



Original Article

# Insights into High School Teachers' and Students' Perspectives on Communicative Skills Represented in English Textbook

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**Abstract:** Course books play an integral part in the process of teaching and learning in general and that of English language teaching and learning. Additionally, it is vital to choose appropriate course books for students to develop their communicative skills. In the context of Vietnam, the new English textbooks for high school students have been designed in an attempt to enhance the communication competence among Vietnamese high school students. Within such a context, this study aims at exploring EFL teachers and students' perspectives on communicative skills represented in the new English textbook grade 10. This study involved 42 students in answering a questionnaire and 5 teachers in responding the interview questions. With the employment of mixed methods approach, the findings indicated that participants believed that the new English textbook grade 10 could improve their communicative skills. Specifically, the activities designed in the textbook reinforced the communicative skills among students. Furthermore, language provided in the textbook is appropriate and conducive for students, and the topics and contents could help to improve students' communicative skills. Such preliminary findings are hoped to contribute to a better understanding of the new English textbooks in English language learning in Vietnamese context.

**Keywords:** Communicative skills, English textbook grade 10, EFL students, textbook evaluation.

## 1. Introduction

Many researchers (e.g., Dubin, 1978 [1]; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994 [2]; Sheldon, 1988;

Tomlinson, 2003 [3]) have confirmed that course books play crucial parts in the curriculum as effective contributors to transmit knowledge and skills to students. According to Tomlinson (2003), a course book is considered as a "route map" which enables teachers and students to review what they have study as well as to foresee what will be taught. It is also

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supply the structure and the syllabus for the teachers to follow. Dubin (1978) clarifies that course books are “the basic ingredient in language courses” (p.128). Therefore, course books are widely accepted as key factors in English teaching and learning situation (Sheldon, 1988 [4]; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). It is obvious that course books bring many benefits to teachers as well as students. As Bảo Đạt (2008) [5] lists some of the advantages of the course books, they possess a wide range of colorful visuals, systematic tasks, various topics and linguistic accuracy. He, however, illustrates some drawbacks of using course books in teaching and learning languages. The instructions are sometimes too complex for students to understand and follow. Some of the cultural information in the course books is unfamiliar with students. Moreover, some course books are unsuitable for students to improve their communicative skills; therefore, there are not enough chances for students to practice their speaking skills and express themselves. Furthermore, seldom can teachers find the perfect fit between their students’ needs and the contents of the course books (Cunningsworth, 1995) [6]. Consequently, there is a necessity for teachers to adapt the practices in the course books so that they can fit the requirements of enhancing students’ communicative skills, meeting the students’ needs, and achieving students’ expected outcomes. According to Núñez et al. (2009) [7], teachers are those who can adapt their teaching practice; therefore, they stimulate the students’ learning process through devising the materials with the new changes and ideas, which are more suitable for their students as well as attract their attention into the lesson. It is the teachers who can explore things their learners have already known and can do, and things they need to learn or do (Graves, 1997) [8]. Moreover, during the adaptation process, teachers also attain more experience and gain their knowledge and teaching skills, which is beneficial for both teachers and students.

In the context of Vietnam, teachers do not have an opportunity to opt for course books that

are suitable for students’ needs and learning levels due to the administrations from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) of Vietnam. However, in an attempt to promote students’ communicative competence, a series of 10-year English textbook or the new English textbooks designed by the National Foreign Language 2020 Project have been introduced to many students nationwide to pilot since 2013 by the MOET. It is thought that their students can acquire the language more effectively and maximize their exposure to language in use by using the new textbooks. However, the question is that whether the new English textbooks have fostered students’ communication skills or not. However, within the scope of this study, only the English textbook grades 10 are focused on. In order to achieve the aforementioned objective, this research aims at addressing the following research question:

- What are high school students’ and teachers’ perspectives on communicative skills represented in the new English textbook grade 10?

