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The reduction of speaking anxiety in EFL learners through drama techniques

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Abstract

The study on drama and anxiety reduction was conducted with 24, 12th grade students at a high school in Kozan, Turkey. The triangulation of the data was established with pre and post-tests, semi-structured pre and post-interviews, and student diaries. The teacher’s reflections strengthened the qualitative aspect of the study. After six weeks of language and drama training, the drama techniques significantly lowered the speaking anxiety of EFL learners.

1. Introduction

The word drama is originally derived from the Greek word dran which means “to do, to act.” Action is an essential part of learning a language, as it develops body language, increases motivation, and keeps students involved in the learning process (Miccoli, 2003; Gorjian, Moosavinia, & Jabripour, 2010). Drama also creates a friendly, stress-free atmosphere where optimal learning occurs (Miccoli, 2003; Conejeros & Fernandez, 2008; Gorjian et al., 2010). Even when adults, let alone children, feel pressure on themselves, it becomes a burden to act, move or speak naturally, especially in public, which means anxiety.

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While trying to find out if drama helps students’ oral skills development, researchers have also found that drama lowers anxiety levels of EFL learners (Miccoli, 2003; Conejeros & Fernandez, 2008; Gorjian et al., 2010). Drama itself has become a teaching technique which encourages students to learn a new language in a creative and effective way. This means that drama techniques create an atmosphere where students learn in context, use their imagination, and spontaneously react. Speaking a language without any preparation is of great importance for fluency in EFL. Fluency requires “performance.” To achieve fluency, a learner has to perform the language. However, speaking a foreign language in the classroom is inherently artificial. It is very difficult to involve students in artificial speaking activities. Students need lifelike situations to perform the elements of the language. They also need to feel as if they are not acting. When they are aware that they are imitating a foreigner, they become anxious.

Teenagers are afraid of making mistakes in front of their friends and their teachers. They feel embarrassed, anxious and humiliated. These feelings may cause reticence. When they are anxious, they can’t speak. When they can’t speak, they become more anxious. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of drama techniques on speaking anxiety in EFL learners. The research question for this study is:

How does the use of drama techniques affect the speaking anxiety of EFL learners?

2. Review of literature

2.1. Speaking anxiety in EFL classes

Foreign language anxiety is a major element which affects performances and acquisition of FL learners. FLA occurs more in output language abilities such as writing and speaking than in input abilities (Chiu et al., 2010). In the study of Chiu et al. (2010), a high percentage of students reported that it was easy for them to become anxious when they spoke in English (p.109). Accordingly, students who tested high on anxiety in the study of Horwitz et al., remarked that they are afraid to speak in the FL (1986). Though the results of the study of MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) presented that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking activity in second language acquisition, half of their students reflected the use of speaking skills as confidence-building experience (p.303). Thus, it can be implied from this study that, when there is no anxiety provoking situation, speaking a FL can increase students’ self-confidence. The level of self-confidence is one of the most important factors provoking anxiety because, when students experience high self-confidence, they are not afraid of making mistakes or having other students laugh at them. Besides, it was found in the study of Park and Lee (2005) that low self-confidence or high anxiety levels affect students’ oral performances negatively. Zheng (2008) stated that when students are supposed to complete an oral task, their anxiety level can increase. Giving oral presentations and performing in front of other students was reported to be one of the most anxiety provoking situations, as well (Ohata, 2005; Woodrow, 2006). Ohata (2005) and Ay (2010) also mentioned the effect of “unpreparedness” on students’ speaking anxiety. In this situation, a student reported that s/he feels weird, and prefers to keep his/her silence during whole class, and wishes not to be asked any questions (Ohata, 2005).

People are often anxious about their ability in a foreign language, especially in listening/speaking situations, which leads to a type of anxiety called “communication apprehension” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). This type of anxiety plays such a crucial role in FL speaking anxiety that even talkative people become silent in a FL class when they have communication apprehension (Horwitz et al., 1986; Aydin, 2008; Ay, 2010).

