

Concept of Word in Text: The Prerequisite in Early English Literacy for ESL Learners in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Research has shown that English literacy instructional practices such as direct teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing are effective for teaching English as second language learners. Previous research on early reading acquisition has focused on phonological awareness—the ability to consciously attend to and manipulate the sound structure of spoken language. Nevertheless, a series of previous studies suggests that children’s ability to match spoken words to written words while reading is important in early reading acquisition. The purpose of this study was to examine a model of early literacy development in which children’s concept of word is assumed to facilitate the development of phonological awareness and sight vocabulary. In this study, 30 kindergarten children who learn English as a second language from two kindergartens in Hong Kong were assessed and compared on measures of alphabet knowledge, concept of word, syllable, and phoneme awareness and word recognition ability. The results essentially replicated a previous study by Morris and support the proposed model. The results have implications for beginning reading instruction for children with English as the second language and future research in early literacy acquisition.

Keywords: Concept of word in text, English as second language, early childhood education

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Introduction

In this study of young English as second language students in Hong Kong, concept of word was found to be an important component of English literacy instruction. A child with concept of print understands that he or she will be able to read the print from left to right and from top to bottom (Barone, and Mallette, 2013). This study is valuable since Hong Kong is a unique place where (1) children's native language is Chinese and they seldom use English outside school; (2) children start learning English at a very early age; and (3) teachers use diverse approaches in kindergartens. Instead of facilitating Chinese children to start their English with phonics, it is definitely possible to start with the "word" like the way they learn Chinese.

Phonemic Awareness

There have been many classical studies focusing on phonological awareness—the ability to consciously attend to and manipulate the sound structure of spoken language. Gleitman and Rozin (1977), Gough and Hillinger (1980), and Mattingly (1972), stated that success in learning to read an alphabetic language like English depends on phonemic awareness. The reasons are: (1) An alphabetic writing system maps to spoken language at the phoneme level; (2) young children have difficulty segmenting speech into phonemes because the discrete unit of speech perception is the syllable, not the phoneme (Lieberman et al., 1967); (3) therefore, a first step in teaching reading is to help children become aware of phoneme segments in spoken words so that they can make the initial speech-print match at a low-order, sound-letter level. The research strongly suggests that phonological awareness is not only correlated with early reading achievement, but actually plays a causal role in learning to read (Blachman, 2000; National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000; Snow et al., 1998). Teaching phonological awareness could strengthen children's learning alphabet knowledge and the knowledge of the names and sounds of letters (Ehri et al. 2001; Invernizzi & Tortorelli, 2013).

Recent research indicates that attaining a concept of word in text is a watershed literacy event that allows a reader to more readily acquire a store of sight words (Bear et al., 2012).

Bear, Negrete, and Cathey (2016) concerned children who have not achieved concept of word by the end of kindergarten or by the second month of first grade. Their study found that students who have not acquired concept of word encounter difficulties in learning and retaining sight words and phonics. Such kind of children need to work with repeating tapping patterns and clapping syllables and rhythmic word patterns (Bear et al., 2016).

Therefore, their study proves the importance of using language experience writing as well as guided reading to teach concept of word. Schwanenflugel and Knapp (2016) also regarded these important skills (such as shared reading experiences) as conventions of written language that could develop children to gain the concept of word. Meanwhile, Mesmer and Williams (2015) hypothesize in their research that a child's attentiveness to syllables in words helps children to develop concept of word. Bowling and Cabell (2019) claimed that a child's ability to fingerpoint accurately to words while reading aloud a memorized text showcases his/her development of concept of word in text. This ability demonstrates the extent to which key early literacy skills are integrated (e.g., alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness).

Morris's studies (1983, 1993, & 2011) drew our attention to concept of word in text in early English literacy. His studies suggested that children's ability to match spoken words to written words while reading is important in early reading acquisition. This article helps English literacy educators understand the important role played by concept of word in text in young children's literacy development and reading acquisition, with a special focus on young children learning English as their second language in Hong Kong kindergartens.

