Children cannot be effective in tomorrow's world if they are trained in

yesterday's skills" (DfEE, 1997). If modern educators want to bring up and educate the new, young generation, and if they want them to succeed in the labour market, they must use technology to attract, motivate and involve students, and they must use interactive technologies to transform and improve the learning process (Cechova and Rees 2013, 2).

Garrison and Vaughan write that: "the key assumptions of a blended learning design are:

› Thoughtfully integrating face-to face and online learning;
› Fundamentally rethinking the course design to optimize student engagement;
› Restructuring and replacing traditional class contact hours" (Garrison and Vaughan 2008, 5).

According to Banados blended learning strategies consist of the following elements: face-to-face English, learners' independent work, online monitoring, and conversation classes with a native speaker. (Banados 2006).

Blended strategies in English language teaching

The term blended learning originated in the business world in connection with corporate training (Sharma and Barrett 2007), was then employed in higher education (MacDonald 2006) and then also immediately appeared in language teaching and learning.

Blended learning could be effective for achieving second language development if course developers follow basic pedagogical principles of learning and teaching and implement technologies wisely. The blended learning language course's strength is developing receptive skills (listening and reading comprehension); its weakness appeared to be in writing and speaking.

However, constant development of technologies enables a remarkable improvement in speaking and writing skills, in addition to important improvements in all the skills, especially in listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Charbonneau-Gowdy writes about web-conferencing technologies to enhance speaking skills (Cechova, Charbonneau-Gowdy 2008, 34), Sluneckova suggests using technologies like Wiki to persuade students to write and share their writing (Sluneckova 2011, 6; Cechova and Rees 2013, 4). Cerna writes about social software implementation in the teaching and learning process and emphasizes its contribution in all language skills (Cerna, 2014).

A number of studies investigate learners' attitudes towards blended learning. Leakey and Ranchoux found that "the students in large measure found the blended CALL experience a positive and motivating one and tended towards preferring [this approach] to the traditional classroom based learning" (Leakey and Ranchoux 2006, 367).

Banados's strategies were implemented in a course of English for academic staff at the University of Defense (UoD) as the course developers wanted to distribute proportionally face-to-face lessons and self-study to balance the self-study with the amount of time spent in the classroom.

The English course was divided in the following way:

> face to face lessons   40 %;
> conversation with a native speaker   10 %;
> learners independent work   40 %;
> e-testing   10 % (Cechova et al. 2015, 4).

When the UoD language teachers were tasked to tailor an e-learning course to provide UoD students as well as the professionals of the Army of the Czech Republic (ACR) with a chance to practice receptive skills and to pass their mandatory military exams (STANG 6001) they implemented all above mentioned experience to meet the ACR and UoD requirements.

Designing the course

The University of Defence is a tertiary education institution which educates and trains future military professionals the ACR. As the Czech Republic is the member country of the NATO, it is essential for the graduates to be educated not only in their specializations, but also to acquire the appropriate language skills, since English has become the NATO operational language. Within NATO armies the language proficiency of soldiers is compared by the NATO STANAG 6001 exam in levels SLP1 – 4 (SLP stands for Standardized Language Profile) which corresponds to the levels A1 – C2 according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference). This test is not of an "achievement" type, which means that it is not based on the accomplishment of the certain amount of studied materials, grammar, and vocabulary. On the contrary, as the proficiency test, it requires a general ability to use language fluently and independently in basic everyday situations, to prove their proper knowledge and communicative skills.

The Ministry of Defence language level requirements reflect on the university study. Since the academic year 2014/15, future military professionals have been educated according to the new full-time five-year Master's degree study programme which prescribes for all undergraduates the obligation to pass NATO STANAG 6001 exam SLP2 in English in all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), corresponding to B1 level according to the CEFR, within first five terms. If students fail the exam in one or two skills, they can resit this part of the exam within three months. If they fail more skills, they then have to sit the whole exam again. It would seem that UoD students have good prospects for passing the prescribed SLP level thanks to their previous years of English studies, but the contrary is actually true. The entry level of students is greatly varied. The usage of information technologies and blended learning strategies is one of the possibilities of how to fulfil the Ministry of Defence language level requirements.

