

EXPLORING POTENTIAL FACTORS AFFECTING ESP STUDENTS' ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILL IN SPEAKING CLASS ACROSS GENDER

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the factors influencing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students' oral communication skills in speaking classes, with particular emphasis on gender differences among Public Administration students at STIA Lppn Padang. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study involved 32 Public Administration students enrolled in an ESP speaking course. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that female students demonstrated stronger oral communication performance than their male counterparts, as evidenced by higher levels of motivation, greater self-confidence, and more effective management of speaking anxiety. In addition, female students were more responsive to teacher support, more actively engaged in peer interaction, and better able to utilize the classroom environment to enhance their speaking skills. In contrast, male students showed lower engagement, limited preparation, and reduced confidence in oral communication tasks. These findings indicate that gender differences in ESP speaking performance are context-dependent and shaped by an interaction of psychological and social factors. Pedagogically, the results suggest the need for ESP instructors to adopt gender-responsive teaching strategies, such as varied speaking tasks, structured peer collaboration, and supportive feedback mechanisms, to promote equitable participation and enhance oral communication skills among all students.

Keywords: *ESP Students, Gender Differences, Oral Communication Skill.*

INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential subject in higher education, particularly for students in non-English majors such as Public Administration. In Indonesian universities, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is offered as a compulsory general course (*Mata Kuliah Umum*) designed to equip students with communicative competence relevant to their academic disciplines and future professions. Despite this objective, the implementation of ESP, especially speaking-oriented instruction continues to pose challenges for both lecturers and students. This condition is also evident at STIA (*Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Administrasi*) Lppn Padang.

For students of Public Administration, oral communication in English is not merely an academic requirement but a professional necessity. Graduates are expected to participate in public meetings, deliver formal presentations, negotiate with stakeholders, and engage in policy-related discussions. However, many students still experience difficulties in speaking English fluently, confidently, and accurately. At the national level, ESP instruction in higher education faces persistent problems, including limited numbers of trained ESP instructors, insufficient use of authentic and field-specific materials, and curriculum designs that remain generic and exam-oriented rather than communicative (Yulia, 2013). Consequently, speaking skills often receive

minimal attention, leaving students inadequately prepared for professional communication demands.

These broader challenges are reflected in the local context of STIA Lppn Padang. Classroom observations and informal discussions with lecturers reveal that many Public Administration students struggle to express ideas orally in English, display passive behavior during speaking activities, and show limited preparation when delivering presentations. Such patterns indicate underlying issues related to both internal and external learning conditions. Psychological factors such as low self-confidence, weak motivation, and speaking anxiety, as well as environmental factors including limited peer collaboration and insufficient classroom interaction, appear to contribute to students' weak oral performance. These findings are consistent with previous studies in the Indonesian EFL context, which report hesitation, low participation, and language anxiety as dominant barriers to effective speaking (Iftanti & Maunah, 2021; Tarina & Mustika, 2020).

Previous research in ESP and EFL contexts has identified multiple factors influencing oral communication performance, including psychological dimensions (e.g., motivation, confidence, anxiety), environmental conditions (e.g., teacher feedback, classroom atmosphere), and linguistic preparedness (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). In speaking classes, learners frequently experience fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary for professional topics, and anxiety about peer evaluation. These challenges are particularly critical for Public Administration students, who must articulate field-specific concepts related to governance, administration, and policy. As Richards (2008) emphasizes, effective oral communication requires not only fluency and accuracy but also appropriateness within specific professional contexts.

In addition to these factors, gender has been widely acknowledged as an important variable in second language learning, particularly in speaking performance. Several studies suggest that female learners may experience higher levels of anxiety and self-consciousness, whereas male learners tend to take more risks and dominate oral interaction (Dörnyei, 2005; Asakereh & Dehghannezhad, 2015). Sociolinguistic perspectives further explain that males and females may differ in interactional styles, assertiveness, and participation patterns (Tannen, 1990; Oxford, 1993). However, these tendencies are not universal and are strongly influenced by cultural context, classroom environment, and instructional practices.