## 2. Literature Review

According to Tomlinson (2003), material evaluation is a procedure to measure systematically the value of learning materials in relation to their objectives. In the process, the effects on the learners utilizing their learning materials are also judged and analyzed in order to have a good choice and development of learning materials for learners. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) [11] assures that it is imperative to evaluate materials in language teaching as it may have a great influence on the ways the teachers teach in their classroom. There appears a two-way process as the teachers’ roles involve in both selecting the materials as well as developing their perception in their teaching situations. Moreover, teachers enhance their abilities to evaluate learning materials as they identify the strengths and weaknesses of the materials as well as their tendency to adapt the tasks in the new course books (Cunningsworth, 1995). Mukundan (2006) [12] states that having

the appropriate selection of materials for learners and determining the effectiveness of the materials play vital roles in teaching process.

In terms of tools for textbook evaluation, many researchers suggest a wide variety of checklists from which teachers can apply to evaluate the course books they are utilizing. Williams (1983) [13] recommends a criteria focusing on the general linguistic features of language such as language items, skills, grammar, vocabulary as well as technical features such as pictures, charts, tables. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the checklist of material evaluation is composed of learners, objectives, subjects, content, methodology etc. Cunningsworth (1995) suggests the checklist putting emphasis on objectives and methodology, design and organization, topic, language content and skills.

In brief, a wide range of criteria in the checklist by various researchers has been introduced lately. Some of the criteria which are in common such as language, topic and content and the activities are discussed and analyzed in this study.

Communicative competency is considered as a norm in teaching English as an international languages and in the globalization, and communication skills play crucial roles in almost every landscape in our life. These are the reasons why the curriculum focusing on communicative skills for schools in Vietnam is the center of attention in the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project (Hoàng Văn Vân, 2016) [14]. The new English textbooks were designed in order to meet the communicative requirements.

The chosen course book is one of the new English textbooks - English textbook grade 10, designed by the National Foreign Language 2020 Project by the MOET. With the aim at improving students' language proficiency by focusing on students' intercultural communicative competence. Like the other English textbooks in the series of new English textbooks, English textbook grade 10 is designed into 4 components: themes, topics, communicative competences and linguistic

knowledge/language items. Units were designed with 9 main sections including: getting started, language, reading, speaking, writing, communication and culture, looking back and project with communicative tasks involving in these sections and the communicative tasks are integrated into each sections. This study will analyze the communicative tasks in the task analysis sheet in terms of the 9 main parts as follows: Part 1: Getting started; Part 2: Language; Part 3: Reading; Part 4: Speaking; Part 5: Listening; Part 6: Writing; Part 7: Communication and culture; Part 8: Looking back; Part 9: Project.

Much research on textbook evaluation, especially the communicative skills in the textbooks, has been carried out recently. Ahmed (2016) [15] implemented the study with the aim of evaluating Effective Communication Skills course book among 214 students and 3 instructors. With the employment of questionnaire, the findings of the study revealed that the participants, especially for those who were instructed at the tertiary levels, expressed the satisfaction with this course book and that the book enhanced the students' communicative skills. Wale (2017) [16] conducted a study in order to evaluate the suitability of Communicative English Skills course book in terms of four major aspects, including layouts and designs, subjects and contents, language skills and activities. Forty first-year agriculture students as well as two English teachers were chosen to implement the questionnaire. The results of the study showed that the layout and design mostly met the students' demands while the most of the subjects and contents were incompatible with their language learning needs. With respect to the language skills, the balance of the language skills introduced in the course book was rather appropriate; however, they were, in some cases, incapable of enhancing learners' communication in their future career environment. With reference to the activities designed in the course book, despite an attempt to design activities in helping students to achieve their study levels, they did not improve the students' needs and styles. In

short, the writer concluded that the course book failed to address the demands of the agriculture students; therefore, it was not suitable the current curriculum at his local place.

