

Graduate Students' Beliefs About Learning a Second Language

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For practical and theoretical reasons, researchers within the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have taken a continued interest in individual differences, as these factors help explain why some learners are more successful than others. As part of this research, especially in the last three decades, researchers have examined learners' beliefs about language acquisition. As Horwitz (1987) points out, learner beliefs about SLA are important as they may determine whether students adopt effective learning strategies. Moreover, when learner beliefs clash with instructional approaches, students may feel less enthusiastic about classroom activities. Based on the assumption that more accurate beliefs generally facilitate learning, research in this area may also assist L2 instructors in identifying student misconceptions that are most likely to negatively impact learning, so that these can be discussed in order to promote learners' understanding and control of their own learning processes.

Research on language learners' preconceptions about L2 learning processes received strong impetus from Horwitz's (1987) development of the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), a survey consisting of 34 Likert-scale items. The inventory was developed based on teachers' input regarding teachers', students', and laypersons' typical beliefs about L2 learning. Research on L2 learner beliefs using the BALLI and

similar instruments has investigated the conceptualization of learning among a diverse range of stakeholders in L2 educational contexts. While several studies have focused on middle (Mantle-Bromley, 1995) or high school students (Aziz & Quraishi, 2017) or even older learners (Johari, Sahari, Morni, & Tom, 2017), most research has examined college-level students, sometimes comparing their responses with those of their instructors (Kern, 1995). This research has produced a number of interesting findings. Student-teacher comparisons suggest that students' beliefs often diverge from those of their instructors (Bernat, 2007; Kuntz, 2000; Schulz, 2001) with students at times favoring pedagogical approaches that their instructors view as outmoded and ineffective (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001).

As would be expected, students' beliefs appear to shift based on learning experiences (Riley, 2009) such as study-abroad (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), although some research suggests that it is only with longer periods of study abroad that beliefs undergo fundamental change (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Kaypak & Ortacepe, 2014). Beliefs regarding several aspects of L2 acquisition such as target language difficulty (Diab, 2006) or the efficacy of grammar instruction (Loewen et al., 2009) appear to be influenced by the language being learned. In the last decade, there has been greater focus on examining the beliefs of language instructors or instructors in training (Kavanoz, Yüksel, & Varol, 2017; Kouritzin, Piquemal, & Nakagawa, 2007). Some studies suggest that initial hands-on experience in teaching an L2 precipitates a shift in teachers' beliefs about L2 acquisition (Busch, 2010), while other studies (Hapan, 2014) have reported less change.

While research on learner beliefs has adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches and sometimes mixed designs using both approaches, most studies have taken a quantitative approach based on survey data. The most popular survey instrument has been the BALLI, which has often been slightly modified or extended. To investigate the relationship between learner beliefs and strategies, the BALLI has been used, in a number of studies, in combination with Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). In one of the larger studies of this type, Hong (2006) examined the language beliefs and strategy use of 428 monolingual Korean and 420 bilingual Korean-Chinese university students. The bilingual students, in spite of living in a less favorable English-learning environment, reported higher use of strategies, greater appreciation of formal learning, and less fear of interacting with native speakers.

While extensive research has been conducted on undergraduate college students, relatively little attention has been focused on the language learning beliefs of graduate students. Fortunately, a few recent studies (Suwanarak, 2012; Tang & Tian, 2015) have begun to fill this lacuna in learning belief research. Suwanarak (2012) examined 220 Thai graduate students in an investigation of their strategies and language learning beliefs. The participants responded to the BALLI and a smaller group of 35 participants were interviewed. Survey responses indicated that the participants felt that motivation, self-confidence, aptitude, and regular practice played a key role in L2 achievement.

As graduate ESL students' beliefs have been relatively unexplored in previous research, the current study examined the

beliefs of a group of matriculating graduate students at a large private university in the U.S. It is felt that this research will be of interest to instructors and program developers who need to better understand graduate students' assumptions and approaches to learning.