Interestingly, preliminary observations at STIA Lppn Padang indicate a contrasting pattern. Female students appear more active, better prepared, and more willing to participate in ESP speaking activities than their male counterparts. This discrepancy suggests that gender-related dynamics in ESP classrooms may differ from commonly reported trends and therefore warrant closer examination. Although previous studies (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2002; Liu & Jackson, 2008) have explored gender differences in general EFL speaking contexts, gender-based analysis remains limited in ESP research,

particularly within policy-oriented disciplines such as Public Administration in Indonesia.

Moreover, ESP courses in Indonesian higher education are often implemented using a one-size-fits-all approach, with a stronger emphasis on reading and writing skills than on oral communication (Basturkmen, 2010). This misalignment between curriculum focus and professional language needs results in graduates who lack adequate oral communication competence. While numerous studies have examined speaking performance in general EFL settings, few have systematically investigated ESP learners' oral communication by integrating psychological, linguistic, and environmental factors alongside gender perspectives in a specific disciplinary context.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated and context-specific approach. Unlike previous research that predominantly focuses on general EFL learners or examines speaking performance without considering disciplinary relevance, this study investigates ESP speaking classes within a Public Administration program. It simultaneously analyzes internal factors (such as self-confidence, motivation, and anxiety), external factors (including teacher support, peer interaction, and classroom environment), and gender differences in shaping students' oral communication performance. Furthermore, by situating the study at STIA Lppn Padang, this research provides empirical insights from an underrepresented institutional and regional context in Indonesian ESP studies.

By addressing these gaps, the present study aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to ESP pedagogy. Specifically, it seeks to identify and analyze the internal and external factors influencing ESP students' oral communication skills in speaking classes and to examine the extent to which gender affects students' speaking performance and participation. The findings are expected to inform more effective, inclusive, and responsive instructional strategies for developing oral communication competence among Public Administration students in ESP contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore and analyze the internal and external factors influencing ESP students' oral communication skills, with particular attention to gender-based differences in performance and participation. A qualitative design was chosen to capture the depth and complexity of students' lived experiences, perceptions, and classroom behaviors that cannot be fully understood through quantitative measures alone (Creswell, 2014).

The study was conducted in the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) speaking classes of a Public Administration program at STIA Lppn Padang. A total of 32 students (17 male and 15 female) participated in the research, selected using purposive sampling to ensure gender balance and active involvement in speaking activities. Inclusion criteria:

- Enrolled in an ESP speaking class
- Willing to be interviewed and observed
- Represent both male and female perspectives equally

In order to achieve the research aims, data were collected through two methods: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interview questions were open-ended and guided by the theoretical framework of Dörnyei (2005) and Horwitz et al. (1986). Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes each and were audio-recorded with consent. Two ESP speaking class sessions were observed using an observation checklist and field notes. This technique helped to validate interview findings and offered insight into real-time speaking behaviors.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model. They are familiar with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Transcripts from interviews. Observational notes were used to triangulate and support the coded themes. Thematic categories were grouped under two main dimensions: Internal factors (self-confidence, motivation, anxiety) and External factors (teacher support, peer interaction, classroom environment). Each theme was also analyzed for gender-related patterns in speaking behavior and participation.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the following strategies were employed:

- Triangulation: Combining interviews and observations
- Member checking: Participants reviewed interview summaries for accuracy
- Peer debriefing: Data interpretations were reviewed by a second researcher
- Thick description: Detailed presentation of data to support interpretations

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the research are based on interview data and classroom observations. The discussion is structured according to the two main research aims: (1) identifying internal and external factors that affect oral communication in ESP speaking classes, and (2) examining the role of gender in shaping students' speaking performance and participation. This presents findings related to the internal factors affecting students' oral communication performance, namely: motivation, self-confidence, and speaking anxiety. Unlike the common assumption found in earlier research that male students are generally more confident and willing to speak, this study discovered a reversal of gender roles, with female students demonstrating stronger internal attributes for oral communication success in the ESP speaking class context. Specifically, the results of this study are:

