Developing Autonomous Learning Skills Among Sudanese EFL University Learners

Ali Ahmed Osman Zakaria

Department of English Language & Linguistics
University of Kassala, Sudan &
Qassim University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The study evaluates and assesses Sudanese EFL university students' readiness to develop and enhance their autonomous learning skills. It aims to find out the nature of the strategies they could adopt to develop these skills. It also attempts to investigate the role the teacher and the learning environment play in the development of learner autonomy. Moreover, the study explores the nature of the activities incorporated in the learning syllabus to assess and evaluate their effects on developing learner autonomy. Outside class-activities are also investigated. This is to have a clear image on how they contribute to the development of learner autonomy. Sixty Sudanese students from Al Neelain University and El Imam Alhadi College responded to a questionnaire specially prepared to collect data for this purpose. An interview was also conducted with these students as a second tool for eliciting the data. Results from the questionnaire and the interview revealed the students' readiness to depend on themselves which is a very good step towards learner autonomy. The students admit that in order to achieve this they need their teachers' help to guide them on how they can approach learner autonomy. The students reported that they seek additional materials to develop their linguistic abilities which could ultimately help them become autonomous in language learning. Furthermore, the students claimed that university environment contribute positively to the development of their autonomous learning skills. They also assumed that their families encourage them to develop the skills required to become more independent in language learning.

Key Words: learner autonomy, cognitive abilities, educational environment, professional support

Introduction

There are instances when learners have to take control of their own learning, which as stated by Macaro, E. (1997) is an essential aspect of developing learner autonomy. They

should be more actively involved in their own learning. Depending on themselves when learning is a gateway towards successful learning process. This will not occur unless learners become more serious and know that they should play a major role in the learning process. Learners need to believe that they could engage in such kind of learning. This leads them to fully employ their cognitive and linguistic abilities to cope with the challenges of taking the responsibility of their own learning. They should realize that sometimes they need to process and execute their own learning without the aid of the teacher. So, Sudanese EFL university learners have to equip themselves with the effective strategies and techniques which could help them achieve this kind of learning. They should appreciate learner autonomy as an effective and fruitful tool for language learning. So, they need to be empowered in order to benefit from all the facilities available which could pave their way towards learner autonomy. The learning environment in Sudan never provides learners with the opportunity to socially employ the English language. Thus, in order to become competent, they must be intrinsically motivated and appreciate the importance of learner autonomy. When learners realize that they are responsible for some of the activities they need, they will develop positive attitudes towards learning and be more engaged in all sorts of the activities that lead to proper learning. Schools should supervise this process by providing the professional support for learners.

Background

Learners need to seriously think of taking an active part in the process of learning. They should be empowered to set goals and make decisions about how they learn and achieve their learning goals. They need to be autonomous and less dependent on their teachers. Little (1997) defines learner autonomy in relation to particular tasks, highlighting that learner autonomy also consists in the ability to use particular knowledge and apply certain skills to new tasks, situated in contexts different from the learning context and under new conditions, which require a reconsideration of the task approach, the strategies to use, the product to aim for, etc. Holec (1981) refers to learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Gathercole (1990) described autonomy as "when the learner is willing to and capable of taking charge of his own learning" Therefore, according to Gathercole, learner autonomy relates to the exploration of why, what and how learners are able to learn independently. Holec (1996) stated that "learner autonomy" and "self-directed learning" were quite similar because in both cases, it was the learner who assumed responsibilities for his/her own learning. Palfreyman and Smith (2003) state that the concept of learner autonomy, promoted by Holec and others in the context of language education in Europe, has in the last twenty years become influential as a goal in many parts of the world. Blidi (2017) states that Learner autonomy and autonomous learning practices have emerged as one response to the challenges of the twenty-first century educational environment in relation to teaching and learning theories, learning styles and strategies, and approaches that can meet the needs of the job market. Palfreyman (2003) states that several arguments may be used in favor of developing