Method

The participants were graduate students in their first semester of study at a private university in the U.S. Except for a couple PhD students, all were matriculating students beginning Master degree programs. All were enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course that was required as a supplementary course for students who scored below 600 on the TOEFL PBT (or 100 on the TOEFL iBT). They were primarily enrolled in finance, engineering, and statistics with only a couple students in humanities majors. Approximately half (43) of the participants were from China, and the remaining participants were from a diverse range of countries. In general, they could be described as highly motivated and self-directed.

To assess students' beliefs, the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) created by Horwitz (1987) was used. The survey assesses learners' belief in five key areas: (1) foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of learning a language, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivation. Although the questions can be sorted into these five areas, the survey is not designed to yield a composite score. Participants were asked to fill out the questionnaire as homework after the first day of class. Survey

responses were collected using the survey function of QUIA, a subscription-based website for testing and surveys. In the analysis of results, the current paper will compare participants' beliefs with current consensus of experts within the field of second language acquisition to the extent that such consensus exists.

Results

Foreign language aptitude. On the BALLI (Horwitz, 1987), a relatively large portion of items assess opinions regarding foreign language aptitude. Participants' responses to these nine items are shown in Table 1:

Table 1

BALLI Questions Related to Foreign Language Aptitude

#	Question
1	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.
2	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.
6	People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.
10	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.
11	People who are good at math or science are not good at learning foreign languages.
16	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.
19	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.
30	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.
33	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

The mean responses for the nine items are shown in Table 2. High responses indicate stronger agreement with the statements shown in Table 1 on a five-point Likert scale.

Table 2

Foreign Language Aptitude Responses

All Participants ($n = 81$)		
#	M	SD
1	4.3	0.9
2	3.9	0.9
6	3.2	0.8
10	3.3	0.8
11	2.2	0.9
16	2.8	0.9
19	2.8	1.0
30	3.4	0.8
33 ^a	4.2	0.8

^a The BALLI items related to aptitude are mostly worded so as to imply that aptitude exist and is an important individual difference. It should be noted that Item #33 is worded to imply the opposite.

As can be seen, nearly all participants felt that children find it easier to learn an L2. Within SLA, comparisons between children and adult learners are complicated since linguistic development occurs alongside general cognitive development. Contrary to folk conceptions of SLA, prepubescent children in many settings do not appear to have any advantage and in most situations actually learn more slowly than their older prepubescent or postpubescent peers. In school settings, for example, earlier age has been found to be less important than the amount of input children receive (Muñoz, 2014). Moreover, studies that have made direct comparisons between children who started learning a foreign language earlier and those who started later have found that starting earlier does not have a positive effect on most aspects of acquisition (Celaya Villanueva, Torras, & Pérez-Vidal, 2001). Some

research suggests that starting L2A earlier may have a positive effect on the perception of L2 sounds (Fullana Rivera, 2005) and speaking skills (Turnbull, Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1998). On the other hand, research suggests that even in phonology-related areas of L2A, older children actually have an advantage (Garcia Lecumberri & Gallardo, 2003). Research has also failed to show an advantage for earlier learners in the acquisition of lexis (Miralpeix, 2007). Participants' strong support for Item #1 can, to some extent, be explained by the vague nature of the question. It is not clear, after all, whether the question is referring to adults' need for effort and motivation in L2A or to children's long-term advantages in terms of ultimate attainment when they acquire a language within immersion settings.

A common folk-theoretic assumption among language learners is that individuals vary greatly, with some learning languages more rapidly and achieving greater fluency and accuracy in production. As can be seen from the responses on Item #2, most respondents agreed with this assumption. While lay conceptualizations of aptitude contain many misconceptions, the general notion that aptitude is a critical individual difference among L2 learners receives extensive support within empirical research, which has shown that a constellation of factors such as working memory span and implicit learning abilities are highly predictive of L2 learning (Hummel, 2009; Li, 2015; Linck, Hughes, et al., 2013; Linck, Osthus, Koeth, & Bunting, 2013).