1. Internal Factors Affecting Oral Communication Skills

Thematic analysis revealed three primary internal factors that significantly influenced students' speaking performance: self-confidence, motivation, and anxiety.

a. Self-confidence

Self-confidence emerged as a critical factor affecting students' willingness to speak. Students with higher self-confidence were more likely to volunteer answers, initiate discussions, and speak spontaneously during classroom activities. Contrary to the dominant trends in EFL/ESP literature (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2002; Liu & Jackson, 2008), female students in this study exhibited higher self-confidence in speaking. This confidence was rooted in preparation, peer support, and regular practice. Female students were more likely to volunteer to speak, lead group discussions, and initiate classroom dialogue.

As stated by them;

““Saya percaya diri karena saya sudah tahu mau bicara apa. Saya tulis poin-poinnya dulu.”” (Female 1)

In contrast, several male students admitted feeling hesitant or underprepared. He said that

“Saya kadang bingung mau bicara apa. Kalau tidak dipanggil, saya diam saja.” (Male 3)

Self-confidence emerged as a central determinant of students' willingness to speak in the classroom. Consistent with Dörnyei's (2005) and MacIntyre et al.'s (2002) theoretical frameworks, students who perceived themselves as capable were more willing to initiate speech, respond voluntarily, and engage in spontaneous interaction. However, a critical contribution of this study lies in its finding that female students demonstrated higher speaking confidence than male students, a pattern that diverges from much of the existing EFL research (Oxford, 1993; Shams, 2008).

In the ESP context of Public Administration, female students' confidence was not merely affective but strategic. Their confidence was grounded in preparation, planning, and peer rehearsal, suggesting that confidence functioned as an outcome of disciplined learning behaviors rather than as an inherent personality trait. This supports Liu and Jackson's (2008) argument that speaking confidence is socially and pedagogically constructed and influenced by classroom dynamics.

Male students, in contrast, frequently reported uncertainty about what to say and expressed hesitation unless directly called upon. This pattern suggests that lower confidence among male students may stem from insufficient preparation and limited engagement with ESP speaking tasks, rather than from linguistic incapacity. These findings indicate that confidence in ESP speaking is closely tied to how learners interpret task demands and professional relevance.

b. Motivation

Both male and female students reported being motivated to improve their oral communication skills due to professional goals in the field of Public Administration. However, female students consistently displayed a stronger and more consistent sense of motivation, which translated into higher levels of preparation and participation in speaking tasks. As stated of the interview result:

“Saya ingin dapat berbicara bahasa inggris dengan baik, jadi saya selalu latihan dulu sebelum kelas speaking.” (Female 1)

Several male students acknowledged the importance of speaking English but admitted they did not prioritize preparation. As he stated:

“Saya sering tidak latihan. Kalau disuruh maju, baru saya coba ngomong.” (Male 10)

Motivation was another decisive factor influencing oral communication performance. Both male and female students acknowledged the importance of English for their future careers in Public Administration, indicating strong instrumental motivation. However, female students displayed a more consistent and action-oriented form of motivation, characterized by regular practice, pre-class preparation, and active participation.

Drawing on Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self System, female students appeared to possess a clearer ideal L2 self, envisioning themselves as competent English-speaking professionals. This vision translated into sustained effort and responsibility toward speaking tasks. Male students, although aware of English’s importance, often delayed preparation and relied on spontaneous performance, resulting in less consistent participation.

This finding contrasts with Asakereh and Dehghannezhad (2015), who reported that female students remained silent despite strong career motivation due to anxiety. In the present study, motivation among female students functioned as a protective factor that encouraged preparation and mitigated anxiety. This difference highlights the importance of context, particularly in ESP settings where speaking tasks are explicitly linked to professional identity formation.

c. Anxiety

While both genders expressed some level of anxiety about speaking in English, female students were more successful at managing their anxiety through preparation and practice. Interviews and classroom observations revealed that female students used strategies such as rehearsing with peers, writing notes, and mentally organizing ideas before speaking. As she stated that

