

An Analysis of the Challenges Faced by Female Undergraduate EFL Students in Speaking English at ULM

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Abstract

Speaking skills play an important role in daily life conversation through which we express feelings, emotions, and ideas easily and confidently. English has gained the status of a global language as it is spoken and understood all around the world. English is the medium of communication enabling people of different linguistic backgrounds to connect, cooperate, and collaborate. The present study investigates the challenges that undergraduate female EFL students face in speaking English. The present study is an attempt to find out the reason for the challenges faced by undergraduate female students in speaking English at ULM and how we defeat these challenges through some achievable actions. To find out the challenges that undergraduate female students in speaking English at ULM, we used the quantitative method. We collect data through questionnaires from the different semester students of the department of English and Applied Linguistics, and then we analyze it on SPSS software by applying the descriptive statistical analysis method. The finding reveals various factors or challenges including social, environmental, economic, and psychological. Moreover, the study also highlights some possible strategies to approach these challenges and enrich English speaking fluency among female EFL students. Understanding and confronting these challenges is critical for developing English language education for female undergraduate EFL students, thus upgrading their academic and professional avenues.

Keywords: Challenges, Speaking Skills, Female Undergraduate Students, EFL Classrooms.

Introduction

English is the primary medium of communication. It ranks as the third most widely spoken language on a global scale, following Chinese and Spanish. English is reflected among the most frequently employed languages globally (Ilyosovna, 2020). Nowadays, English is a standard, developed, and modern language. English is the primary language used in multiple domains, covering information technology, commercial activity, science, technology, engineering, pharmaceuticals, apothecary, instructions, tourism, enjoyment, cyberspace, and profession (Rao 2019). Due to globalization and the development of the English language, it plays an important role and becomes the basic needs of the different countries of Asia. According to Cheng (2012), English plays numerous functions in Asia, such as being a Lingua Franca, an official and semi-official language, a teaching tool, and a project for schools.

The National language of Pakistan is Urdu. English is used as an official language, in addition to their national and local languages. Speaking skills are among the most challenging language-learning skills (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). To learn English, students must become proficient in all four language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Though the

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significance of English is well established at all levels in Pakistan, it is considered a complex subject to study at the rural level (Bangash et al., 2021). Different studies have been conducted on students' difficulties learning other language skills. One of them is speaking skills. Numerous reasons affect students' speaking skills, including academic, social, cultural, and economic barriers. This study will analyze female students' difficulties at the University of Lakki Marwat speaking English and provide strategies to overcome their challenges.

Statement of the Problem

According to Trinh and Pham (2021), Speaking is typically regarded as a sign of a person's linguistic competency. Students face a lot of difficulties in speaking English. At the University of Lakki Marwat, English is compulsory. Here, English is used in textbooks, course materials, and lectures, making proficiency in speaking essential for students. There are many articles about the challenges of speaking English in different contexts. Still, there is a gap in focusing on females mainly. Hence, this study attempts first to address the difficulties that female students face in speaking English and secondly in the context where the education ratio is low. It investigates the problems of undergraduate female EFL students speaking English and provides possible solutions.

Research Questions

1. What challenges do female undergraduate students face in speaking English in ESL classrooms at ULM?
2. What strategies do female undergraduate students adopt to address their speaking skills challenges?

Literature Review

In today's globalized world, proficiency in English is crucial for effective communication, opening up opportunities for international business and employment in multinational companies.

Different studies have been conducted to uncover the challenges people face in speaking in English (Chand 2021, Hammad & Seyyedi 2020, Leong & Ahmadi 2017, Aziz & Kashinthan 2021) and so many more. According to Dang 2020, many foreign English learners face problems in speaking communication because of issues with pronunciation, listening, vocabulary and grammar, due to which they are struggling with expressing complex ideas, fluently communicating and raising questions. Moreover, results revealed that students had very few opportunities to practice English communication. To address these challenges they should provide a supportive and international environment, minimize the use of their mother tongue, and encourage them to frequent participation in speaking activities. Hammad (2013) identified several factors affecting the speaking skills of female college students in southern Saudi Arabia. Key issues include 1) inadequate English background of students; 2) reliance on Arabic due to teachers allowing its use; 3) difficulty in communicating in English over the phone and fear of speaking publicly; 4) a curriculum that emphasizes listening over speaking, with insufficient speaking exercises; 5) lack of effective speaking strategies like role-play and debates; and 6) greater focus on listening practice rather than speaking.