In the context of Vietnam, in terms of the new series of new English textbooks, Hoàng Văn Vân (2018) [17] presented the renovation in curriculum design and textbook development as a solution to improving the quality of English teaching in Vietnamese schools. The conclusions are that the design of the three sets of English textbooks (primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary) is breakthrough solution to improving the quality of teaching and learning English, and the coherent, systematic and high-quality series of English textbooks have renovated the teacher training and teacher retraining, in teaching methodology, and in testing and assessment. Nguyễn Thị Viên (2018) [18] conducted a study so as to evaluate the new English textbooks grade 6 at Quynh Mai secondary school. With the aim of investigate the extent to which the textbooks were suitable for students, three research instruments, namely document analysis, questionnaire and interview were employed. The results of the study revealed that the textbooks were appropriate and helpful for students in terms of layout and design, contents and activities. Nguyễn Thị Thùy Minh and Cao Thị Hồng Phương (2019) [19] implemented a study to evaluate the secondary textbooks in Vietnam to measure how well the students were prepared to develop their intercultural competence in global contexts. By using the document analysis, the findings of the study showed that despite the fact that the cultural contents of different countries worldwide were recommended in the textbooks, students did not stand much of a chance of improving their intercultural knowledge thoroughly. In their research on Vietnamese high school English textbooks evaluation, Nguyễn Thị Thùy Minh, Marlina and Cao Thị Hồng Phương (2020) [20] employed the document analysis to evaluate English textbook 10. The findings the indicated that only did the textbooks partially meet the learners' communicative demands in reality as

they had a tendency to prepare for students the use English to communicate with Anglophone English users.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Setting

This study was conducted at Bui Thi Xuan High School, Lam Dong Province, which was chosen to implement the new English textbook designed by the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam for over 7 years. There were 3 grades: 10, 11 and 12 with 6 classes. The new English textbooks of each grade are divided into four books, including two student books and two workbooks for each semester. Each student book is composed of five units with various topics of education, entertainment, society, health, technology, and so on. In each unit, there are 9 sections, consisting of getting started, language, reading, speaking, listening, writing, communication and culture, looking back and project.

#### 3.2. Research Participants

Participants of the study who were purposively sampled were 42 students who were using the new English textbooks at Bui Thi Xuan High School, Lam Dong Province. To learn in the classes using new English textbooks, students at this school were obliged to take an entrance examination by the Department of Education and Training in Lam Dong province, and those with marks above average were chosen, so their English proficiency were assured to be better than other students'. Most of the students had studied English for more than 8 years. They answered the questionnaire of textbook evaluation related to three main aspects: activities, language, and topic and content.

Five out of 10 English teachers at Bui Thi Xuan High School who had been teaching the new English textbooks for at least 3 years were purposively invited for interview in order to explore their perspectives of the new English textbooks in terms of activities, language and subject and content.

### 3.3. Research Instruments

As the nature of the study is the mixed-methods design, two instruments utilized to collect the data were questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was designed with 23 questions, adapted from the English questionnaire by Admed (2016). However, in this study, the author merely focused on the communicative tasks rather than the general view of the course books. It was separated into 3 parts: i) students' textbook evaluation on communicative activities; ii) students' textbook evaluation on language type towards communicative activities; and iii) students' textbook evaluation on topics and contents. The questionnaire was structured with the Likert Scale from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". To ensure the validity and reliability, the questionnaire was reviewed by a researcher in the field of English language studies before it was delivered to the participants of the study. Furthermore, in order to collect the best results, the author translated into Vietnamese to make the students understand the questionnaire more easily and to avoid misunderstandings. During the answering questionnaire process, the author was available so that the students could make questions if necessary. Cronbach Alpha  $\alpha$  is at .836, so the reliability of the questionnaire was relatively high.

In terms of semi-structured interview, the number of the teachers was 5 teachers who were invited for interviews. The interview included four questions which were checked and piloted to ensure the feasibility of these questions.

### 3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

As for data collection, 51 copies of questionnaire were administered to students in grades 11; however, 42 copies of questionnaire were returned. Before answering the questionnaire, the participants were explained the purpose of the study, and it took them around 15 minutes to answer the questionnaire. As regards the semi-structured interview, five teachers were invited for interview. The interviews were conducted in English and recorded for later analysis.

With respect to data analysis, there are two types of data: quantitative and qualitative. The former was analyzed by SPSS software in terms of (mean and standard deviation), and the meaning of the mean scores is interpreted as: 1-1.80: strongly disagree; 1.81-2.60: disagree; 2.61-3.40: neutral; 3.41- 4.20: agree; 4.21 - 5.00: strongly agree.