“Awalnya saya gugup, tapi kalau sudah latihan dulu sama teman, saya jadi berani.” (Female 5)

Male students, on the other hand, appeared more likely to avoid speaking when anxious, rather than confronting the fear through preparation. He argued that

“Kadang saya takut salah, jadi lebih baik diam.” (Male 8)

Anxiety was experienced by students of both genders; however, its impact on speaking behavior differed markedly. Female students reported initial nervousness but actively managed anxiety through rehearsal, note-taking, and peer collaboration. These strategies enabled them to transform anxiety into preparation-driven confidence, supporting the notion that anxiety is not inherently debilitating but can be facilitative when accompanied by effective coping mechanisms.

Male students, on the other hand, were more likely to respond to anxiety with avoidance, choosing silence over participation to minimize the risk of making mistakes. This finding partially aligns with Horwitz et al.’s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) framework, which emphasizes the negative impact of anxiety on speaking performance. However, the present study extends this framework by demonstrating that anxiety operates differently across genders in ESP classrooms, influenced by sociocultural expectations and institutional practices.

Interestingly, this finding contradicts earlier studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; Yashima, 2002; Shams, 2008) that associate higher anxiety with female learners. In this ESP context, female students demonstrated greater emotional resilience, suggesting that anxiety should be conceptualized as a context-sensitive and gender-mediated construct, rather than a universal predictor of silence.

From an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective, oral communication competence is not merely linguistic accuracy but the ability to perform contextually appropriate, goal-oriented communication tasks relevant to a specific discipline (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). In Public Administration, this includes articulating ideas clearly, participating in discussions, presenting arguments, and engaging in collaborative decision-making.

The findings of this study demonstrate that female students at STIA Lppn Padang were better able to internalize the communicative demands of ESP. Their higher levels of preparation, peer rehearsal, and strategic planning reflect what Hyland (2006) describes as disciplinary literacy, where learners adapt language use to institutional and professional norms. Female students treated speaking tasks as simulations of real administrative communication rather than isolated classroom exercises. Male students, by contrast, appeared less responsive to the ESP-oriented instructional design, often engaging in speaking only reactively when prompted. This mismatch suggests that ESP effectiveness is not gender-neutral but mediated by how learners interpret professional relevance and institutional expectations. As Basturkmen (2010) argues, ESP success depends on learners’ ability to connect language learning with future

professional identities, a connection more consistently evident among female participants in this study.

Thus, gender differences in oral performance should be understood not as inherent linguistic ability but as differential engagement with ESP goals, tasks, and professional discourse communities.

From a sociocultural standpoint, female students' stronger speaking performance reflects culturally shaped learning behaviors prevalent in collectivist societies. Indonesian educational culture tends to socialize female students toward academic diligence, cooperation, and compliance with institutional norms (Norton, 2013; Oxford, 1995). These traits manifested in strategic behaviors such as peer rehearsal, collaborative preparation, and reflective planning, which are particularly advantageous in oral communication tasks. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, learning occurs through mediated social interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Female students actively utilized peer scaffolding to manage anxiety and enhance confidence, transforming speaking from an individual risk into a shared learning process. Male students, however, were more likely to internalize speaking anxiety and withdraw from participation, limiting opportunities for social mediation and linguistic development.

Institutionally, the ESP speaking course at STIA Lppn Padang emphasizes structured performance, continuous assessment, and collaborative activities. According to Biggs' (1996) theory of constructive alignment, learners whose strategies align with teaching methods are more likely to achieve intended learning outcomes. Female students' disciplined preparation and responsiveness to task requirements aligned closely with course expectations, giving them a structural advantage.

Furthermore, gendered identity construction plays a critical role. Research on language, gender, and identity suggests that male students may avoid public language performance to protect perceived authority or competence, particularly in error-sensitive environments (Pavlenko & Piller, 2008; Sunderland, 2000). This explains why several male students preferred silence over risk-taking, even when acknowledging the professional importance of English. Contrary to earlier EFL findings that associate female learners with higher anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Shams, 2008), this study demonstrates that anxiety functioned differently across genders. Female students transformed anxiety into productive preparation, whereas male students more often experienced anxiety as avoidance. This highlights the necessity of examining anxiety as a context-sensitive and gender-mediated construct, particularly in ESP classrooms for non-English majors.