Defining Concept of Word in Text

Researchers have studied concept of word in text for many years when grasping concept of word is a crucial beginning reading skill. Adams (1990) recognized concept of word as the patches of units that separate words and are the same units that can be isolated in speech. Bear and Barone (1998) defined concept of word as the ability to match spoken words with words in text. Juel and Meier (1998) suggested that the development of concept of word is necessary in understanding the form of print because children's attention must be drawn to

individual words. Morris (1983 & 1993) conducted a number of studies on concept of word and defined concept of word as awareness of “the match between the spoken word and the written word in reading text.” He described the development of concept of word as a pivotal event in learning to read because it facilitates the development of sight vocabulary along with phonological awareness. Concept of word in text reflects “a student’s automatic letter-sound knowledge and ability to isolate the beginning sound in a word to make an accurate speech-to-print match in a familiar text by pointing to each word as it is read aloud, which ultimately leads to the ability to develop a bank of words recognized at sight” (Bowling & Cabell, 2019, pp143; Flanigan, 2007; Morris, 1993; Smith, 2012).

Morris’ Studies in Emergent Reading

His study of suburban Chicago kindergarteners (Morris, 1993b) revealed that development in kindergarteners’ emerging knowledge of written words followed this sequence: (1) Beginning consonant knowledge (BC) facilitates a concept of word in text (CW); (2) concept of word in text facilitates phoneme segmentation ability (PS); and (3) phoneme segmentation ability facilitates word recognition (WR). Morris and Bloodgood (2003) further tested a refined developmental model of emergent reading that includes seven components:

1. Alphabet knowledge (ABC)
2. Beginning consonant awareness (BC)
3. Concept of word in text (CW)
4. Spelling with beginning and ending consonants (SPBE)
5. Phoneme segmentation (PS)
6. Word recognition (WR)
7. Contextual reading (READ).

The researchers assessed 102 children individually at five different points during their first two years in school: September, February, and May of kindergarten, and October and May of first grade. The results showed that alphabet recognition (ABC) and beginning consonant awareness (BC) changed or rose in parallel across the course of the year, as did two other

pairs of variables: concept of word in text (CW) and spelling with beginning and ending consonants (SPBE), and phoneme segmentation (PS) and word recognition (WR). Furthermore, changes in ABC and BC tended to precede changes in CW and SPBE, and changes in CW and SPBE clearly preceded changes in PS and WR.

Morris (2011) proposed that phoneme awareness instruction fits this developmental model. The teacher can teach letter–sound correspondences and demonstrate to students how to sort spoken words by the beginning consonant sound. The teacher can also carefully model how to match spoken words to printed words when reading short, memorized texts. In reading simple texts, the child’s concomitant attention to beginning and ending consonant letter sounds may serve to frame the interior of a printed word for further sound–letter analysis. The teacher can also foster vowel awareness by using a “say it and move it” phonics strategy (Blachman et al., 1994; Morris & Bloodgood, 2003) so the child says a target word and then moves letter chips, one by one, to construct its spelling. On the other hand, the teacher can construct the word letter by letter and have the child attempt to decode it.

Methods

A Study of Concept of Word in Text

A study of concept of word in text in the age range of five to six was conducted. Two classrooms in bilingual kindergartners in Hong Kong were visited to assess and compare children’s reading performance using the Early Reading Screening Instrument (ERSI) developed by Morris (1983 & 1993) to see whether (1) the model of reading development proposed by Morris, in which the development of concept of word and phonological awareness play central roles, can be generalized for understanding early literacy development in Hong Kong bilingual kindergartners, and (2) the kinds of kindergarten instructions (play versus language experience) that influence the development of concept of word.

Context

The second language environment for children in Hong Kong is unique. Most Hong Kong children's mother tongue is Cantonese, and the core medium in kindergartens is also Cantonese (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Yet, starting from three years old, children in kindergartens learn English through emergent reading and writing. In English learning sessions, which are held two to three times each week for most kindergartens, teachers speak in English only. There is no compulsory policy on the approaches to teaching English. Some kindergartens emphasize a phonics approach while some emphasize whole-language approaches. In this study, child participants came from two types of classrooms. One was a play-based classroom; that is, a non-English language experience kindergarten (NELE), in which children are encouraged to participate in socializing, solving problems, and creative thinking in Cantonese and without many English learning materials. The other children were in a whole language-oriented classroom, which is an English language experience kindergarten (ELE), spending a greater proportion of class time attending to print, stories, and emergent reading.