The latter was analyzed by using content analysis approach, which means that three steps, viz. familiarizing and organizing, coding and recoding, and summarizing and interpreting were employed. Five interviewed teachers were coded as T1, T2, T3, T4 and T5.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results

As can be seen in Table 1, it is evident that the total mean score of students' evaluation of communicative skills in the new English textbook grade 10 was high (M=3.83; SD=.357). This means that high school students were positive when evaluating communication skills in the English textbook.

Table 1. students' evaluation of communicative skills in the new English textbook grade 10

No		N=115	
		M	SD
1	Students' textbook evaluation on communicative activities	3.84	0.39
2	Students' textbook evaluation on language type towards communicative activities	3.78	0.41
3	Students' textbook evaluation on topics and contents	3.92	0.46
Total		3.83	.35

Note: M: mean; SD: Standard deviation

As can be seen from table 2, the results of the study revealed that the students agreed that the activities designed in the textbook promoted the creativity in their responses among students (item 1.6: M = 4.02, SD = 0.68) and their independence in their responses (item 1.7:

M = 3.98, SD = 0.84) in English classroom. The students approved that they could enhance their incorporation with their friends through individual, pair and group work (item 1.3: M = 4.00, SD = 0.73). Students also expressed agreements that “the textbook provides a balance of communicative activities” (item 1.1: M = 3.88, SD = 0.74) and “encourage sufficient communicative and meaningful practice” (item 1.2: M = 3.86, SD = 0.72). Students noticed the importance of grammatical points and vocabulary items in improving their communicative skills (item 1.4: M = 3.79,

SD = 0.68) and (item 1.5: M = 3.86, SD = 0.68). They acknowledged that reading tasks, listening tasks and writing tasks could reinforce their communicative skills; however, they believed that tasks in writing skills (item 1.9: M = 3.48, SD = 0.89) did not enhance much on their communication as the others skills (item 1.10: M = 3.55, SD = 0.74) and (item 1.11: M = 3.06, SD = 0.85). This can be understood that students had positive attitudes when they evaluated the new English textbook grade 10. They believed that the new textbook could aid them to improve their communicative skills.

Table 2. Students' textbook evaluation on communicative activities

No.		N=115	
		M	SD
1.1	The textbook provides a balance of communicative activities.	3.88	0.74
1.2	The activities encourage sufficient communicative and meaningful practice.	3.86	0.72
1.3	The activities incorporate individual, pair and group work.	4.00	0.73
1.4	The grammar points are introduced in motivating realistic contexts.	3.79	0.68
1.5	The vocabulary items are introduced in motivating realistic contexts.	3.86	0.68
1.6	The activities promote creative responses among students.	4.02	0.68
1.7	The activities promote independent responses among students.	3.98	0.84
1.8	The number of tasks is suitable.	3.60	0.94
1.9	The tasks in reading periods can improve my communicative skills.	3.48	0.89
1.10	The tasks in listening periods can improve my communicative skills.	3.55	0.74
1.11	The tasks in writing periods can improve my communicative skills.	3.06	0.86

Note: M: mean; SD: Standard deviation

In order to obtain in-depth information about evaluating Communicative Language Teaching in the new English textbook grade 10 from the quantitative data, the qualitative data from the interview was also taken into account. With respect to the qualitative data collected from the interviews, it was revealed that all of the teachers who answered the interview questions agreed that students can improve communication skills through practicing different tasks in the textbooks. They also shared that:

Students can improve their communication skills in most of the periods, even when they study the skills (T1).

It helps students to practice speaking in most of the periods from getting started and project (T2).

It helps students to improve their communication skills by practicing the tasks in the textbooks (T3).

It is easier for students to practice our speaking skills by doing the different tasks in the textbook (T4).

Students can speak English better by using the new vocabulary and grammar point in the textbook (T5).