In summary, there are many reasons for why EFL learners experience speaking anxiety, such as:

- fear of public speaking,
- communicating orally
- immature vocabulary
- fear of making pronunciation mistakes
- limited grammatical knowledge
- unpreparedness
- fear of being laughed at
- taking an oral test
- native speaker effect
- error correction style of the teacher
- levels of English proficiency
• worrying about being understood or not
• shyness, and
• low self-confidence. (Wörde, 2003; Ohata, 2005; Woodrow, 2006; Awan et al., 2010.; Dalkılıç, 2013; Park & Lee, 2005).

When FL learners continually experience FL speaking anxiety, they react physically with heart palpitation, sweating, and trembling. They also react psychologically with negative thoughts concerning language learning and speaking; having low level of self-confidence in language class; and by not looking at the eyes of the teacher. They may also remain silent during the lesson. At this point, what teachers are supposed to do is to create an atmosphere of low or no anxiety. Only by doing this can the student overcome the apprehension of speaking an FL.

2.2. Use of drama for speaking anxiety

Even though the history of drama dates back thousands of years, the use of drama in language classrooms has played a small, but consistent role in language teaching for only about four decades. Nevertheless, the advantage of this technique hasn’t been completely appreciated in second/foreign language learning (Dodson, 2000). Hamilton and McLeod (1993) claim that the use of drama techniques fits naturally into the nature of language and language learning (p.2). According to Du Mont (2007), in drama, there is emotion and movement, both of which have the power for liberating linguistic abilities. Holden (as cited in Davies, 1990, p. 87) describes drama when he says, “In other words, drama is concerned with the world of ‘let’s pretend’; it asks the learner to project himself imaginatively into another situation, outside the classroom, or into the skin and persona of another person.”

According to Schewe “if drama had a place in the curriculum then its purpose must straightforwardly be the improvement of pupil’s speech.” (as cited in Hölzl, 2009, p. 37). Among all the positive effects of drama in ELT, improvement of speaking has a very special place. Still, as the use of drama techniques for speaking skills is relatively recent, and there is limited research on the issue, the effects of drama activities on oral skills development of FL learners hasn’t clearly been put forth (Zerey, 2008; Galante, 2012).

The previous research showed that the largest portion of anxiety in a FL classroom belongs to “speaking” an FL (Stroud & Wee, 2006; Woodrow, 2006; Wood Shand, 2008; Zerey, 2008; Gai & Yang, 2010; Galante, 2012). With the intention of finding a remedy for this disturbing situation, researchers, like Miccoli (2003), Wood Shand (2008), Zerey (2008), Gorjian et al. (2010), Galante (2012), have tried drama techniques in FL classrooms. Based on this research, it can be implied that drama changes attitudes and beliefs of students about learning a foreign language as well as speaking it in public or in FL classroom atmosphere. We can hopefully say that drama techniques psychologically and physically affect students’ language abilities. Students’ understanding of drama texts, their verbal knowledge, and communication skills improve. Drama keeps students active in the learning situations. Students’ self-confidence and motivation increase. However, their anxiety level, which plays a major role in communicative skills in FL classes, decreases.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted at Kozan Anatolian Medical Vocational High School in the first term of academic year 2013-2014. The participants of the study were 24 students who were chosen through purposive sampling. They were 12th graders at the age of 18. Students at this level were preferred because they were studying at the department for emergency medical technicians. As there was only one class of students in this department, there wouldn’t be unfairness to any other classes. Moreover, despite their negative feelings about English, most of the students were interested in studying language through drama and they complained about the time given to English speaking exercises during regular English classes. For these reasons, these participants were chosen, and all the students willingly agreed to participate in the study. The participants were number coded such as St1, St2, to ensure their confidentiality.
3.2. Materials & design

To investigate how drama affects the speaking anxiety of EFL learners, the data was collected through pre- and post-questionnaires, semi-structured pre- and post-interviews, and student diaries. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), designed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), was used as pre- and post-questionnaire. During 6-weeks-drama course, the students kept diaries which gave better insights into the effects of drama techniques. The teacher video-recorded the drama sessions and took notes on her reflections. Right after the course period, students took post-questionnaires and answered the semi-structured, post-interview questions.