Although participants were learning English in the U.S. and although nearly all came from non-Indo-European L1 backgrounds, they nevertheless had somewhat positive estimates of the foreign

language learning abilities of people from their country of origin. They also felt that L2 learners have an advantage when learning a third language. While most SLA researchers would agree with the latter statement, the exact nature of the purported advantage is currently a subject of significant debate (for a discussion of L3A, see Cabrelli Amaro, Flynn, & Rothman, 2012; Flynn, Foley, & Vinnitskaya, 2004).

As seen in responses to Item #11, participants did not accept the notion that an aptitude for science and math is negatively correlated with foreign language aptitude. Responses can be explained, in part, by the fact that the participants, who had all learned enough English to gain acceptance into a U.S. graduate program, were mostly in science majors and/or majors requiring math skills. In other words, their own high achievements in both math and L2A suggested that math and language skills were not necessarily dissociated. Most researchers on aptitude would certainly agree that there is no strong disassociation between math and L2 skills. There are, in fact, strong indications that an aptitude in both areas largely overlaps with verbal working memory (WM) and other WM components (Peng, Namkung, Barnes, & Sun, 2015), so a strong disassociation would appear to be unlikely.

Surprisingly, participants gave low assessments of their own language learning abilities. Since the participants were matriculated graduate students who had, in nearly all cases, learned English to a fairly advanced level in a non-immersion setting, their responses probably represent an underestimation of their aptitude, which in most cases was probably quite high. Participants gave neutral responses to Item #19, which asked if they agreed that

women generally have higher language learning aptitude. Their responses mirror the rather mixed conclusions of researchers, who typically find only a minor difference between men and women, typically with women enjoying a slight advantage in some areas of L2A (Kaushanskaya, Marian, & Yoo, 2011; Piske, MacKay, & Flege, 2001; Rogers, Meara, Barnett-Legh, Curry, & Davie, 2017). Moreover, the locus of any purported advantage is not entirely clear, since women and men differ in terms of patterns of verbal interaction, attitudes toward classroom learning, and other factors that are associated with successful L2A.

The participants showed slight agreement with the statement regarding the association between intelligence and bilingualism (Item #30) while also agreeing quite strongly that anyone can learn a foreign language (Item #33). Strong agreement with Item #33 would logically entail that language aptitude does not strongly predict L2A success. The participants' responses on Item #33 may reflect discomfort with some of the implications inherent in the view that traits such as intelligence and aptitude are decisive factors predicting success in L2A.

Difficulty of learning a language. Another set of questions (see Table 3) examined the inherent difficulty of learning a foreign language.

Table 3

BALLI Questions Related to the Difficulty of Learning a Foreign Language

#	Question
3	Some languages are easier to learn than others.
4	English is: an easy language; a language of medium difficulty; a difficult language
5	I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.
15	If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well?
25	It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.
34	It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.

Participants' responses to Items #3, #5, #25, and #34 are shown in Table 4. The possible responses to #4 and #15 were not precisely scalar in nature, so they will be discussed separately.

Table 4

Responses Regarding Difficulty of L2A

All Participants ($n = 81$)		
#	M	SD
3	3.9	0.9
5	4.3	0.6
25	2.6	1.0
34	3.0	1.2

Participants generally agreed that some languages pose greater difficulty. Strictly speaking, difficulty is primarily related to the typological distance between a learner's L1 and the target language (Chiswick & Miller, 2004), so the BALLI question is overly vague. Participants were surprisingly upbeat regarding their prospects

of learning English. Neutral responses to Item #25 and Item #34 suggest that they did not feel that speaking was easier than listening and also did not feel that reading and writing were easier than listening and speaking. Their responses to these questions are odd if one considers the relative lack of online time pressure involved with reading and writing. Regarding the difficulty of English, most participants (53) said that English was “a language of medium difficulty,” about a quarter (20) said it was “an easy language”, and only a tenth (8) said it was “a difficult language”. Again, this is odd in light of the typological distance between English and many participants’ L1s. For example, over half of the participants were Chinese, and Chinese is regarded as typologically distant from English (Chiswick & Miller, 2004) and is written in a different script. Responses regarding the time to learn a language were likewise surprisingly optimistic. When asked how many years it would take if one studied an hour a day, 13 responded with “less than one year”, 26 responded with “one to two years”, 18 with “three to five years”, 12 with “5 to 10 years”, and 12 with “you can’t learn a language in an hour a day.”