At the beginning of the first term students undergo an entry test, the aim of which is to determine their level of English and divide them into appropriate study groups for English lessons. Within

the three academic years we have registered a rising level of entry knowledge, which is positive. Nevertheless, this fact is not always the guarantee of successful fulfilment of this exam in all four skills.

Graph 1: Entry students'English levels (CEFR)
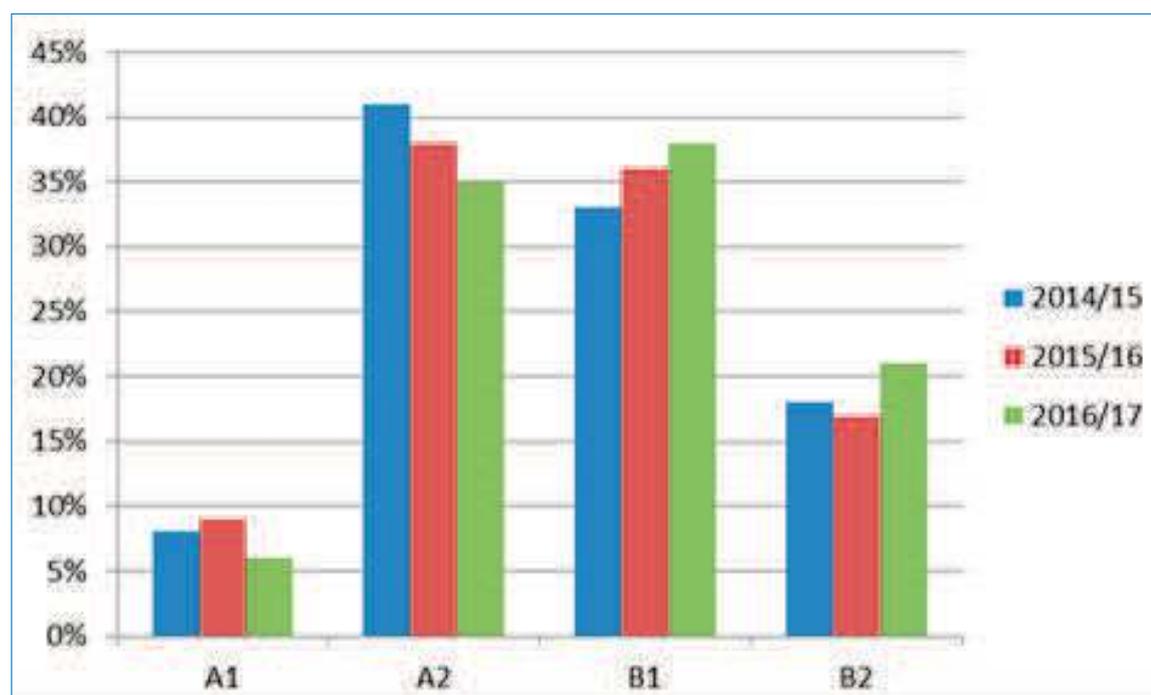
Source: Own

UoD students attend one 90-minute lesson once a week within five terms, which makes 149 teaching units (45-minute ones) including an intensive language course at the end of the fourth term. However, this total amount of lessons does not correspond to 450 lessons prescribed by CEFR for the transition from A2 to B1 levels for all students. Achieving the proficiency level B1 causes problems for more than half of the accepted students. Students with a higher entry level than B1 can sit the NATO STANAG 6001 SLP3 exam.

The face-to-face teaching enables students to level their knowledge, therefore it is based on general English commercial textbooks available in our book market. Teachers focus on those skills with which students have difficulties while mastering, and these are mainly productive skills (speaking and writing) according to the STANAG 6001 SLP2 requirements. During their self-study students should acquire and practise the receptive skills, and so each teacher provides students with proper study materials, both in paper form and in the form of electronic links to available websites. Furthermore, students can use study materials on the UoD Intranet, like the course "STANAG SLP2 Practice", where numerous texts from commercial sources are published.