Tariq et al. (2023) investigated the competence level and challenges faced by undergraduate south Punjab students in learning English speaking skills through descriptive quantitative method. They found that speaking is a significant difficulty for students and struggling in communication both psychologically (fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence, and motivation) and linguistically (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation). Poor pronunciation, grammar, usage of the mother tongue, sudden go blank and difficulty in structuring are the most common issues that they faced. Grammar with an average mean score

of 3.34 and having a limited vocabulary of 4.24 are being identified as major problems. Robah et al. (2023) found several challenges that students faced while communicating in English due to some factors. Psychological factors such as hesitation, low confidence, perfectionism and fear of being ridiculed. Linguistic issues include trouble choosing a suitable language, misunderstanding grammar, and difficulty employing appropriate tenses. Environmental factors such as inadequate preparation. This study suggests adopting a cognitive strategy and creating a supportive environment for them to overcome these issues.

Chand et al. (2021) identified speaking as the most challenging skill for students in EFL contests, with common issues including low self-confidence, limited vocabulary, hesitation, anxiety, and fear of mistakes, inadequate practice environments, and lack of motivation from professors. Factors contributing to these difficulties include the traditional teacher-centered approach, limited oral practice settings, insufficient education, and excessive use of the native language, poor classroom atmosphere, and inadequate focus on spoken language in curricula. The study suggests creating a supportive speaking environment, revising English programs, and transforming teaching methods and roles to improve speaking skills. Ganesh et al. (2019) revealed that students struggle to speak in English due to limited classroom time more focus on achieving marks over communication skills, and lack of encouragement from friends and family. Furthermore, latecomers to English-medium schools are less proficient in English due to limited exposure to everyday English usage.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm adopted for this study is positivism. The data from female students and subsequently analyzed concerning questions of the study.

Research Approach

This study utilized a quantitative research approach to analyze the difficulties that undergraduate female EFL students face in speaking English. The data will be gathered from students through a questionnaire, which will be analyzed through SPSS software.

Participants

The individuals participating in the present investigation are 60 female students. A total of 60 female students were selected utilizing a stratified random sampling method. Among these 60 students, 16 students are from the 8th semester, 20 students are from the 6th semester and 24 students are from the 4th semester. Most of the students are Pashto speakers, with some Punjabi and Bannuchi speakers.

Techniques for Data Collection

The questionnaire was conducted with a total of 60 students from the Department of English and Applied Linguistics at the University of Lakki Marwat. But before that, a pilot study with a 20-statement questionnaire was conducted to test the methodology and authenticity of the study. Following feedback, a 30-statement questionnaire was finalized, focusing on challenges and strategies for undergraduate female EFL students at ULM's Department of English and Applied Linguistics.

Data Analysis

We collect the data for our study from the undergraduate female EFL students of the Department of English and Applied Linguistics by using a quantitative method. Researchers often employ this method for objective and generalizable findings. Data were analyzed using

SPSS software with descriptive statistical analysis, a common approach among researchers by applying frequency and percentage methods with 30 statements.

Data Analysis

This chapter consists of the results and findings of our data analysis focused on the challenges in speaking English confronted by the undergraduate female EFL students at ULM. For the current study, data is collected from the students through a questionnaire by following divided among the 60 students from 4th, 6th and 8th semester students of the Department of English and Applied Linguistics randomly. To analyze the data, we used SPSS software and then applied the descriptive statistical analysis method. We draw tables for each statement and then analyze them based on frequency and percentage.

Table 1: As an undergraduate female EFL student, I experienced a lack of confidence while speaking English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	18	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Agree	24	40.0	40.0	70.0
	Neutral	10	16.7	16.7	86.7
	Disagree	6	10.0	10.0	96.7
	Strongly disagree	1	1.7	1.7	98.3
	22.00	1	1.7	1.7	100.0
Total		60	100.0	100.0	

In the above table, 70.0% of students either strongly agree (30.0%) or agree (40.0%) with the statement. Additionally, 16.7% are neutral, while 11.7% (10.0% disagree and 1.7% strongly disagree) do not support it. The consensus shows that many students believe that a lack of confidence hinders the ability to speak English confidently.

Table 2: I frequently translate statements from my native language into English, which affects my speaking skills

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	14	23.3	23.3	23.3
	Agree	29	48.3	48.3	71.7
	Neutral	14	23.3	23.3	95.0
	Disagree	2	3.3	3.3	98.3
	Strongly disagree	1	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total		60	100.0	100.0

From table 2, 71.7% of students either strongly agree (23.3%) or agree (48.3%) that frequently translating phrases and sentences from their native language to English affects their communication skills, which acknowledges the issue of limitation of translating from their native language, which hinders the student's ability to think naturally in English. Additionally, 23.3% are neutral, while only 4.3% (3.3% disagree and 1.7% strongly disagree) do not support this view.