Expert opinion would almost surely converge on the “5 to 10 years” response or perhaps the response that it is simply impossible to attain good working proficiency of an L2 in an hour a day. For perspective, it is useful to consider the curriculum and objectives of the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, California, one of the largest language schools in the world. Students (primarily young adults), nearly all from English L1 backgrounds, who have been screened for exceptionally high language learning aptitude currently spend around 64 weeks (six class hours per day for five

days a week with extensive study outside of class) in order to learn a “Category Four” language (i.e., Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, or Korean). The equivalent time calculated as an hour a day would be well in excess of five years. Moreover, the goal upon completion of these intensive courses is merely limited working proficiency and thus falls short of speaking “the language very well” (i.e., the wording used in Item #15).

The nature of language learning. One set of BALLI questions focused on learners’ opinions regarding learning and key components of language competence (for a discussion, see Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980). These questions are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

BALLI Questions Related to the Nature of Foreign Language Learning

#	Question
8	It is important to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.
12	It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.
17	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.
23	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.
27	Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.
28	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language to English or from English to my native language.

Participants’ responses to these six items are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Responses Regarding the Nature of L2A

All Participants ($n = 81$)		
#	M	SD
8	3.9	0.9
12	4.3	0.9
17	3.4	0.9
23	3.0	1.0
27	3.6	1.0
28	2.6	1.0

As can be seen, participants recognized the need for cultural knowledge, which Bachman (1990) includes in his model of language competence as a component of sociolinguistic competence. Responses were slightly higher regarding the importance of vocabulary (Item #17) relative to grammar (Item #23). The slight difference may reflect participants' awareness of the crucial role of lexis in conveying meaning. While morphosyntactic knowledge and lexical knowledge must be coordinated to express meaning in a precise manner, lexical knowledge is viewed as especially critical and has been found to be highly correlated with proficiency in all four skills (Schmitt, 2010, p. 5).

Participants expressed moderate agreement with the notion that language learning is distinct from other academic subjects (Item #27). It is surprising that the agreement was not higher. Language, unlike knowledge in typical academic subjects, is used in situations in which the knowledge must be accessed rapidly (especially, when speaking and listening). Learning must therefore result in knowledge that is available for rapid, unconscious, and effortless use (DeKeyser, 2001; Ellis, 2005, 2015; Segalowitz, 2000).

Participants did not feel that translation is a key process in learning. In the early history of language teaching in the West, many of the target languages were dead languages (e.g., Latin and Greek) and a similar situation existed in East Asia where people learned classical Chinese in order to read the Confucian classics. Thus in both the West and the East, both rote memorization and, to a lesser degree, translation often constituted the main form of L2 language training. Translation as a learning technique has now gone out of fashion, although there have been some researchers (e.g., Cook, 2010; Marques-Aguado & Solis-Becerra, 2013) who feel that we have gone too far, and that translation still has a place (albeit, a very limited place) in SLA pedagogy.

Learning and strategies. Another set of BALLI items (see Table 7) focus on learning and communication strategies (for a discussion, see Dörnyei & Scott, 1997).

Table 7

BALLI Questions Related to Learning and Strategies

#	Question
7	It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.
9	You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.
13	I enjoy practicing English with the native English speakers I meet.
14	It's o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in English.
18	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.
21	I feel timid speaking English with other people.
22	If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.
26	It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.