2. External Factors Influencing Oral Communication Skills

This section presents findings related to the external factors that affect students' oral communication skills in ESP speaking classes, namely, teacher support, peer

interaction, and classroom environment. While many studies suggest that male students typically benefit more from external classroom dynamics, the present research at STIA Lppn Padang revealed that female students responded more positively to these external factors and showed greater speaking performance and participation as a result. There are three dominant external factors that were identified: teacher support, peer interaction, and classroom environment.

a. Lecturer Support

Positive teacher support, such as encouragement, constructive feedback, and patience, was essential in reducing anxiety and boosting participation. Students appreciated it when teachers corrected errors gently or used humor to ease the classroom tension. On the other hand, teacher support played a central role in encouraging students to speak. Female students were more responsive to positive reinforcement, indirect correction, and structured scaffolding techniques used by instructors. As argued by female students

“Dosen saya sering memberi pujian kecil, jadi saya merasa berani mencoba.” (Female 11)

Female students took the feedback seriously, applied corrections, and improved in subsequent tasks. In contrast, many male students were observed to react passively to teacher input and tended to disregard or minimize corrective feedback. He stated that

“Kadang saya tidak terlalu peduli kalau dosen koreksi. Yang penting saya sudah coba.” (Male 8)

This contrasts with earlier research (e.g., Tuan & Mai, 2015) which emphasizes that male students are often more responsive to teacher authority. In the context of this study, female students demonstrated greater receptiveness, making teacher support a stronger contributing factor to their oral communication improvement. Notably, female students responded more positively to soft corrective feedback and emotional support, while male students were more comfortable with direct correction. This finding extends prior work by suggesting that teacher strategies should be gender-responsive, particularly in mixed-gender ESP classrooms.

b. Peer Interaction

Peer dynamics played a complex role. While group activities helped reduce speaking anxiety among friends, fear of peer judgment often silenced students in mixed groups or whole-class settings. Peer dynamics were particularly impactful for female students, who often relied on group collaboration, practice discussions, and shared preparation strategies. These peer networks gave them more opportunities to rehearse, seek clarification, and gain confidence before speaking in public.

Female students were more likely to rehearse or rely on peers before speaking. She said that

“Saya lebih nyaman latihan dulu dengan teman perempuan sebelum tampil di depan.” (Female 6)

Male students, however, tended to work independently or showed less interest in collaborating before speaking tasks. He said that

“Biasanya saya langsung saja, tidak latihan dulu sama teman.” (Male 11)

This differs from general EFL research (e.g., Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987) that often shows male students benefiting from peer interactions in competitive or task-based contexts. In this ESP class, female students created supportive peer environments that helped reduce anxiety and increase speaking frequency. This reflects Oxford (1993), who found that social dynamics affect female learners' confidence. However, previous research has not extensively discussed how peer interactions specifically impact speaking performance in ESP settings, making this an important addition.

c. Classroom Environment

The classroom environment at STIA Lppn Padang was perceived as supportive and inclusive, particularly for female students. Classroom activities such as simulations, discussions on public service issues, and role-plays related to administrative contexts were highly engaging for them. Female students were more likely to connect classroom topics with real-world applications and their future career roles in public administration. This contextual relevance boosted their willingness to communicate. As a stated by one of them:

“Topik pelayanan publik itu penting. Jadi saya ingin mencoba bicara seolah saya benar-benar sedang kerja.” (Female 17)

Male students, on the other hand, expressed less connection between the classroom speaking tasks and their perceived professional roles. This insight builds upon Shumin (2002) and Richards (2008), who argue that a meaningful and contextualized learning environment increases language production. However, this study adds nuance by showing that female students benefit more from contextualized ESP content than their male counterparts.