Electronic course APA

With respect to quite a large number of students who did not achieve B1 level at the entry test, in 2015/16 teachers of the Language Centre of the UoD decided to design a compact electronic course which would help students pass the exam in two receptive skills (reading and listening) and enable them to continue with the practice for two remaining productive skills (speaking and writing). The course, which was launched in September 2016, contains authentic materials processed by the teachers and is supplied with practical exercises.

The course authors are experienced in designing online courses for combined study programme students, where the situation is even more complicated. These students have minimum face-to-face lessons and most of their study for exams is based on their self-study. Thus, the use of electronic supports can help them to orientate in the topics of individual study modules which they have to master in order to pass the final university exam. Therefore these materials are focused on specific terminology, not on general English.

The course called APA (an acronym meaning English for the Military) is published in LMS MOODLE, which was chosen as the suitable e-learning environment because it is most widely used at Czech secondary schools and universities, and it offered us an extensive choice of interactive exercises which form the core of the e-learning course. Another advantage is that Moodle is currently used at UoD as well as at Military Secondary School and College, so all military students are already familiar with it. Apart from the interactive exercises, there are presented non-interactive study materials and additional sources.

Study materials are sorted according to topics the mastering of which is required for passing STANAG 6001 SLP2. The topics are as follows:
1. Family and Relationships
2. Job and Career
3. Housing and Accommodation
4. Travelling
5. Shopping and Services
6. Leisure Time
7. Environment
8. Health
9. Food
10. Society
11. Media
12. Basic Military English.

Each topic is divided into two lessons regarding the difficulty and contains interactive exercises for practising vocabulary and reading comprehension at levels B1 to B2 in order to offer the better students the study material as well. The exercises are incorporated in the format of QUIZ which enables the users to get feedback, their evaluation, and record-keeping. Essentially, we used the following types of interactive activities – multiple choice, close, true/false, drag and drop, and short answers boxes. When students finish the quiz, they submit it and their results in percentages are displayed. They have a chance to overlook their solutions and to compare it with the correct ones. The number of attempts is not limited and the best quiz scores are recorded. The also course includes some non-interactive exercises, where the course participants can react to the set tasks (answering questions, expressing their opinion, forming questions and comments to the texts) which are discussed in the face-to-face lessons. Each topic includes two further lessons with tests to practice listening and reading comprehension. These tests correspond in their form to the tests at STANAG 6001 SLP2 exam, which can contribute to students' better prospects for passing. The time allocated for each lesson is approximately 45 minutes.

The structure of every topic is as follows:
❯ Lesson 1: Texts and activities to the topic.
❯ Lesson 2: Listening comprehension test.
❯ Lesson 3: Texts and activities to the topic.
❯ Lesson 4: Reading and listening comprehension test.

The course is supplemented with the manual/instructions to facilitate the study for students. Further, the course contains Forum, where students can discuss the topics, express their opinions and inquires, and also react to the other students' opinions. In the appendix there are additional materials including the grammar and vocabulary related to the topics.

Students were offered this course as an optional source of practical activities for STANAG 6001 SLP2 exam and the frequency and length of their study depended on their responsible approach to their self-study. Also the choice of individual topics was up to them and the suggested pace was to submit one topic a month. The course was given as an obligatory part of the English self-study for those students whose entry knowledge was at levels A2 or lower.

Feedback

Students of the first and second grades of the full-time five-year Master's degree study programme were asked to express their opinions on the course APA with focus on the level of presented materials, the time spent on individual lessons, and the format of exercises. 263 students were provided with an electronic questionnaire which contained 12 items. The information was gathered from 182 of respondents (69 %).

The appropriateness of materials was compared to the entry language levels of our students according to STANAG 6001 levels. We found out that this course seems suitable for more than 82 % of students as a tool for their language skills improvement to meet the SLP2 requirements. They appreciate the fact that the tasks are challenging, but not excessively demanding or incomprehensible (Graph 2).