Table 3: Unintentionally using inappropriate words caused challenges for me as a female student speaking English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	16	26.7	26.7	26.7
	Agree	24	40.0	40.0	66.7
	Neutral	12	20.0	20.0	86.7
	Disagree	8	13.3	13.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

According to the table, 66.7% of students either agree (40.0%) or strongly agree (26.7%) that using inappropriate words unintentionally poses challenges in speaking English. Additionally, 20.0% are neutral, and 13.3% disagree with this view. This highlights that many students perceive difficulties in speaking English due to a lack of appropriate vocabulary.

Table 4: Restricting the use of English only in classrooms can affect my communicative competence as a female EFL student

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	21	35.0	35.0	35.0
	Agree	24	40.0	40.0	75.0
	Neutral	13	21.7	21.7	96.7
	Disagree	2	3.3	3.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

According to the table, 75.0% of students either agree (40.0%) or strongly agree (35.0%) that restricting the use of English only in classrooms affects the communicative competence of female EFL students. This suggests that many students believe limiting English use in classrooms contributes to ongoing issues with their English speaking skills.

Table 5: Due to my Incompetence in grammar, I face difficulty speaking English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	25	41.7	41.7	41.7
	Agree	23	38.3	38.3	80.0
	Neutral	5	8.3	8.3	88.3
	Disagree	6	10.0	10.0	98.3
	Strongly disagree	1	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 reveals that among students, 41.7% strongly agreed, 38.3% agreed, 8.3% were neutral, 10.0% disagreed, and 1.7% strongly disagreed. Nearly 80% of students strongly believe that poor grammar poses a significant challenge for English speaking. This highlights that female students also face considerable difficulties in English speaking due to grammar incompetence.

Table 6: As an undergraduate female EFL student, I may find it challenging to maintain smooth conversations in English due to fluency

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	20	33.3	33.3	33.3
	Agree	26	43.3	43.3	76.7
	Neutral	6	10.0	10.0	86.7
	Disagree	6	10.0	10.0	96.7
	Strongly disagree	2	3.3	3.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

According to the data in table 6, a significant majority of students, 76.7% in total, perceive maintaining fluent conversations in English as a major challenge. This difficulty hinders their ability to converse smoothly and effortlessly. However, 10% of students are neutral, and 13.3% disagree.

Table 7: Building phrases and long sentences while speaking English is difficult for me

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	22	36.7	36.7	36.7
	Agree	22	36.7	36.7	73.3
	Neutral	5	8.3	8.3	81.7
	Disagree	8	13.3	13.3	95.0
	Strongly disagree	3	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Approximately 73.3% of students find it challenging to construct long sentences and phrases in spoken English, impacting their ability to provide detailed explanations during discussions or about various topics.

Table 8: Insufficient practice is one of the main reasons I, as a female undergraduate EFL student, face difficulties in speaking English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	28	46.7	46.7	46.7
	Agree	28	46.7	46.7	93.3
	Neutral	3	5.0	5.0	98.3
	Disagree	1	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The findings of table 8 reveal that a significant majority, around 93%, indicated that inadequate practice hindered their ability to speak English effectively which creates an impact not only on academic performance but also limits social interaction and future opportunities. Therefore, this issue stands out as a primary concern among students, given its widespread prevalence. A small proportion, approximately 5.0%, remained neutral, while 1.7% disagreed.

Table 9: My fear of mistakes can create a barrier to communicating effectively in English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	30	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Agree	19	31.7	31.7	81.7
	Neutral	9	15.0	15.0	96.7
	Disagree	1	1.7	1.7	98.3
	Strongly disagree	1	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The table indicates that a substantial majority of students, totaling 81.7%, either strongly agree (50%) or agree (31.7%) with the statement. Additionally, 15.0% of students express neutrality, while a small minority, 3.4%, either disagree (1.7%) or strongly disagree (1.7%). The data suggests that for many students, the fear of making mistakes poses a significant barrier to effective communication in English, hindering their engagement in language use.

Table 10: The insufficiency within an English-speaking setting impacts my proficiency as an undergraduate female EFL student

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	15	25.0	25.0	25.0
	Agree	32	53.3	53.3	78.3
	Neutral	10	16.7	16.7	95.0
	Disagree	3	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Approximately 78% of undergraduate female EFL students believe that the lack of an English-speaking environment impacts their language proficiency, highlighting significant challenges in communication and interaction due to limited exposure to English.