Turning to the results of students' textbook evaluation average on language type towards communicative activities, it can be noted the main aspect mentioned as in Table 3 is language. Students approved that the language used in the new English textbooks grade 10 was suitable for their study level (item 2.2:  $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) and they could apply it in their future (item 2.5:  $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ).

Students also showed their strong agreement on the authentic English language used in the textbooks which was used in real-life situations (item 2.1:  $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ), the progression of grammar points and vocabulary which was appropriate for students (item 2.3:  $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) and the helpfulness of them in enhancing speaking skills (item 2.4:  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ). These results indicated that students could improve their communicative skills through the language in the new English textbook grade 10.

Table 3. Students' textbook evaluation on language type towards communicative activities

No.	Items	N = 115	
		M	SD
2.1	The language used in the textbook is authentic – i.e. like real-life English.	3.83	0.69
2.2	The language used is at the right level for my current English ability.	4.10	0.76
2.3	The progression of grammar points and vocabulary items is appropriate for my learning levels.	3.83	0.79
2.4	The grammar points are helpful to improve my communicative skills.	3.90	0.69
2.5	The language functions in English are suitable for me to use in the future.	3.95	0.73

Note: M: mean; SD: Standard deviation.

Aligning with quantitative data, qualitative data indicated that the teachers strongly agreed that the language used in the new English textbook grade 10 helped students to enhance their communicative skills. However, two of the teachers believed that the vocabulary in the textbook should be reduced. Here are the obvious examples:

The language used in the English textbook is taken from real-life situations, so students may find it easy to apply them in their communication (T1).

The vocabulary items and the grammatical points are helpful for students when they communicating. Furthermore, the new vocabulary is relatedly used in different tasks in the unit, which helps students to memorize them easily. However, it will be better if the new vocabulary is reduced (T3).

Most of the language used is suitable for my students' level. However, the vocabulary is

so much that it is difficult for students to memorize (T4).

It is clear that from the reasons given, students and teachers agreed that the textbook provided appropriate language for the students.

In terms of the results of students' textbook evaluation on topics and contents towards communicative activities, the high school students, as regarded in Table 4, had much positive attitudes towards the topics and contents in the English textbook grade 10. Most of the students confirmed that the topics and contents in the English textbook were interesting (item 3.3:  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), motivating (item 3.5:  $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) and challenging (item 3.4:  $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). In terms of the cultures, they strongly agreed that the materials were not culturally biased (item 3.7:  $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). There were agreeable ideas of the relevance between the topics and contents of the textbook and the students' demands (item

3.1:  $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ). Moreover, students highly agreed the topics and contents of the textbook were in wide variety of themes and topics. In general, students' textbook evaluation on topics and contents towards communicative activities was positive.

Table 4. Students' textbook evaluation on topics and contents towards communicative activities

No.	Items	N = 115	
		M	SD
3.1	The topics and contents of the textbook are relevant to my needs as an English language learner.	3.79	0.78
3.2	The topics and contents of the textbook are generally realistic.	3.81	0.74
3.3	The topics and contents of the materials are interesting.	3.88	0.71
3.4	The topics and contents of the materials are challenging.	3.71	0.77
3.5	The topics and contents of the materials are motivating.	3.76	0.82
3.6	There is sufficient variety in the topics and contents of the textbook.	3.88	0.71
3.7	The materials are not culturally biased.	4.02	0.72

Note: M: mean; SD: Standard deviation

Concerning the data collected from the interviews, the findings indicated the teachers' opinions on topics and contents mentioned in the new English textbook Grade 10. Positive as well as negative comments were raised. Some teachers gave positive comments as followed:

The topics and contents are interesting. It helps students know more about the society, culture, environment in the world, and use these to their communicative skills (T1,T3).

The topics and contents cover a wide variety of fields such as education, technology, environment, cultures; therefore, it can attract students' attention. Thanks to this, students can use the knowledge to improve their communicative skills (T4).

The topics and contents are useful. My students can learn new things from the

textbooks and enhance their communicative skills (T5).

However, not all teachers gave positive comments, some negative comments are:

Some of the topics and contents are difficult for students as they are too young to think about it such as discussing about wedding in unit 2: Cultural identity (T1).

