

## Jordanian University Communicative Language Teaching Dangling Between Theory and Practice

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Received 3 June 2012; accepted 7 August 2012.

### Abstract

This study investigates whether Jordanian university instructors' practices match their attitudes in regards to selected communicative language teaching (viz. pair/group work, the teacher's role, error correction, and use of native language). The research design is essentially qualitative in which observation is the basic instrument. The researcher traced the aforementioned CLT principles in the practices and attitudes of two university instructors teaching English. After the researcher observed the two participants' classroom practices and took notes of their classroom behaviors for three 60-minute lectures, she conducted a semi-structured interview to reveal their attitudes towards CLT as well as challenges hindering its adoption in their context. The findings indicated a relative disparity between the instructors' attitudes and their classroom practices despite some instinctive embracement of certain CLT features. The major challenges were embodied in lack of CLT training, huge class sizes, limited exposure vents to English, structure-oriented syllabuses and shortage of time.

**Key words:** Communicative language teaching; Communicative competence; Attitude; Classroom practices

Raghd Yacoub Al Rabadi (2012). Jordanian University Communicative Language Teaching Dangling Between Theory and Practice. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 5(1), 37-44. Available from <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320120501.2749>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120501.2749>

### 1. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

In a single word broadly defined, CLT is a disequilibrium. It marked a new epoch where a number of ingredients were reshuffled. Omaggio (2000, p. 118) states that "CLT represents a repertoire of teaching ideas rather than a fixed set of methodological procedures, and as such is not easily defined or evaluated."

McDonough and Shaw (2003) perceive the birth of CLT as a reflex of dissatisfaction with the previously prevailing methods of teaching. They point out that such methods produced students who were only structurally but not communicatively competent. Brown (1994) holds that myriad functions of language were investigated in both spoken and written discourse including nature of styles, registers, gender factors, and nonverbal communication as pressed landmarks of CLT. Based on previous literature, Omaggio (2000, pp. 116-117) unfolds the following major distinctive features:

- Meaning is of primary importance in CLT, and contextualization is a basic principle.
- Attempts by learners to communicate with the language are encouraged from the beginning of instruction. The new language system will be learned best by struggling to communicate one's own meaning and by negotiation of meaning through interaction with others.
- Sequencing of materials is determined by the content, function, and/or meaning that will maintain students' interest.
- Judicious use of the native language is acceptable where feasible, and translation may be used when students find it beneficial or necessary.

- Activities and strategies for learning are varied according to learner preferences and needs.
- Communicative competence, with an emphasis on fluency and acceptable language use, is the goal of instruction.

It can be evident from these aforementioned characteristics that CLT is a radical departure from its predecessors, precisely those that dwelt on the grammatical competence. Revising the historical literature of CLT brings its readers to one conclusion that there has been an array of definitions, models, and components of the communicative competence, yet there was never a consensus on any. One of the models hued as practical and easy going was that proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) who proposed a set of three competences, namely, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic. It was later updated by Canale (1983) by introducing the fourth competence, that of discourse. According to Penedidikan (2008), if we were to compare Canale and Swain's construct of communicative competence with that of Chomsky's in a rather general sense, Chomsky's "competence" would be equivalent to the "grammatical competence" introduced by Canale and Swain (1980) leaving all the other competences out of the question (Penedidikan, 2008). However, the inclusion of the grammatical component within the communicative framework remained one of the most touchy and controversial issues in this respect (Omaggio, 2000); there seemed to be no consensus on weaving it with the rest of the integrating components or considering it as a prerequisite for all the others. Furthermore, controversy stretched to reach the locus and importance of including all the other components.

To push the argument further, one can safely stress that features of CLT proposed by scholars like Omaggio (2000) fit properly well in today's classes to protect language learning from becoming a boring, frustrating, and threatening experience. Boring since a lesson may be foreign to the students and their world, frustrating since the students might very often find it hard to live to their own expectations and threatening since fear of failure is a crucial bottom line in such context (Macdonald & Rogers-Gordon, 1984).