Graph 2: Difficulty of tasks
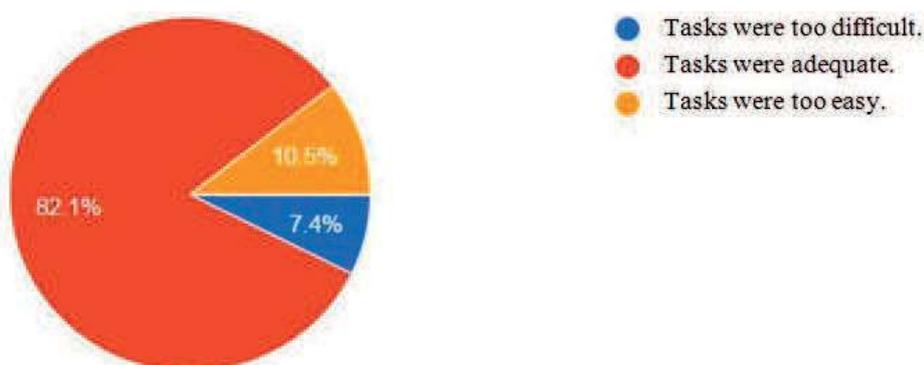
Source: Own

Next we surveyed the students' motivation for the APA course usage (Graph 3). Approximately the same number of students worked in the course on their teachers' requirements and according to their own need to improve their skills before the exam. We were pleased that there were students who had already passed STANAG 6001 SLP2 exam who welcomed the course for revision and practice in order not to lose gained language skills (7.5 %). Quite a large number of students approached the course only out of curiosity (22.6 %).

Graph 3: Reasons for using APA course
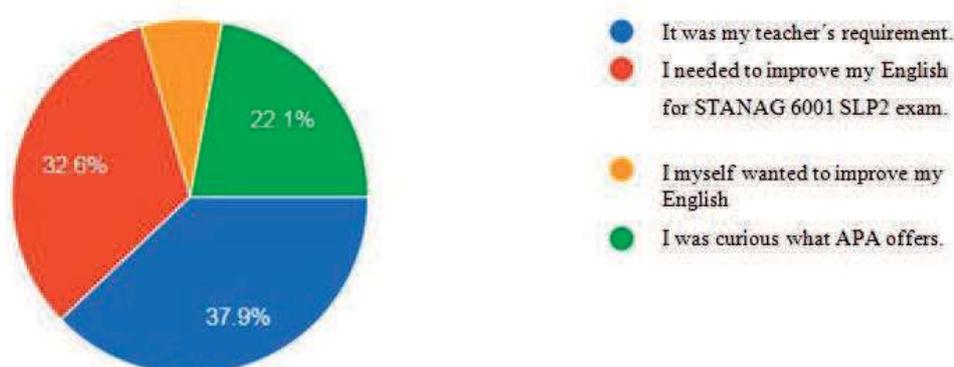
Source: Own

The students who approached the course out of curiosity stated that they did not use the APA course for the following reasons: they preferred other sources like reading authentic materials, watching films in original language with subtitles etc. (56.8 %), their teacher did not require using the course (20.7 %), the form of e-learning did not suit them (20.7 %). Some of the respondents state that they did not use the APA course because they were too busy (24.2 %). (See Table 1)

Table 1: Reasons for low number of visits to APA course

If you studied at the course only several times (1x to 4x), mark the three most likely reasons for this fact.	
1. I use other possibilities for studying English.	56.8 %
2. I forgot about the APA course.	31.6 %
3. I am too busy to study the APA course.	24.2 %
4. My teacher does not make me study the APA course.	20.7 %
5. E-learning does not suit me.	20.7 %
6. The technical environment of Moodle puts me off.	13.7 %
7. I do not have an Internet access.	5.3 %

Source: own. Data from APA questionnaire.

The students of the full-time five-year Master's degree study programme do not have any problems in working with electronic study materials (83 % did not state any problems), which is contrary to the previous authors' experience with e-learning courses designed for the combined study programme students where only 55 % of respondents were satisfied with electronic environment (Berankova et al 2013, 13). The contemporary full-time students accept the blended-learning form positively. According to the questionnaire, the APA course helped to improve listening comprehension for 60 %, reading comprehension for 62 %, and grammar for 53 % of them (Graph 4). Although the course is not primarily focused on speaking and writing skills, students noticed their improvement in speaking (30 %) and writing (44 %).