In this case study, qualitative data was collected through student diaries and semi-structured pre- and post-interviews, and teacher reflections. The one-group, pretest-posttest design was conducted for the quantitative data.

3.3. Procedure

Before beginning the data collection, the instructor talked to the students and confirmed all the students are willingly attending the study. First, the Turkish version of FLCAS was administered to the students as pre-test. There were 33 items in this five-points likert scale test. Second, 10 students out of 24 were chosen by lot for the interview. The interview was conducted one-to-one in an empty classroom. The interviewee was informed that his/her voice will be recorded for the benefit of the teacher. After the administration of the questionnaire and conducting the interviews, it was time to record a diary, and answer pre-drama questions. One day before the drama activities began, the pre-drama questions and drama-questions were pre-prepared and given to the students. All the questions written on the handout were read by the teacher and explained by giving examples to make sure that all the students clearly understood everything. The following day, the drama exercises began. Within the drama exercises, there were famous films, fairy tales and a final performance show. Using films is mostly preferred because, in films, there are human emotions which the students feel while acting the roles. Drama scripts were used which were previously prepared. The scripts were prepared according to learners’ interests, age, and language level. Music was an important point in the study. The soundtracks of the films were effectively used in the drama activities to motivate students better. A soundtrack was played in the background of a drama activity or it was the activity itself. Props were also very important for the exercises. Students had a chance to create their own props which was very motivating for them, or they were able to choose from the variety of props which were brought to the classroom by the teacher.

Language games, role play, mime, improvisation (Dundar, 2012), and drama scripts (Karakaya & Kahraman, 2013) are the drama techniques used in this study.

Table 1 is prepared to briefly present which data collection tools were used for the research question, together with how it was applied.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Collection Tools</th>
<th>Data Collection Procedure</th>
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<tr>
<td>How does the use of drama techniques affect the speaking anxiety of EFL learners?</td>
<td>FLCAS</td>
<td>Turkish FLCAS</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Semi-Structured</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pre and post-interviews</td>
<td>10 randomly-chosen interviewees (40%)</td>
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<td>Before-after drama sessions</td>
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<td>Student Diaries</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
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<td>24 students</td>
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<td>6 weeks</td>
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<td>Teacher’s Reflections</td>
<td>Video records</td>
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<td>Notes</td>
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The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) FLCAS was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). To test the reliability of both pre-test and post-test questionnaires, Cronbach’s Alpha statistic was used and calculated as 0.948 for pre-test and 0.914 for post-test. Because the statistics are very close to 1, reliability was found to be very high. Foreign language speaking anxiety level of the students was determined with the total scores of each student’s answers to the FLCAS. The responses to each item in the questionnaire were analyzed calculating the individual item means. For each item, frequencies and percentages were also calculated to see the general distribution of the responses among the participants.

The qualitative data were collected through pre- and post-interviews, students’ diaries, and teacher reflections which were analyzed using the content analysis technique. In the content analysis, the steps used by Zerey (2008, p. 73-74) were followed throughout the analysis process:

- Transcribing
- Coding/labeling
- Clustering
- Looking for interrelationships between categories
- Write-up

4. Findings & analysis

4.1. Foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS)

For the FLCAS, a paired samples t-Test was administered to the data in order to determine the difference between the pre and post-test results. In the following tables, the mean of pre-test scores showing the level of anxiety of the students was 3.07 over 5 and this represents “neither agree nor disagree” point on the Likert Scale. The mean of post-test scores was 2.40 over 5 and this nearly represents the “disagree” point on the Likert Scale. In the questionnaire, negative propositions was questioned. Because of that, it can be implied that the students’ foreign language classroom anxiety decreased after the drama application.