Table 11: I fear criticism from the teacher and other students when I speak English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	14	23.3	23.3	23.3
	Agree	21	35.0	35.0	58.3
	Neutral	13	21.7	21.7	80.0
	Disagree	12	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Around 23.3% of students strongly agree, 35.0% agree, 21.7% are neutral, and 20.0% disagree with the statement of fear of criticism from teachers and peers when speaking English. This indicates that a total of about 58% of students acknowledge feeling inhibited in speaking English accurately due to perceived judgment and criticism from others.

Table 12: Expanding my vocabulary can help me to overcome the challenges of speaking English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	27	45.0	45.0	45.0
	Agree	26	43.3	43.3	88.3
	Neutral	3	5.0	5.0	93.3
	Disagree	4	6.7	6.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The above table result demonstrated that 88.3% of students agree that expanding vocabulary can help overcome challenges in speaking English. Specifically, 45.0% agree and 43.3% strongly agree with this strategy. Meanwhile, 5.0% of students are neutral, and 6.7% disagree.

Table 13: Regular practice of speaking English can also increase my ability to speak English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	50	83.3	83.3	83.3
	Agree	7	11.7	11.7	95.0
	Neutral	1	1.7	1.7	96.7
	Disagree	1	1.7	1.7	98.3
	12.00	1	1.7	1.7	100.0
Total	60	100.0	100.0		

The results of the above table indicate that 83.3% strongly disagree, 11.7% agree, 1.7% are neutral, and 1.7% disagree with the statement. The majority, approximately 95% of students, agree that regular English practice can effectively help them overcome challenges. Therefore, consistent practice in speaking English is seen as a highly beneficial solution for students in overcoming difficulties.

Table 14: Listening to native speakers and imitating their pronunciation and rhythm can improve my fluency in speaking English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	33	55.0	55.0	55.0
	Agree	18	30.0	30.0	85.0
	Neutral	3	5.0	5.0	90.0
	Disagree	6	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

According to the data in the above table, 85% of students either agree or strongly agree that listening to native speakers and imitating their pronunciation and rhythm can enhance fluency in English. This indicates that actively mimicking native speakers could potentially lead to improved English speaking skills.

Table 15: We can overcome challenges in speaking English by starting to think in English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	26	43.3	43.3	43.3
	Agree	19	31.7	31.7	75.0
	Neutral	13	21.7	21.7	96.7
	Disagree	2	3.3	3.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The majority of students, almost 75.0%, agree that thinking in English can effectively help overcome communication challenges. This approach allows students to analyze concepts from various perspectives, aiding them in improving their English communication skills. Regarding the item “We can overcome challenges in speaking English by starting thinking in English”. However, 3.3% disagreed and 21.7% had no opinion about it.

Table 16: Arranging speaking activities classes for students can also help to overcome the challenges they face in speaking English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	41	68.3	68.3	68.3
	Agree	19	31.7	31.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Based on the above table, the majority of students, 68.3% strongly agreeing and 31.7% agreeing, support the implementation of speaking activities and classes to help overcome English-speaking challenges. This underscores the need for teachers to organize such activities, which can enhance students' confidence and vocabulary skills effectively.

Table 17: Male dominance culture affects my ability to speak English confidently

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	29	48.3	48.3	48.3
	Agree	22	36.7	36.7	85.0
	Neutral	6	10.0	10.0	95.0
	Disagree	3	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The data from able 17 indicates that 48.3% of students strongly agree and 36.7% agree that male dominance culture negatively impacts female students' competence, limiting their career goals and self-improvement. This culture is seen to discourage and undervalue female students.

Table 18: Inadequate resources impact my ability to enhance my English-speaking skills

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	22	36.7	36.7	36.7
	Agree	28	46.7	46.7	83.3
	Neutral	5	8.3	8.3	91.7
	Disagree	4	6.7	6.7	98.3
	Strongly disagree	1	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The data from the above table reveals that approximately 83% of students agree that inadequate resources hinder their ability to improve their English-speaking skills. While 8.3% are neutral and 6.7% disagree, a small 1.7% strongly disagrees. This consensus highlights inadequate resources as a significant challenge impacting students' development of English communication skills, leading to underdeveloped abilities and decreased motivation.