Graph 4: Skills improvement
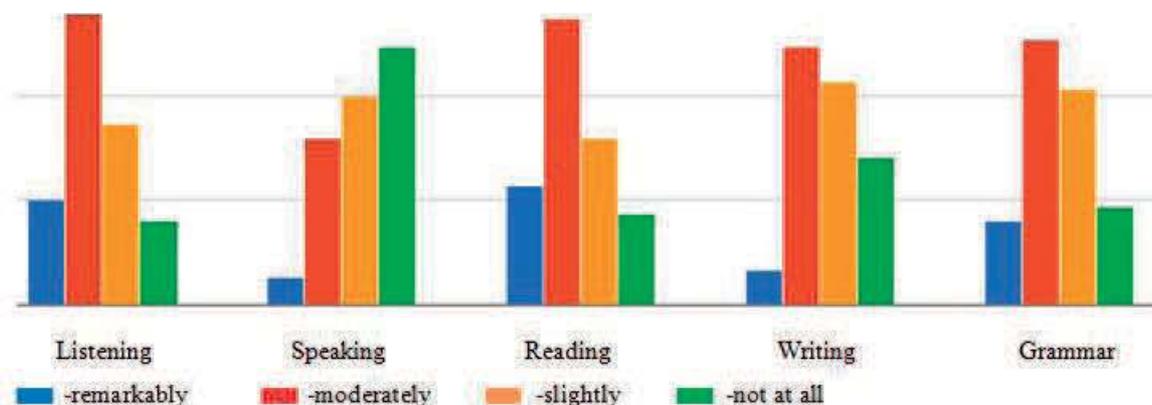
Source: Own

There were also several students' critical remarks. For example, they did not regard LMS MOODLE as the suitable online environment, and they suggested different, more advanced possibilities. However, we cannot take these suggestions into account because of the previously stated reasons for the choice. Some of the students criticized mistakes in several tasks which complicated their self-study. If these mistakes were reported, the authors were grateful for the students' cooperation and corrected them as quickly as possible. Students could report the comments to their teachers or comment in the Forum which is at the top of the course. The next remark dealt with the way the correctness of the exercises was displayed. Students had to go through the whole lesson, submit their answers, and only then they could go through the lesson again and see the correct answers. We reacted by the change of the exercises setting – students can see the correct answers immediately after submitting individual exercises.

Despite the fact that there appeared to be several critical remarks, overall the APA course was accepted positively. We can state that the course met the purpose it was designed for – to help students with improving and practising the receptive skills, reading and listening comprehension, to be able to pass the Ministry of Defence requirement for STANAG 6001 SLP2 exam.

Conclusion

The path from traditional to blended learning is not without its challenges and pitfalls. The aim of this paper and research was to share the challenges faced in blended programme at the University of Defence. Our focus was primarily on engagement and investment in sustained use of the APA course provided as the part of current English language courses. The research method, questionnaire, enabled us to address the APA users, to gather and process data from all respondents, albeit this part of research will be followed by the qualitative research (semi-structured interviews) to get information in depth.

From the gathered data it was concluded that the appropriateness of materials is adequate for the majority of students (82.1 %), which is positive. On the other hand, all critical remarks and recommendations have been implemented in the APA course and serve as a source of inspiration for the further work. Ayan states that implementation of Moodle is both motivating and autonomy building particularly in English language courses (Ayan, 2015, 6), however, only 32.6 % of the respondents used the APA course because they needed to improve their English for STANAG 60001 SLP2 exam, which is the mandatory exam for all military professionals. Some students did not regard LMS Moodle as a suitable online environment. According to the search for a suitable virtual learning environment for the Czech military, the DISTANCE Defence Research Project in 2007-2008 (Halberstat, Prenosil 2009), in which one of the co-authors participated, three independent studies suggested Moodle as the most suitable LMS for the ACR. Additionally, Stankova and Businova state that Moodle modules enable the educators to

build richly collaborative communities, to deliver the content to students, and assess students' performance (Stankova, Businova 2010, 147).

The authors consider the research as the beginning of a longer process to optimize language training at the UoD and to enhance the UoD students' successfulness in meeting the ACR requirements.

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