Shifting gears into more local attempts, can tell how much scant the studies are in regards to the communicative approach in Jordan; this claim echoes early attempts that recognized how deficient Jordanian students can be in expressing themselves communicatively; Lababidi (1983) presented the nature of instruction that was locally prevailing at the compulsory cycle; she conducted an analysis of the lessons that were randomly chosen from the *New Living English for Jordan* series, that none of the lessons included activities that can be considered communicative. The findings from the questionnaire and the analysis of textbooks supported Lababidi's call for the need to teach language as communication. However,

even when new changes took place and more pragmatic and functional language became injected into the local materials the problem still remains clear as the present author has noticed through years of teaching English at the tertiary level.

Therefore it seems to be high time to practically – and not only theoretically-reconsider the criteria of teaching EFL in Jordan especially that traditional applications of teacher-centeredness have become virtually out of fashion in contemporary educational circles (Al-Momani, 1993). Among the features of CLT focused upon by various researchers (Coskun, 2011) are some common features including pair and group work, fluency and accuracy, error correction and the role of the teacher which mostly come up as the focus of this study. Coskun (2011) discussed these features in the Turkish context with an emphasis on their advantages to reveal whether teachers' classroom practices overlap with their attitudes towards these features. The findings indicated that there is a discrepancy between teachers' classroom practices and the attitudes they expressed. The major challenges in the implementation of CLT from both teachers' perspective were found to be large class sizes, traditional grammar-based examinations and the little time available to prepare communicative materials.

Regarding the chasm traced between Jordanian university instructors' theory and practice in implementing the CLT, one should perceive that educational reforms especially on theoretical basis are not necessarily practical improvements. This remark was solidly grounded by Stigler and Hiebert (1999) in the American context. They marked an urgent need for a mechanism without which the teaching gap was doomed to grow. Of the studies commented on thus far Coskun's 2011 work resonates best with this study. In his work, he argued for the mismatch between the input and the output of the teaching process that revealed such discrepancy in the Turkish communicative context. Accordingly, the discrepancy traced in this paper is not just rhetoric nor as an esoterically raised stump speech. On the contrary, it is a yardstick against which features of CLT can be traced in the Jordanian context.

### Pair/Group Work Activities

Savignon (2001) reckons that CLT does not require pair/group work; such work has been deemed beneficial in many contexts as a way of providing plentiful motivation. Yet they are not compulsory but inappropriate in certain occasions. Brown (2001) tends to give pair/group work more benefits of the doubt. Though he unfolds a number of drawbacks for such activities, he considers their merits as essential to orchestrate a successful communicative class. The pros he advocates are generating interactive language, offering an embracing affective climate, promoting learner responsibility and autonomy, and providing a step toward individualizing instruction.

Swain (1998) (cited in Omaggio, 2000) cautions that collaborative activities should be dealt with as critical issues that can backfire if used unduly and improperly. So she states that it is advisable for teachers to circulate among groups, offer assistance, give feedback to learners directly or indirectly.

### **Use of First Language (L1)**

In the ever expanding revolution of teaching methods, the use of L1 has virtually been wavering between the two poles of rejecting or adopting the use of L1 in foreign language teaching. Chastain (1976) holds that one of the basic tenets of audiolingual methodology is that native language is banned in EFL classrooms; hence, L2 is to be taught with no reference to L1 in contrast to the grammar-translation approach where both L1 and L2 are constantly compared and using a dictionary was permitted. In the metamorphosis of teaching methods, the use of L1 has been virtually swinging between the two poles of rejecting and adopting the student's native language in EFL classrooms. Recently, a judicious use of the native language became acceptable wherever feasible, and translation became permissible where necessary. Such claim stems from the fact that instruction in its core is conveying L1 into L2 and vice versa (Omaggio, 2000).

### **Error Correction**

According to Gas and Selinker (2001), errors are red flags that wave to provide evidence of the learners' knowledge of L2. They are issues where neither teachers are to "throw their hands up in the air about" nor learners to be "passive hiccupers". Although the prism of errors can be hued with complexity, the major source of errors is attributed to the learners' native language (NL) to the extent that led to the demise of NL in some English classes. Regardless of the ramifications of this issue a rather germane question has to be raised concerning how to deal with errors. Omaggio (2000) reveals a glimpse on the growing dispute of when to interfere as a teacher (directly or indirectly) and in what modality (oral or written) to maneuver. She considers it the teachers' challenge to offer correction and feedback strategies according to a number of factors (e.g., the learners' capability, the level of performance, the task at hand, the focus of the activity and the modality).