Participants

Thirty K3-class kindergarteners aged from five to six who were learning English as a second language participated. Half came from a non-English language experience kindergarten (NELE) and the other half from a systematic English language experience kindergarten (ELE). The children were selected from three classrooms such that groups of high, middle, and low ability students based on teacher ratings were fairly represented. The children's socioeconomic status in both kindergartens was primarily middle and lower middle class. Two English subject teachers from NELE and ELE kindergartens participated in the semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection

Data collected for this study included quantitative data from word-consciousness tasks,

field notes from class observation of teachers' instructions, and children's responses and transcripts of tape-recorded semi-structured interviews of the kindergarten teachers to investigate their classroom practices. Both kindergartens were provided with a consent form to inform the purposes and procedures of the study and to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the data and the right of the participants to withdraw from the study.

Measures and Procedures: Early Reading Screening Instrument (ERSI)

The assessment tasks in this study were aligned with ERSI, which was originally designed to screen low-reading first graders in the United States for intensive tutoring (Morris, 1989). ERSI is an individually administered assessment that includes four task areas: alphabet knowledge, concept of word, phoneme awareness, and word recognition. Task instructions were delivered to the subjects in Cantonese. In eight weeks during the school year, from December to January, the kindergarteners were assessed individually. There was another helper to assist in the data collection. To assure uniformity in the administration of data collection in the assessment tasks, training and pilot tasks were conducted in December prior to the January testing. All children's performances were recorded in the score sheets. The procedures based on the ERSI are shown in Appendix A.

Findings

This research study collected both quantitative and qualitative data. For the field notes from class observation and the transcripts from semi-structured interviews, the analysis process was inductive and data were coded and categorized to compare the children's performance, teachers' instructions, and learning activities between play-experience and language-experience kindergartens.

In addition, the word-consciousness tasks were recorded quantitatively. The data were analyzed using SPSS. The scores (proportion of correct responses) from AK, CW, PA, and WR tasks between NELE and ELE were compared. The scores were then subjected to Pearson correlation analysis to generate a scatterplot matrix between the tasks. The scoring system is shown in Appendix B.

Findings (I): Morris' Model of Reading Development in Hong Kong Bilingual Kindergartens

Data in this study supported that the model of reading development proposed by Morris can be generalized for understanding early literacy development in Hong Kong bilingual kindergartens. Correlation analysis revealed a significant relationship between beginning readers' concept of word in text and their performance on the overall ERSI measure in both samples of NELE and ELE kindergartens. Correlational analysis revealed a significant relationship between beginning readers' concept of word in text and their performance on the overall ERSI measure (AK, PA, and WR): $r = .92$ ($p < .01$). Comparing the NELE and ELE kindergartens, the performance of NELE: mean = 21.7 (SD = 8.5), while the performance of ELE: mean = 26.4 (SD = 7.8). My analysis also showed that the performance pattern in both NELE and ELE samples replicates the developmental scheme reported by Morris (1993); that is, beginning consonant knowledge was achieved before concept of word in text, concept of word was achieved before the ability to segment words in phonemes, and segmentation preceded word recognition ability.

	AK	CW	PA	WR	ERSI Total
Total Score	129.24	97.21	61.2	38	325.65
Average Score	8.62	6.48	4.08	2.53	21.71
Average Percentage	86.2%	64.8%	40.8%	25.3%	54.3%

Figure 1. Proportion of Correct Responses on AK, CW, PA, and WR Scores (NELE Sample)

	AK	CW	PA	WR	ERSI Total
Total Score	138.08	115.84	71.4	71	396.32
Average Score	9.21	7.72	4.76	4.73	26.42
Average Percentage	92.1%	77.2%	47.6%	47.3%	66.1%

Figure 2. Proportion of Correct Responses on AK, CW, PA and WR Scores (ELE Sample)

The following reports the children's performances in specific tasks:

The Task of Alphabet Knowledge

Children in both kindergartens were able to recognize all alphabet letters in upper and lower cases. Children in both kindergartens with relatively weak alphabet knowledge misrecognized some alphabet letters apparently in terms of (1) pronunciation, (2) visual print, and (3) upper-and-lower cases. Children had difficulties in differentiating the letters by pronunciation, for example "C" to "Z" and "B" to "D," and they confused the visual prints of the alphabet letters, for example "O" to "Q," "d" to "p," and "I" to "l," and last but not least, they mixed the two forms of cases, for example, "g" to "G" and "f" to "F." In general, children in both kindergartens spent 80% to 100% more time to complete the task in recognizing lower case letters.