autonomy in language learners: for example, that autonomy is a human right (e.g. Benson, 2001); that autonomous learning is more effective than other approaches to learning (e.g. Naiman et al., 1978); and that learners need to take charge of their own learning in order to make the most of available resources, especially outside the classroom (e.g. Waite, 1994). Alexander Ramírez (2017) states that the endeavor of learner autonomy, in language learning and in all fields of knowledge, should be implemented as early as possible, starting in primary school and high school. Surma (2004) hypothesizes that instead of training learners to satisfy teacher expectations, or simply giving students unbounded freedom to make decisions, learner development that promotes autonomy should be more concerned with the nature of both students' and teachers' learning as a path towards self-growth.

Materials and Methods

3.1 Participants

Sixty Sudanese EFL students taking English as their major at Al Neelain University and El Imam Alhadi College represent the participants in this research paper. The students are in their final year and have been studying English for four years - they are exposed to language input which could prepare them to be good practitioners of English. This means the data they provide can be used to conduct an effective and reliable research paper.

3.2 Instruments

The tools employed to collect the data for this research paper were questionnaire and interview. The rationale behind this procedure was to collect reliable information about students' attitudes towards autonomous language learning.
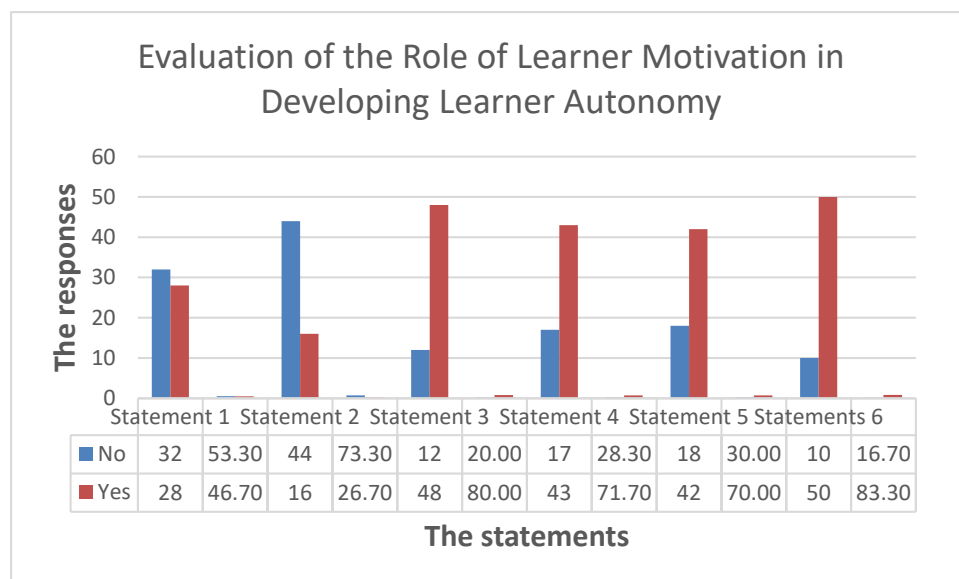
4. Results and Discussion

1-Learner motivation

Table (1): Evaluation of the Role of Learner Motivation in Developing Learner Autonomy

No.	Statements	No	Yes
1.	I am always prepared to learn without teacher supervision.	32	28
		53.3%	46.7%
2.	I never turn to the teacher when I have any language problem.	44	16
		73.3%	26.7%
3.	I feel satisfied when I perform learning task properly on my own.	12	48
		20.0%	80.0%
4.	I usually work hard to overcome the difficulties I encounter when learning English.	12	48
		20.0%	80.0%
5.	l seek opportunities for online language engagement to improve my autonomous learning skills.	18	42
		30.0%	70.0%
6.	I usually participate in discussion group to develop autonomous	18	42

	learning skills.	30.0%	70.0%

The responses to the items in the table above show that most students require teacher supervision to continue their learning process effectively. The responses also show that the students refer to their teachers when they face any problem while learning. However, the subjects of the study claim that they sometimes attempt to solve these problems without teacher guidance. They consult their teachers only when they fail to solve these problems themselves. Responses to the table above also indicate that the students are prepared to develop their autonomous learning skills. They seek opportunities for online language engagement and lead into group discussion to develop their autonomous learning skills. They claim that they feel satisfied when they when they achieve their learning tasks properly. This makes them become more motivated and strive to engage in more learning.