### **The Role of the Teacher**

Research (Bataineh & Zghoul, 2006; Brandao, 1999; Evans, 1997; Kim, 2002, 2003; Toland, 2006; Zafeiriadou, 2007) reveals that the time has come where the role of teachers and students have undergone drastic change. Learner-fronted activities have spawned under the auspices of the communicative approach but have conjured a specter of haziness at the same time. Savignon (2001) puts it clearly:

Depending upon their own preparation and experience, teachers themselves differ in their reactions to CLT. Some feel understandable frustration at the seeming ambiguity in

discussions of communicative ability. Negotiation of meaning may be a lofty goal, but this view of language behavior lacks precision and does not provide a universal scale for assessment of individual learners. Ability is viewed as variable and highly dependent upon context and purpose as well on the roles and attitudes of all involved. Other teachers who welcome the opportunity to select and/or develop their own materials, providing learners with a range of communicative tasks, are comfortable relying on more global, integrative judgments of learner progress. (p.19)

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## **2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The thrust of this study was to investigate whether Jordanian University instructors' practices correspond with their attitudes towards four features that occupy prime position in CLT. Moreover, by virtue of any discrepancy, the research aimed to reveal the obstacles that hinder CLT implementation in the Jordanian university context. It is a sheer fallacy to believe that communicative oriented textbooks or a purportedly communicative claimed approach can be a solid guarantee for a successful CLT application if not sustained with qualified agents of proper teaching. This claim is evidently reflected in the students' present limited communicative competence as opposed to their passing grueling entrance exams (Bataineh, Al Rabadi, Smadi, in press; Mukattash, 1983; Rabab'ah, 2005).

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## **3. PROBLEM OF THE STUDY**

Despite the fact that the communicative approach is theoretically speaking the academic haven for the Jordanian educational system, English language classes tell a different story. Teachers gravitate towards more conventional methods of teaching, specifically, the Grammar Translation Method and teacher-centered classes. The instruction is structure-based instead of meaning-oriented. Such claim is reflected on their students who lack eventually the ability of authentic communication especially in unrehearsed contexts.

The problem of the study lies in the following questions:

- Do Jordanian university instructors' attitudes towards CLT match their actual classroom practices in the language classroom?
- What are the challenges that impede university instructors' implementation of CLT in Jordan?

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## **4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Although there are studies on the communicative language teaching in the Jordanian context (Bateineh, Bateineh, Thabet, 2011; Bateineh, Rabadi, & Smadi, in press), studies on the mismatches of university instructor's attitudes and practices towards CLT are scant. If the ultimate goal of CLT is to help students yield an authentic

communication, it becomes mandate to reconsider the teaching framework and its variables from a CLT perspective.

Though this research does not claim any readymade recipes to bridge the gap between practice and theory, it reveals the current educational system and illuminates curriculum designers' vision in making teachers more knowledgeable and skillful practitioners. If today's takers are tomorrow's givers, then more effort has to be exerted in such regards instead of bashing or blaming these teachers as the only responsible partners in the educational process (Al-Momani, 1993). This claim stands clear under the fact that instructors are not generally educated enough to use qualified methodologies of teaching. In fact, all years of instruction fail to equip students in reaching a proper degree of proficiency in expressing themselves. So does this comply with a well-defined philosophy after all? The significance of this paper lies in shedding the light on the gap between theory and practice in a vital teaching cornerstone. Jordan has to reassess its language teaching policies towards the realm of communication instead of searching for silver-bullet approaches of teaching English.

## 5. METHOD, SAMPLING, AND INSTRUMENTATION

The design applied in this research is basically qualitative where the two participating instructors' attitudes and practices are emphasized. The participants are two female university instructors from the English Department at Ajloun University College (AUC). They were selected purposefully based on their willingness to participate in the experiment. They share some characteristics, most important amongst which are that they have an M.A degree in translation, that they have each taught different English communication courses at AUC for a minimum of three years, that they both suffer from lack of training in CLT and that they both have evident weakness in certain aspects of communicative performance.