Paired Samples t-Test shows that there is a statistically significant, positive difference between the means of pre-test and post-test scores, because t statistic is 3.592 and corresponding P value is 0.002 which is less than predetermined significance level 0.05.

<table>
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<th>Table 2. Paired Samples Statistics of FLCAS</th>
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<td>Mean</td>
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<td>Pair 1</td>
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*Df = Degrees of Freedom, *t = t-Test, *Sig. = Significance Level

The findings of the quantitative data show that drama positively affected students’ anxiety, fear, nervousness, and embarrassment towards speaking in the FL. Most of the students benefited from drama exercises in ways such as speaking in FL when unprepared; feeling confident while speaking English; overcoming the feel of being worse at speaking English than other students; and the fear of being laughed at while speaking an FL.

4.2. Interviews

As for the interviews and the student diaries, the findings are not much different from the findings of
FLCAS. During the pre-interviews, the students continually articulated that they are afraid of making mistakes while speaking. They mostly mentioned pronunciation mistakes.

St3. If I don’t know (the answer), I feel embarrassed. If I pronounce funny or silly, I feel embarrassed.

When they were asked about their reaction to this disturbing situation, students reported that they stop speaking, feel ashamed, or get angry.

Similar to the findings of FLCAS, it is found in the post test that after the drama application most of the students started to feel better in English classroom, and consequently, found it easier to speak English.

St1. There are many differences. For example, when we are in the classroom, it is just an ordinary lesson. But while doing drama activities, we both have fun and learn at the same time. It helps us to overcome our excitement.

St2. Speaking in a regular English lesson and speaking in a drama course is so different from each other. You learn speech patterns in drama. I mean you learn what to say with using these patterns. But it is more difficult (to speak) in a regular class. I mean, I think learning grammar rules is more difficult.

However some students handled the issue in a different way:

St9. As we are doing something “critical,” as we believe that we shouldn’t make a mistake, we give more importance to drama. But in a regular English class, when we make a mistake, you can correct it. We don’t need to get anxious. However we get anxious in drama as it is a “critical” issue.

4.3. Student diaries

In the student diaries, the responses of the students to the question asking if they feel comfortable, excited, anxious, frightened or happy, showed that most of the students were anxious, frightened, or excited while speaking English in the first drama session. However, when the last week arrived, no students felt this way. Some students also stated that their self-confidence had increased. In the first week, while half of students observed that their friends liked to speak English, after 6 weeks, all of the students agreed that their friends enjoyed speaking English. Moreover, after the six-week-drama application, students compared their thoughts and feelings towards English speaking situations with the ones they had before the drama application. The responses demonstrated that there is a great difference after six weeks. More than half of the students stated that they used to have problems with pronunciation. Almost half of the students stated that they used to abstain from speaking English lessons while some students expressed that they used to be afraid of making mistakes while speaking English. Similarly, some of the students said that they used to get excited while speaking. However, some complained about that they used to have poor vocabulary. Yet, these negative situations turned into positive thoughts and feelings with the help of drama application. Many of the students stated that they are not afraid of making mistakes while speaking English. Most of the students expressed that their pronunciation has improved. More than half of the students stated that they feel comfortable in English lessons, while some students said that they spoke better after the six-week-drama application.

4.4. Teacher’s reflection

As a result of my observations, I start to believe that drama is a must in foreign language teaching. After 6-week-drama application, I conclude that drama helped my students to discover themselves; see their strengths and weaknesses; face their fear or nervousness; and overcome these relatively negative feelings. The students who were always abstaining from speaking English and acting, started to raise their hands when I asked for a volunteer. These students also wanted frequently to be called on. Although there was not an observable improvement in their pronunciation, after the application, students weren’t afraid of making mistakes while pronouncing a word. On the other hand, warm up activities also had a significant effect on lowering speaking anxiety levels. During warm up activities, both the students and I enjoyed the language training experience. We acted, danced and sang out loud. Everybody laughed at each other which appeared to help students overcome the fear of being laughed at.