In contrast to dominant patterns reported in language learning literature, this study shows that female students at STIA Lppn Padang benefitted more from external classroom conditions than male students. Their ability to leverage teacher feedback, peer support, and a positive classroom environment resulted in higher frequency, fluency, and confidence in oral communication tasks. These findings highlight the need for context-sensitive and gender-responsive teaching strategies, especially in ESP programs for non-English majors.

3. Gender Differences in Oral Communication

Classroom observations and interview data indicate that both male and female students experienced speaking anxiety; however, the impact and management of anxiety differed substantially across genders. Female students did not experience lower anxiety in absolute terms; rather, they demonstrated more effective coping strategies that reduced the *negative impact* of anxiety on their speaking performance. Through systematic preparation, peer rehearsal, and collaborative support, female students were able to regulate anxiety and maintain active participation in both structured and spontaneous speaking activities.

This explains why female students appeared confident and well-rehearsed during presentations and discussions, despite reporting initial nervousness. Their anxiety functioned as a facilitative factor, motivating preparation and rehearsal rather than inhibiting participation. This finding partially aligns with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) framework, which acknowledges that anxiety does not uniformly lead to avoidance but can be mitigated through strategic learning behaviors.

Male students, by contrast, experienced speaking anxiety as a debilitating factor. Interviews revealed that anxiety among male students was closely associated with under-preparation, fear of making mistakes, and a tendency to avoid voluntary participation. Rather than confronting anxiety through preparation, many male students chose silence as a coping mechanism, waiting to be called upon before speaking. As a result, anxiety had a stronger negative impact on their classroom engagement and oral communication development.

This clarification resolves the apparent contradiction with earlier research. While studies such as Shams (2008) and Yashima (2002) report higher anxiety among female students, the present study demonstrates that anxiety level and anxiety impact are not equivalent. In the ESP context at STIA LPPN Padang, female students may experience anxiety, but they manage it more effectively, resulting in higher participation and performance. Conversely, male students may report similar or even lower anxiety levels, yet experience greater performance inhibition due to avoidance-oriented coping strategies.

Therefore, the key distinction lies not in which gender is more anxious, but in how anxiety is managed and translated into communicative behavior. This finding refines MacIntyre et al.'s (2002) willingness-to-communicate model by emphasizing that anxiety interacts with preparation habits, peer support, and institutional expectations, producing gender-differentiated outcomes in ESP speaking classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the internal and external factors that influence ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students' oral communication skills in speaking classes, with a particular focus on gender-based differences among Public Administration students at

STIA Lppn Padang. The results revealed several key findings: 1) Internal Factors: Female students exhibited higher motivation, greater self-confidence, and better management of speaking anxiety compared to male students. Their proactive preparation and positive mindset toward English communication enabled them to speak more fluently and frequently in class. 2) External Factors: Female students also benefited more from teacher support, peer interaction, and the classroom environment. They were responsive to feedback, frequently collaborated with peers before speaking tasks, and engaged more actively with the learning material. Male students, in contrast, tended to be passive, less prepared, and less motivated to take initiative in speaking activities. 3) Gender Differences: Contrary to many previous studies, which suggest that male students tend to be more dominant or confident in speaking English, this research found the opposite pattern in the context of STIA Lppn Padang. Female students surpassed male students in nearly all aspects of oral communication performance. This suggests that gender-based differences in speaking skills are context-sensitive and shaped by institutional culture, learning strategies, and social dynamics.

Hence, the study concludes that internal factors such as confidence and motivation, coupled with strong external support systems, play a critical role in enhancing students' oral communication performance, and that gender should not be generalized but analyzed based on specific classroom contexts.

This study was conducted in a single ESP speaking class for Public Administration students at STIA LPPN Padang, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other institutional or disciplinary contexts. The research relied primarily on qualitative data from classroom observations and interviews; although this allowed for in-depth analysis, the absence of standardized quantitative measures of speaking proficiency, anxiety, and motivation restricts cross-context comparison. In addition, gender was examined within a binary framework, which may not fully capture the complexity of learner identities. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than universally representative.

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