To maintain privacy and assure confidentiality, I1 is used to refer to the first instructor and I2 for the second. The data collection instruments incorporate a classroom observation checklist, note-taking of instructors' in-class practices and semi-structured interviews (which were tape recorded) with the two participants.

Four principles (viz. pair/group work, the teacher's role, error correction, and use of first language) were purposefully selected and formulated as statements in the observation checklist adapted from Al-Majid (2006, p.122). Corresponding questions were also raised in the semi-structured interviews that functioned as a yardstick in gauging the congruency of the instructors' CLT practices and attitudes. It was mandate to support the Yes/No checklist with field notes; not only did note taking participate in showcasing the preponderance or scarcity of

CLT parameters, but also it served in clarifying classroom treatments and behaviors.

The selected criteria for this study were very well established in previous literature of CLT theories. The observation was rated by the researcher and another expert. The inter-rater reliability gauged at 0.96 which is statically appropriate of the purpose of this study. The instruments were validated by a jury of five experts whose respective feedback helped in making amendments. The reliability of the findings was confirmed through multiple-source triangulation (data triangulation, investigator triangulation and theory triangulation). Both instructors covered in different classrooms Unit Seven in *Life Lines Pre-intermediate Students Book* (Hutchinson, 1999). The five-page unit lies basically in three sections. The first two pages revolve around the present perfect in guided instruction. They are covered in a variety of exercises: a puzzle, checklist, short answers and question formation. The second two pages tackle a vocabulary section and a grammar completion; one column is devoted to homophones and homonyms in three exercises and the rest of the two pages focus again on the present perfect and its implications. The third section of the unit is merely writing. It stresses the notion of writing formal letters in two exercises; the first one introduces ten directions of writing a formal letter and its layout while the second is about writing a formal letter answering an advertisement question, *Have you ever seen a UFO?* It can be obviously induced that the bulk of the unit is grammar-oriented with no reading comprehension or enough exercises to activate the students' implementation of contextual meaning.

## 6. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This section tackles the analysis of the data gathered via class observation, field notes and interviews. The researcher used content analysis of all transcribed data to draw up categories and elaborate themes. Though the categories (viz. pair/group work, the teacher's role, error correction, and use of first language) were a priori set in previous literature, they went through a process of tracing and saturation in this study. The data collected through the observation, field-note-taking and participants' interviews occupied four themes in highlighting similarities and differences between the two participants from a CLT perspective. Data came under multiple revisions in order to verify the gained conclusions. Both participants' attitudes and practices will be discussed below with I1 and I2 used for both participants, respectively.

### Pair/Group Work

The question raised under this parameter is *Do you think that instructors should engage students in pair/group work activities and why?* The two participants diverged in their

adoption of such technique as the following exposition reveals:

**I1 (Attitude)**

I think that pair work gives a chance for students to help each other understand the material in front of them and discuss it together. It also helps those who come to class not well prepared to get a better idea of what is going on and catch up with the others. I prefer doing all my classes with pair work mode to reduce the factor of stress even in large classes and for all different majors.

**I1 (Observation)**

The instructor superficially matched her attitude towards pair work to her classroom practice. She commenced her class with a quick revision of the grammatical background differentiating between the past simple and present perfect. Automatically, she shifted into the grammatical exercises in Unit 7, one after the other, all in pair work. She gave the apparently mixed-ability class recurrently short pauses to try to discuss each grammatical exercise; however, what was observed in an in-depth analysis uncovered that appearances are deceptive. There is a crucial difference between assigning a few minutes for solving some questions in pair work with side-conferencing centered here and there among the large number of students, on the one hand and a genuine involvement of students in collaborative work to discuss, negotiate and take advantage of such interactive vent, on the other. Guided discussion does not tend to endorse much critical thinking or real communication. It was rather a reflection of reciting mostly previously solved questions in a hasty manner. It was apparent that the pressure of time to get through with the unit superseded in importance the communication outcome. However, two students tried to discuss the answers after mistakenly presenting their answers. Hence, if it were for a Yes/No checklist, this instructor would be abiding to a rather important CLT tenet and she would easily be inferred as communicative oriented, yet observation and field notes revealed her paradoxical input.