Table 19: In this setting, the focus on education is primarily centered on the acquisition of academic credentials, thereby impeding my opportunities for regular practice in spoken English

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	39	66.1	66.1	66.1
	Agree	16	27.1	27.1	93.2
	Neutral	2	3.4	3.4	96.6
	Disagree	2	3.4	3.4	100.0
	Total	59	100.0	100.0	

According to the table, 66.1% of students strongly agree and 27.1% agree that there is a predominant focus on obtaining a degree, which negatively impacts students' collaboration, career prospects, and cultural exchange. A small minority, about 3.4%, remain neutral, while another 3.4% disagree with this viewpoint. These findings underscore a widespread sentiment among students regarding the implications of a degree-centric focus.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study focuses on challenges faced by female undergraduate EFL students at ULM's Department of English and Applied Linguistics in speaking English. The analysis aims to

identify these challenges and propose strategies to address them, emphasizing their impact on collaboration, career growth, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities.

The finding of the study reveals that undergraduate female EFL students of the University of Lakki Marwat faced a lot of problems while speaking English, which are categorized into different factors like psychological factors such as Nervousness, shyness, fear of mistakes and fear of criticism, Linguistic factors such as translation of sentences from native to English language, grammar incompetency, poor pronunciation, lack of vocabulary and building phrases and long sentences in English, Situational or environmental factors which include restricted English language only in classrooms, insufficient practice, insufficient English-speaking settings, and lack of guidance and academic credentials, Socio-cultural factors such as lack of confidence, using inappropriate words unintentionally, maintaining smooth conversation in English, Bilingualism and male dominance culture and economic factors include inadequacy of resources.

Female students in the study experienced significant psychological challenges when speaking English, including nervousness, shyness, fear of making mistakes, and fear of criticism. These factors created hesitation, affecting their pronunciation, confidence, and accuracy. Shyness reduced fluency and participation, lowering their self-esteem. Fear of mistakes and criticism further hindered their ability to speak fluently.

The study highlights linguistic challenges among female students, such as grammatical errors resulting from translating native language phrases to English, which hinders direct engagement and thinking in English. Many students struggle with grammar incompetence, affecting their ability to speak fluently. Weak pronunciation discourages them from speaking English, as they lack suitable vocabulary to express ideas effectively. Additionally, constructing complex sentences poses difficulties during English conversations. These factors collectively impede students' proficiency and confidence in spoken English.

The study identifies environmental constraints for female students in speaking English, particularly within a Pashto-speaking society where English is primarily confined to educational settings. This limited exposure outside classrooms prevents regular practice, impacting their language proficiency. Students also lack sufficient guidance and practice opportunities in English, essential for academic and professional advancement where English is required. Additionally, societal expectations in a patriarchal context further hinder their ability to speak confidently, contributing to disparities in English proficiency between genders. The study underscores socio-cultural challenges faced by female students, particularly in patriarchal societies that limit their academic and professional growth. Gender inequality restricts active participation in classrooms, hindering language development. Students also struggle with confidence in sustaining English dialogue and inadvertently using inappropriate language, leading to miscommunication. Native language dominance and a focus on academic qualifications over practical language skills further impede English proficiency and career advancement. These factors collectively create barriers for female students in mastering English and navigating social, economic, and personal domains effectively.

The study highlights economic challenges for female students, including limited access to language learning materials, overcrowded classrooms hindering individual attention and speaking practice, insufficient funding for teacher training focused on language instruction, and restricted access to technology like computers and internet for enhancing English skills through online platforms and language labs. These factors collectively impact their ability to improve English speaking skills effectively.

In short, Undergraduate female EFL students face numerous challenges in speaking English, which hinder their overall development in personal, social, academic, and professional aspects of life. These challenges stem from psychological, linguistic, environmental, socio-cultural, and economic factors. Proficiency in English is crucial in today's world for success across these

domains, making these obstacles particularly impactful on students' progress and achievements.

Recommendations

Here are some specific recommendations that address the challenges that female undergraduate EFL students face in speaking English at the University of Lakki Marwat (ULM). Recommendations for improving English speaking skills include creating a supportive environment, fostering gradual verbal communication, emphasizing growth over perfection, providing consistent practice opportunities, promoting skills-based education, advocating bilingualism, ensuring inclusive language practices, enhancing grammar instruction and vocabulary building, securing more funding for resources, training educators, and advocating for policy changes to support equitable access to language education. These recommendations aim to provide an extensive support system that enhances the English speaking abilities and overall language proficiency of female undergraduate EFL students at ULM by addressing the psychological, social, linguistic, environmental and linguistic factors influencing those students.

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