Participants' responses to these eight items are shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Responses Related to Learning Strategies

All Participants ($n = 81$)		
#	M	SD
7	3.9	0.9
9	1.8	0.6
13	4.1	0.8
14	3.7	0.9
18	4.5	0.8
21	2.8	0.9
22	2.6	1.1
26	3.4	0.9

Pronunciation is often what comes to mind in folk-linguistic conceptions of L2 ability. It thus comes as little surprise that participants showed fairly strong agreement with the Item #7 statement regarding the importance of having an “excellent pronunciation.” On the other hand, an obsession with appropriate pronunciation (Item #9) can leave L2 speakers tongue-tied. An excessive emphasis on nativelike pronunciation even during early phases of L2 learning ultimately harkens back to behaviorist theories of SLA prevalent in the 1950s, which viewed learning as “a progressive accumulation of habits” and thus saw the goal of SLA as “error-free production” (Benati & Angelovska, 2016, p. 7). Fortunately, participants generally agreed that one should not be overly concerned with pronunciation. They also did not agree with the statements in Item #22 (the idea that errors would become entrenched). The participants’ expressed views, which receive strong endorsement from current SLA researchers, may reflect the increasing popularity of communicative language teaching

techniques (for a discussion, see Savignon, 1991).

The positive replies on Item #13 and negative replies on Item #21 suggest that the participants showed great willingness to engage with native speakers, an attitude regarded as crucial in much recent work on affective factors and attitudes conducive to L2A (e.g., MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998). They also did not hold perfectionist views of language learning, but instead agreed that it was okay to guess if they did not know a word. They strongly agreed with the need for repetition and practice (Item #18). In the field of SLA, repetition (and to a lesser extent, practice) has gone out of fashion as part of the reaction against behaviorist views of learning. Recently, there has been greater recognition for the need to reassess the role of practice in SLA (see, for example, DeKeyser, 2007). Participants' strong sense that repetition is needed may reflect their intuition that successful language learning, particularly, learning of the lexis, requires considerable re-exposure to recently learned items. The perceived need for review and repetition may also explain participants' moderate endorsement of the need to use recorded materials (Item #26).

Motivation. Five items on the BALLI assess learners' views related to motivation (see Table 9).

Table 9

BALLI Questions Related to Motivation

#	Question
20	People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.
24	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know native English speakers better and their cultures.
29	If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.
31	I want to learn to speak English well.
32	I would like to have friends who speak English as a native language.

Participant responses to the five items related to motivation are shown in Table 10.

Table 10

Responses Related to Motivation

All Participants ($n = 81$)		
#	M	SD
20	4.2	0.8
24	4.0	0.8
29	4.4	0.7
31	4.9	0.3
32	4.6	0.5

As can be seen, the responses to these items were overwhelmingly positive. Participants strongly agreed that English was important to people in their country (Item #20). They expressed a strong motivation to learn about the target culture (Item #24) and make English-speaking friends (Item #32). They also showed extrinsic motivation (i.e., the desire to use English for employment purposes). While such motivation has often been

denigrated in SLA research on motivation as inferior to intrinsic motivation, research on highly proficient learners (Mueller, 2003) suggest that extrinsic motivational factors may be necessary to sustain language learning in the long-term.

Discussion

The current research suggests that matriculating graduate students in an ESL context hold fairly consistent views that are, in some respects, in line with the current theoretical consensus in SLA. In particular, participants' attitudes regarding learning the target culture and seeking opportunities to interact with native speakers appear to be positive and conducive to learning.

Regarding aptitude for language learning, the participants would appear to adhere to prevalent folk-theories regarding age and learning. In SLA, a highly contentious debate has been underway regarding the existence of a critical period (or, as some would have it, a "sensitive period") after which nativelike acquisition appears to be either highly unlikely or impossible (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2008; Birdsong, 2005; DeKeyser, 2000, 2013; Flege & MacKay, 2011; Johnson & Newport, 1989). A common misconception is that children's advantages in L2A are related to the speed of learning. Both the empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks that best explain this evidence would suggest that L2A differs in important ways from first language acquisition (L1A). To mention one obvious example, children, when learning their first language, in addition to mastering form-meaning links (i.e., the association of sounds, and abstract patterning of sounds, with meaning), must also learn the related concepts. It is not enough to

know that the animal in the living room is referred to as a /dag/, one must also slowly learn what differentiates it from a cat, and why a Great Dane and a Chihuahua can both be referred to as a “dog” in spite of significant differences in appearance.