**I2 (Attitude)**

I truly believe in the importance of infusing the language classroom with pair or group work; such work can help students figure out answers, discover each other's fears, ambitions, points of strengths and weaknesses. They will make use of the concept of sharing each other's knowledge if collaboration is properly channeled. However, reality is so different. With large classes, what chances do we have to control the class, prevent personal chats or text messaging during pair or group work? Time allocated for such technique can be improperly slacked.

**I2 (Observation)**

I2 did not invest any pair/group work in class and did without it. She rather considered it suffice to pick some individual volunteers to answer most questions of the lesson. However, she manipulated a rather genuine

technique in prompting students' critical thinking. As opposed to I1, she kept urging the students to think twice before yielding any answers and infused her lecture with clues and hints to help them produce the required answer. Moreover, I2 was observed occasionally to prompt volunteers from back seats to participate.

**The Teacher' Role**

Under this parameter, the attitude of both instructors is discussed. They both shared the role of almost the ultimate authority, yet differently, in terms of pace and degree. Regarding the first instructor, she occupied most of the time speaking by herself. Her aspired goal was to get through with the exercises and finish them as soon as possible. As for the second instructor, she worked in a slower pace but oftentimes manifested a tighter grasp of control in dominating the teaching process. Nevertheless, her authority was hued with a dose of facilitating student's participation from time to time.

**I1 (Attitude)**

The teacher is a role model for her students. She has to excel in terms of language, behavior, etc. In fact, a teacher plays several roles; he or she is the source of knowledge who has to be right all the time, plus being the dominator without whom the class will be uncontrollable.

**I2 (Attitude)**

A teacher has to be a multi-tasker and a full authority in class, but mostly a transmitter of knowledge and the one in charge of allocating the roles. When students sense any shade of weakness in the teacher's control, they turn the class into a mess and there is the point where order gets lost. However, this does not mean that the teacher should not be friendly and flexible from time to time.

**I1 (Observation)**

Not only were the two instructors clear in their controlling attitude but also in their practices. However, the former manifested a different control of class in terms of pace and degree, mostly. With her aim to get through the unit; for example, she exerted a hasty lecturing style by all means. The students were flipping pages and obeying orders. No evidence of a real communication between the instructor and her students was delineated. To elaborate, the coverage of the grammatical instruction did not involve much real life application of the grammatical rules assigned for Unit 7. Interaction did not bear authenticity with a lack of communication.

**I2 (Observation)**

I2 also played the role of a dominating authority but which was slower in pace and more flexible in triggering students' answers. She did not allow much interaction or collaboration among students but urged the students occasionally to throw their own examples of homonyms, for instance. She also had her main concern to finish the unit assigned in time. Taking control was evident in picking some preoccupied students to remain vigilant by

asking them to read certain items such as the difference in the pronunciation of the two words *bath* and *bathe*. A point worth mentioning regarding the second instructor was her role modeling. However, she reflected a sensible communicative confidence herself that appeared in her fluency yet not full accuracy. A critical comment was observed concerning her repeated mispronunciation of the vocabulary headline itself (homonyms) as /'həʊməni:zmz/ instead of /'həʊmənəmz/. She also committed other mistakes even in the grammatical section in explaining the usage of “since” and “till” in the present perfect. Her mistake was, namely, over generalizing and promoting the students to exclusively choose the present perfect for all sentences containing any of these two clues. Such practice underestimated the significance of context even in grammar.

### **Error Correction**

In this section, error correction and its sources are tackled. Both instructors shared their attitudes regarding correcting recurrent errors. However, they diverged in terms of practice when correcting these errors.

#### **I1 (Attitude)**

I believe that errors which students keep committing should be stressed to help students in avoiding them. The point of recurrence itself reflects a weak comprehension of something in their heads. I allow them to correct themselves or I just correct them right away.

#### **I1 (Observation)**

The instructor was observed to correct all sort of mistakes relating to fluency or accuracy not only recurrent ones. She mainly corrected them herself. However, whenever, a student properly corrected another before her, she approved and passingly repeated the correction.