After the drama application, it was clear that their friendship became stronger. There was no grouping among the students any more. All of them wanted to share a scene with a volunteer who they really don’t know very well. This also helped students to overcome their fear of making a mistake in front of their friends.

Drama had many positive effects on students. Among the most important ones, we can count the lowering of speaking anxiety levels; improving self-confidence; increasing motivation; decreasing the level of their fear of being laughed at; and being called on in English class.

5. Discussion

In order to explore the effects of drama on the speaking anxiety of students, the findings of FLCAS, interviews, students’ diaries and the teacher’s reflections were analyzed. As a result of the comparison between the
pre-test and post-test (FLCAS) anxiety scores of the students, it is found that there is a significant difference between the anxiety levels of the students before and after the 6-week-drama application. Examining the items specifically related to speaking in FL (Items 1,9,14,16,24,27,33) provided data to support the argument of the present thesis. The findings revealed that drama application lowered students’ speaking anxiety in FL.

Moreover, the post-interview results showed that students constantly mentioned their previous concerns about pronunciation which is reported to decrease after the drama application. Similarly, in the students’ diaries, the most frequently (n=15) mentioned issue was the improvement of pronunciation after the drama. It is clear in the findings of the present study that pronunciation is considered to be among the dominant elements of FL speaking. As it is accepted as an obligation to pronounce well or perfect in FL, students get anxious when they don’t have a good command of it.

Another outcome of the drama application was that students felt comfortable. The word “comfortable” might define several situations here such as, not excited, not anxious, not embarrassed, no fear of making mistakes, no grammar rules, and feeling comfortable among friends. Regardless of these meanings, most of the students said that they feel more comfortable in drama classes than in regular classes. However, there were 2 students who reported that speaking in drama classes was more difficult than in regular classes. One of these students said that the reason for the difficulty was that they had to give attention to more than one thing at the same time, such as the lines, intonation, pronunciation, and of course acting. The other student explained the reason for the anxiety, underlining that drama is a “critical” issue. Since she finds drama more important than a regular lesson, she believes that when she makes a mistake in a regular class, the teacher can correct it, yet this is not possible in drama when she is on the stage. It would not be appropriate to assume that the reaction of the two students was evidence for the negative effect of drama. Rather, they need to be accepted as good outcomes. It was difficult for the first student to speak, as he put effort into the drama by speaking and expressing feelings at the same time, which shows his eagerness to do his best. On the other hand, since the drama activity was given excessive importance by the second student, she believed that she shouldn’t make any mistakes. Both students also expressed that they enjoyed the drama activities, which shows that negative feelings towards English don’t stem from anything related to the teacher, the other students, or the drama exercises. The reason for their speaking anxiety is directly related to the importance they give to what they are doing in drama.

Additionally, in line with the findings of Zerey (2008), after the drama application, students stated that they gained more self-confidence in speaking English. Pre and post-test included item 31: “I’m afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.” It shows that the number of the students who are not afraid of being laughed at increases (n=17) in the post-test. According to the teacher’s reflections, this might not have been caused by the decrease in laughter directed at the student, but by an increase in the students’ level of self-confidence.

In addition to these favorable outcomes of the study, there is another issue to mention here. The findings of the FLCAS reveal that there is a statistically significant difference between the speaking anxiety levels of the students before and after the drama application. However, there are 7 items in the findings which differ from the other 28 items in the scale. Basically, what was found in the FLCAS was that the students got benefits from drama. These 28 supporting items showed significant support for the idea that drama has positive effects on students’ speaking and general anxiety in language classrooms. Though, the findings of these 7 differing items (Item 2,5,8,11,14,18,28) don’t show consistency with the majority of the items supporting the present thesis. According to the findings of the Item 5, most of the students (n=18) don’t want to have more English lessons after the drama application, while in the student diaries, students frequently stated that they are happier and more comfortable in a language class. Similarly, all of the 10 interviewees reported that they like English classes after the drama application.