Based on these considerations, most SLA theorists (including those who argue for the existence of a critical period for nativelike attainment in SLA) believe that adult learners have a number of cognitive advantages when learning an L2. For example, they are able to use their knowledge of their L1 as well as explicit knowledge (quite often metalinguistic knowledge) of an L2 grammar to know where to focus attention when processing L2 input (DeKeyser, 2009; Ellis, 2015; Leow, 2015). Learners should thus be made aware that the abilities that they bring to the classroom are actually well-suited to rapid acquisition of a second language. This is especially true for graduate students who have been accepted into English universities as they are even more likely to have high aptitude in a second language.

The participants demonstrated some appreciation of the difficulty of learning an L2. On the other hand, their responses suggest that they have not deeply considered the ways in which the four skills differ (e.g., the differences between input and output and the differences between verbal and written modes of communication). Language instructors who wish to assist learners so that they become more autonomous and “take charge of” their “own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3) may want to spend more time pointing out some of the fundamental ways in which practice in the four skills contribute to L2A (Nakanishi, 2015; Swain, 1995) and how practice using the four skills is particularly effective during

particular types of communicative interaction (Long, 1996).

One positive finding from the current study is that graduate students do not appear to be unduly influenced by behaviorist views of language learning. This is likely to be a result of changes in the language teaching profession globally. Language teachers throughout the world base their classroom practices largely on the views and practices they encounter during training. While good teachers update their practices in light of the most current SLA findings, many undoubtedly continue to use methods that have been shown to be ineffective. Fortunately, the current findings would suggest that at least among international graduate students, the legacy from the behaviorist view of language learning is on the wane.

A further positive finding is the report of very high motivation and willingness to communicate with English speakers. Unfortunately, this desire on the part of graduate students is offset by a number of situational constraints. Unlike undergraduate students who have many classes and more opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities, graduate students often spend long periods of time studying or working on research. Institutions may need to do more to ensure that foreign graduate students have ample opportunities to interact with native speakers. A good means of promoting such interaction is to have students do part of their classwork in teams put together by the instructor, ideally, teams consisting of students from diverse L1 backgrounds.

Finally, future research in the area of learner beliefs needs to address several issues. First, the BALLI needs to be updated to reflect current SLA theory. Ideally, the items should assess

participants' opinions regarding factors that are currently thought to be most relevant to L2A. Second, the items need to be rewritten so that they have a more precise wording. Many of the items, judged from the perspective of an SLA theorist, could be answered multiple ways depending on how they are interpreted. To return to just one example touched on earlier, the issue of whether children learn a language "easily" could be construed in a number of ways. Children do not constantly make conscious efforts to learn their mother tongue. Rather, much of their learning occurs spontaneously as they play and interact with caregivers and siblings. Even so, many researchers focused on L1A would not describe their learning as "easy" since children must pass through many stages (often, stages accompanied by a great deal of confusion and even frustration) to arrive at natively-like adult L2 competence. If SLA experts reading a BALLI item cannot agree on a clear interpretation of the item, it is difficult to arrive at an interpretation of respondents' answers.

With these caveats, the focus on learners' beliefs is valuable and worth pursuing further. Language learning to advanced levels is a long and arduous process that requires considerable investment of time and energy. Learners should ideally develop an informed set of beliefs that enables them to become "good learners" (Cohen & White, 2008; Griffiths, 2008). Instructors can hope to help learners arrive at sound views of learning only if they have a sense of the conceptualization of SLA that learners bring to the classroom.

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