The culture in the textbook is not in details and updated (T2).

From the results mentioned above, although there were some negative comments from the teachers, in general, teachers and students had strong and positive agreements about the topics and contents in the new English textbook grade 10.

#### 4.2. Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that teachers as well as students believed that the new English textbooks could improve the students' communicative skills. The communicative approach emphasizes on the importance of improving learners' communication skills in real-life communication. According to McKay (2013) [21], in order to enhance students' motivation and to aid specific goals, the use of authentic materials as well as the demonstration how language is used by the community are encouraged in language classroom. Yalden (1983, as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001 [22]) adds in order to have a good language books and enhance communicative skills, task-based activities and materials should be taken into considerations. In this study, the majority of the students and teachers agreed that the language utilized in the new English textbook grade 10 was authentic and the activities in the textbooks were designed in task-based ones, which, in some ways, supported students' communication. McDonough and Shaw (1993), Brown (2001) [23], Oxford (2001) [24] state that integration of the four skills, including reading, speaking, listening and writing is regarded as an plausible approach in a communicative and interactive framework and advocate for its use in the contents of the



ESL/EFL textbooks. In the same line with this study, the large number of students believed that they could improve their communicative skills when they learned the new English textbook grade 10. Nunan (2004) [26] indicates that when communicative language involves in pedagogical tasks, the interrelationship of meaning and the form is specifically targeted more as grammatical knowledge is considered as a tool to express meaning. In this study, most of the students expressed their agreement that both grammatical points and vocabulary were appropriate and helpful for them to develop their communication skills. Tok (2010) [27] emphasizes the topics and contents are one of the imperative factors in textbook evaluation.

Related to the new English textbooks in Vietnam, the findings of this study was partially supported by Nguyen Thi Vien's (2018) study in terms of contents and activities. The results of the two studies stated that the contents and activities are appropriate for students. However, Nguyen Thi Vien (2018) did not confirm whether the contents and the activities in the textbook enhanced students' communicative skills or not. On the contrary, the results of this study revealed that participants believed that their communicative skills in three aspects: activities, language and topics and content could be improved. This is also supported by Hoang Van Van (2018) who confirmed that the main aim of the textbooks was to promote students to communicate effectively.

## **5. Conclusion**

The findings of the study have indicated that teachers and students could promote their communicative skills thanks to the new English textbook. The study also sheds light on the students' evaluation of some of the aspects designed in the new English textbooks in order to improve students' communicative skills in terms of activities, language as well as the topics and contents. In conclusion, the new English textbook grade 10 is applicable and appropriate in the context of my school in

order to meet the urgent requirements for Vietnam that learners can use English to communicate effectively.

In order that the use of the new English textbooks supports greatly for students' communication skills at high schools in Vietnam, some pedagogical implications are introduced as follows. First of all, during teaching and learning process, teachers should adapt some activities in order to suit the students' levels and reinforce the students' communication skills as well as explore some materials which are compatible with language, topics and contents in the textbooks. In terms of textbook modification and adaptation, it is vital to improve learning autonomy among students (Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh, Cao Thi Hong Phuong, 2019). Furthermore, it is integral for the teachers to encourage their students to work in pairs or groups in the language classroom to practice English more so that they can develop learner autonomy which is considered one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (e.g., Tran Quoc Thao, Duong My Tham, 2018 [28]; Tran Quoc Thao, Vo Quoc Dai, 2019 [29]). The fact that teachers should involve more authentic language activities, involving the intercultural knowledge, is vital as the more the students are provided with authentic language, the more they feel confident when communicating in real-life situations. Also, teachers should stimulate students to apply the grammar points as well as vocabulary items into their real-life settings.

The study has some limitations resulting from the nature and process of research which could affect the generalizability of the findings. First of all, due to the small population of the study, it cannot provide a complete picture of the textbook evaluation. Another limitation is that only three aspects are discussed and analyzed in this study. It would be better if the author adds some more aspects to evaluate the textbooks. Finally, the fact that only the new English textbook grade is evaluated among the

new English textbook series in Vietnam is the last limitation.

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