The Task of Concept of Word

Children in NELE and ELE kindergartens showed differences in the way they completed each task. Children in ELE kindergartens who showed more highly developed concept of word were able to point and read the target words in the sentence and infer the pronunciation of the words by singing the rhymes to him- or herself. They performed this task as follows:

Point: No more jumping on the bed.

Read: No more jumping on the bed.

Children in NELE kindergarten tried to pronounce the target words based on their limited phonological knowledge. They performed this task as follows:

Point: No more jumping on the bed.

Read: No more "jump-ing" on the bed.

In general, low-ability children in both ELE and NELE kindergartens with weak concept of word were unable to recognize a word with more than one syllable so that they pointed twice for "jump-ing" and "mon-keys."

The Task of Syllable and Phoneme Awareness

Children in ELE kindergarten showed better performance than children in NELE

kindergarten regarding the characteristics in completing the word spelling task, such as: (1) listening to the pronunciation of a word by the researcher and trying to integrate the letter blocks phonetically; (2) recalling the spelling by arranging the letter blocks with beginning and end consonant first and inferring the familiarity of the print; and (3) combining the letter blocks accordingly.

The Task of Word Recognition

In general, children in NELE kindergarten achieved 50% and those in ELE kindergarten achieved 80% accuracy in recognizing high-frequency words, but children in both kindergartens achieved a low level of accuracy in recognizing low-frequency words in the Hong Kong context, specifically “the,” “me,” and “this.” Low ability children in both NELE and ELE kindergartens read the letters of the word one by one when they were being asked “What is this word?” and replied “t-h-e” instead of “the.”

Findings (II): Influences of Kindergarten instruction in Hong Kong on the Development of Concept of Word of Children

The data of this study supported the view that play-experience and language-experience kindergartens have different impacts on the development of concept of word. There were clear differences between NELE and ELE kindergartens measured in ERSI tasks—children in the NELE kindergarten who recognized words in a narrow way by relying only on sound letters performed relatively weakly in ERSI tasks. In contrast, children in the ELE kindergarten who read words and sentences in a holistic manner had a stronger sense of a word and performed better in ERSI tasks. One teacher each from the NELE and ELE kindergartens were interviewed about their beliefs and practices about the relationship between their literacy instructions and the literacy development of children.

Beliefs and practices of the NELE teacher

The teacher of the NELE kindergarten supported a phonics approach in teaching English: “*Yeah, because when you start with English, you have to know how the letter sounds go. It’s easier because when you fill them a letter and then know what the sound is, it would help them break the words and connect everything together.*” She valued the whole language approach in teaching

English but found it difficult to implement in practice: *“I think for me, combining it will be good. I like this approach better because if you stick to phonics, it’s a two-way thing. If you stick too much on this one, then they will only know phonics. But yet, they can’t talk to you conversation wise. If you talk to them conversation wise, then you wouldn’t know the basis of the alphabet. So for me, if you combine both evenly, it would be more valid.”*

The teacher in the NELE kindergarten was most concerned with children’s phonemic awareness. She used letter cards as the teaching materials focusing on the letter sounds “a” and “i.” Then, she asked children to follow the word “train” and “t-rain.” Children followed the teacher in reading “mot-her,” “teac-her,” “brot-her,” “fat-her,” and “sis-ter” with specific and meaningful gestures for the sound letters. After that, children were asked to differentiate the letter and pictorial cards of “mother” and “sister.” The teacher conducted one-on-one assessment by asking the child to match the letter card with the pictorial card.