#### **I2 (Attitude)**

I think that student’s errors should be noticed and not taken lightly. If they wave for help, I directly interfere and help correcting them especially if they keep repeating such errors. However, not only do I correct them but allow them to help themselves and each other. So if the student can correct a mistake I cordially encourage him or her. I also welcome their trying to help each other whenever possible.

#### **I2 (Observation)**

The second instructor was noticed to remedy any apparent mistakes committed by the students especially if they insisted on committing them. Nevertheless, she was observed to give more time to the students than the first instructor in correcting themselves. More importantly was promoting the students to reconsider their answers or pronunciation for certain cases. She made them sense an error and discover it. She was noticed furthermore to reinforce their self-confidence in such errand. In fact this was her true piece of evidence for being occasionally a fascinator. Finally, all errors corrected by the student him/herself or other colleagues were reiterated by her once more.

### **Use of the First Language (L1)**

Both instructors had the tendency to lessen the use of Arabic, the students’ native language. They tended to inject it only when students revealed a blocked channel of understanding.

#### **I1 (Attitude)**

Students, especially whose major is not English, are to be exposed to English in order to help them get used to it and practice it. Where else will they learn it? If practice makes perfect, then they will eventually learn something.

#### **I2 (Attitude)**

I do not allow much Arabic in my classes. It is almost forbidden in other classes where students major in English. They only learn English in our classes. I know that it is not enough for them to learn good English. But such classes are their only hope. So using Arabic is only for emergencies.

#### **I1 and I2 (Observation)**

Both instructors revealed a congruency between their attitudes and practices of using the students’ L1. They both adhered to the same tenet of discrete use of L1 to be their far most communicative trait.

## **7. CHALLENGES HINDERING CLT IMPEMENTATION**

The previous section was a scrutinizing of CLT application by two university instructors in a purportedly communicative context in terms of four CLT tenets (viz. pair/group work, the teacher’s role, error correction, and use of first language). After a mismatch appeared regarding some highlighted points, it becomes important to answer the question *What are the challenges that impede university instructors’ implementation of CLT in Jordan?* In fact, from both participants’ viewpoint, the answer to this question included the following factors: lack of CLT training, huge class sizes, limited exposure vents to English and structure-oriented syllabuses. The two participants had neither heard of the expression CLT nor been in a training course to acquire any of its principles; their classes comprised 63 and 65 students, respectively. The material was imposed on them by the administration with collective exams at the end of the semester. Two thirds of the material traced in this unit was inclined towards structure-based instruction with meager vents for the students to boost the communicative competence. Such elaboration confirms an urgent need to reconsider a follow-up policy in teaching English in such context.

## **CONCLUSION AND AFTERTHOUGHT**

Revising the previous analysis of the two participants is depicted with a disparity between their attitudes and classroom practices. They both confirmed their attitudes

towards pair/group work but only the former proved to apply such technique though not with a genuine teamwork spirit. Regarding their roles as university instructors, they both practically assured the importance of being the ultimate authority in transmitting their knowledge by occupying the leading roles and dictating their students; thus, they reflected a less spectrum of roles than what they expressed in their attitudes of being more flexible and facilitating. Concerning error correction, the two participants could neither tolerate their students' errors nor settle for being selective under such principle as they claimed in their attitudes. However, the latter was more collaborative with her students than the former. Regarding the fourth CLT principle, both instructors manifested a common attitude of discretely using L1 in their classes. Their practices matched most under this tenet.

Though both participants in this study had never been subject to CLT before, they instinctively slanted towards it but in different degrees. Their adoption of the CLT principles was impeded by their lack of proper and adequate training, limited CLT sources, structure-based curriculum, pressure of time and large class sizes. All in all, this study stands with its qualitative data as limited in their external ability to be generalized to all university instructors; nevertheless, it adds some insights into the Jordanian context that is theoretically built on the CLT premise. It mostly affirms the aphorism that actions speak louder than words. Moreover, it paves the way to introduce new studies of investigating the implications of such mismatches between instructors' attitudes and practices in order to bridge the gap between them and remedy any malfunctioning in the educational process.

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