This was an unanticipated result which caused the researcher to re-examine the data in an attempt to understand why this situation occurred. The reasons for this apparent contradiction may be related to the students’ ability to understand question content and the misunderstanding of the purpose of the questions during the administration of FLCAS. This seems reasonable because the student clearly responded in a positive way to the use of drama in other data collection areas of the study.

6. Educational implications

The present study shows that drama has positive effects on the speaking anxiety of EFL learners which corresponds to the findings in the FLSA literature. To understand how and to what extent drama helps to lower the
levels of speaking anxiety of EFL learners, it is necessary to explain the factors which contribute to anxiety in EFL classrooms.

In order to make use of the findings of the present study, anxiety in foreign language classes should be discussed with the students. They are not alone in the feeling of anxiety in language training classes. As most of the students suffer from the fear of making a mistake, they might also be told that everybody, even the native speakers, can make a mistake while speaking. The same thing happens in Turkish language training. Students should give the same level of respect as they prefer to receive from friends during language training exercises.

In addition, language teachers should be given special education concerning how to create an anxiety free atmosphere in classes. When a student becomes reticent in a language classroom, it means that the teacher has lost a student. The unwillingness of a student to participate in a language classroom is not a sign of discipline, but a sign of higher levels of anxiety, or no anxiety which might suggest complete disinterest. As Brown (1994) suggests, anxiety is a matter of degree. How it is perceived depends on if it is a mild or severe anxiety. Severe anxiety is debilitating while mild anxiety can be facilitating in FL classes. For this reason, anxiety, to a certain degree, could be considered as a beneficial effect on language learning.

Moreover, language teachers should also be informed about the positive effects of drama on speaking and anxiety of FL learners. The literature of FLCA also supports the effectiveness of drama for reducing speaking anxiety. Foreign language teachers could use drama as a powerful medium to teach FL; to motivate students to speak in FL; or to encourage student involvement in literature. On the basis of the observations performed in this study, teachers can work miracles in FL classrooms through the use of drama techniques.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that drama helped to reduce speaking anxiety in FL classes. Thus, the purpose of this study was to seek the answer to the question:

How does the use of drama techniques affect the speaking anxiety of EFL learners?

The study was conducted with a group of 12th graders in Kozan Anatolian Medical Vocational High School. The language levels of these 24 participants were A2. To answer the research questions, the quantitative data was collected through pre and post-tests by the use of FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986). The data was analyzed via SPSS program. Semi-structured pre and post-interviews, students’ diaries, and the teacher’s reflections were included to collect qualitative data which were analyzed through content analysis.

In the present study, it is found that drama application significantly contributed to the emotional quality of the FL classroom. Students felt better, got rid of their prejudices about English classes, and became eager to come to FL classes. In addition, drama lowered the speaking anxiety of the participants. The students started to speak without the fear of making mistakes. They willingly started to take part in English speaking situations.

Helping students to speak in FL classes is a major responsibility of an FL teacher. In order to fulfil this duty, it is necessary to inform students that it is common to get anxious while speaking an FL, and they are not alone. Moreover the students need to know that the teacher is waiting there to help and courage them; not to correct their mistakes or insult them. When students start to feel secure in the FL classroom, they naturally start to speak.

In conclusion, all foreign language teachers need to motivate their students; encourage them to speak; and to allow them to make mistakes without punishment. In general, it is impossible to learn a foreign language without making mistakes. Given this situation, teachers should make adjustments in the language class to prevent negative feelings toward English language learning. According to this study, the use of drama in foreign language teaching promotes positive feelings toward the learning experience while it increases the likelihood that students will continue to involve themselves in language training.

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