Beliefs and practices of the ELE teacher

The teacher of the ELE kindergarten agreed on the integration of both the whole language and phonics approach. She specified the integral way of applying two approaches, which is similar to systematic language teaching, as suggested by Morris and Bloodgood (2003):

“The existing curriculum is quite effective and comprehensive. The English curriculum is linked with the projects in the school. First of all, the curriculum is theme-based, so we teach children through stories. Children have one theme book and one phonics book. Our school designs the curriculum first and then searches for curriculum-appropriate books. Therefore, the stories could be related to the themes and we could find related phonics to link with the themes... A theme will last for three weeks and there will be two sessions each week. There will be four to five sessions for one theme. I will tell a story to bring out the theme, and the rhymes we read are useful to recall their memory about the story. Then I will teach children sentences related to the themes and especially the phonics (sound letters). After that, I will reinforce the sound letters and come to the conclusion or summary of the theme. In fact, it is not necessary to put an emphasis on phonics. Children learn phonics through stories and games and, at last, we bring out the learning objectives of the phonics in the theme.”

The teacher in the ELE kindergarten integrated phonics and word awareness. She started the class with the letter sound “O” and “S” to motivate the children to play a warm-up game

with gestures and postures. Then she demonstrated a role-playing game based on a Chinese New Year story. Children had to role play and practice the conversations “Would you like some biscuits?” “Yes, thank you!” In the second game, children had to practice the sentences in the story, like “Would you like some chocolate?” “No, thank you. I’m full!” Finally, the teacher ended the class by singing the theme song, “Kung Hei Fat Choi.”

In the field observation, although the sequence of children development was similar across the K3 classrooms in NELE and ELE kindergartens, the literacy level achieved by children in each type of classroom was found to differ—instructions in ELE were more advanced than in NELE. Hence, this study concluded that the children in the ELE kindergarten had better development of concept of word than those in the NELE kindergarten.

Discussion

Concept of word in text is a watershed event in the development of a reader (Henderson, 1980; Invernizzi et al., 2005). To foster its development, Morris and Bloodgood (2003) suggested teachers should consider systematic reading and writing instruction.

Alphabet Instruction

Kindergarten teachers can teach the alphabet and the sounds represented by the letters (e.g., b = /b/; r = /r/). Teachers can teach one letter per week and review letters in subsequent weeks as needed. They have to make sure that children attend to the beginning consonant sound in a word (e.g., the /b/ in /bar/) and match the sound to the appropriate letter (b).

Guided Reading

Morris and Bloodgood (2003) suggested that teachers read stories aloud to their children to develop concept of word. For instance, a teacher can model the reading of a calendar message each day. For instance, when reading, “Today is Friday. The weather is hot and sunny,” the teacher points at each word in the sentences and invites the children to join in reading.

Teachers can also model finger-point reading in different contexts, for example, “weekly story or rhyme,” and introduce a short poem that emphasizes the letter or sound being studied that week and lead the children in reading the verse each day. Teachers can also read Big Books with children by pointing to the words as they read the story aloud. In guided reading, there should be very little print on the page so the children can follow the teacher’s modeling. Children should have opportunities to come up and try finger-point reading the text themselves. In fact, guided reading enables a beginning reader to self-correct whenever he or she is reading in a word boundary.

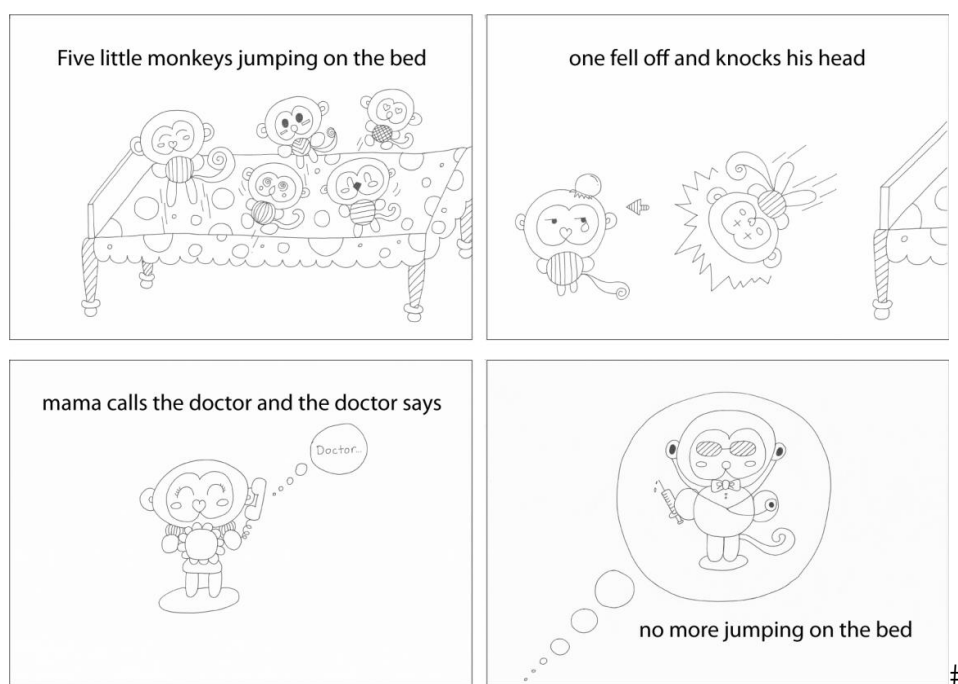


Figure 3. The story above is a sample for teachers to show very little print on the page so that children can follow the teacher’s modeling in the guided reading.

Writing Instruction

Teachers can invite each child to draw a picture and write a sentence describing his or her drawing. The child will be invited to spell words “the way they sound,” and the teacher should positively accept partial representations of words (e.g., B or BG for “bag”). For those

children who cannot or are not eager to write, the teacher can write the sentence down and then guide the child in finger-point reading it. A variety of activities, ranging from writing a caption sentence under a picture to composing a book about one's family to making regular entries in a personal writing journal, can be used (Morris & Bloodgood, 2003). Writing instructions is a further step to consolidate the concept of word by putting words into a context.

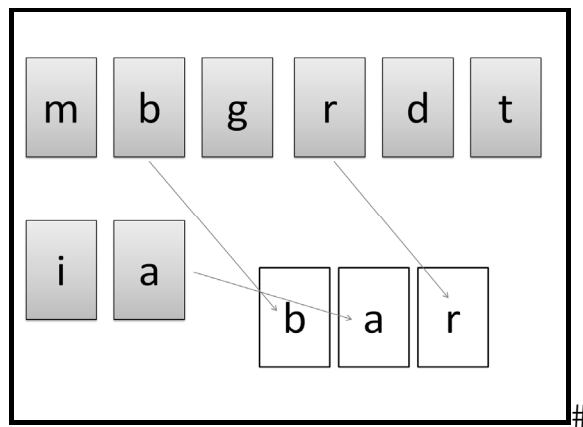


Figure 4. We can foster vowel awareness by using a “say it and move it” phonics strategy by which the child says a target word and then moves letter chips, one by one, to construct its spelling. On the other hand, the teacher can construct the word letter by letter and have the child attempt to decode it.

Conclusion

Concept of Word in Teaching ESL and ELL

This study reveals the interwoven relationship between beginning readers' concept of word in text and phoneme awareness and provides evidence for the developmental sequence of early English reading proposed by Morris in the setting of bilingual kindergartens in Hong Kong. It appears that the concept of word in text is a prerequisite of phoneme awareness, and that the ability to map spoken words to written words in text precedes the presence of the phoneme segmentation skill for both native and second language English learners.

The pedagogical implication is that kindergarten teachers should reconsider the conventional approach in teaching children to perceive individual phonemes within spoken words before introducing reading instruction. The reading instruction in leading beginners to map spoken words to written words in text need not await the presence of phoneme segmentation skills. It is worthwhile for teachers to pay more attention to the concept of word in text, which interacts reciprocally with phoneme awareness in a top-down and bottom-up manner, as Morris (2011) proposed (see Appendix C).

This study needs a larger sample size to be measured by the ERSI so that the reliability and validity of this screening instrument could be confirmed. Further, a systematic observation method should be performed; for example, frequency and event sampling could be conducted in the field notes. Last but not least, kindergartens in Hong Kong are developing various kinds of curriculum; therefore, this study should not limit the sample to play-experience and language-experience kindergartens.

This study's data may not be accessed due to ethical reasons (in order to protect the identity of the participants). This research was carried out in full compliance with ethical guidelines and received approval from the appropriate institutional ethics committee. Ethical consent forms were signed by each participant in this research. There are no potential conflicts of interest in the work reported here.

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