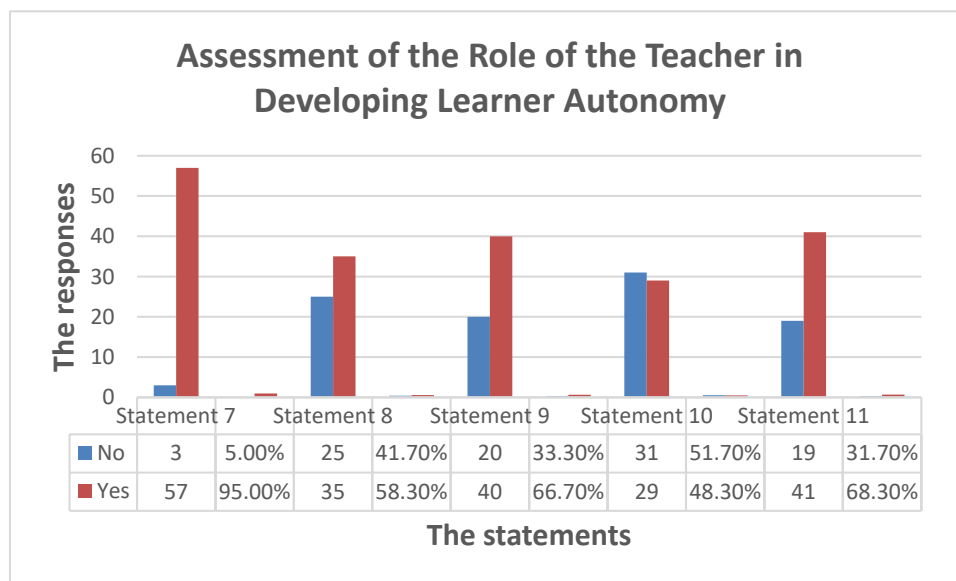**Figure (1): Evaluation of the Role of Learner Motivation in Developing Learner Autonomy**

Evaluation of the Role of Learner Motivation in Developing Learner Autonomy

	Statement 1		Statement 2		Statement 3		Statement 4		Statement 5		Statements 6	
No	32	53.30	44	73.30	12	20.00	17	28.30	18	30.00	10	16.70
Yes	28	46.70	16	26.70	48	80.00	43	71.70	42	70.00	50	83.30

Table (2): Assessment of the Role of the Teacher in Developing Learner Autonomy

No.	Statements	No	Yes
7	The role of the teacher in the classroom is to help and guide me towards successful autonomous learning.	3	57
		5.0%	95.0%
8	I need my teacher's guidance on how to take part in planning and monitoring my own learning.	25	35
		41.7%	58.3%
9	I need the teacher to encourage me to reflect continuously on my learning process.	20	40
		33.3%	66.7%
10	One of the roles of my teacher is to help me engage in	31	29

	regular self-assessment.	51.7%	48.3%
11	I need the teacher to show me how to socially interact through language in order to develop my language skills.	19	41
		31.7%	68.3%

Nearly all the subjects of the study see that teachers have to teach and guide them during their language learning process so that they can become autonomous learners. This does not prevent them from taking part of the responsibility inside the classroom. They state that they need to be involved in planning and monitoring their own learning. So, they believe that teachers and students complement each other in the process of language teaching and learning. They admit that teachers encourage them to continuously reflect on the process of learning. Teachers also help them to engage in regular self-assessment which helps them discover how far they are towards achieving their goals. The students contend that teachers show them how to socialize through English. That is, they view English not only as school subject, but as a means of effective communication outside classroom.

Figure (2): Assessment of the Role of the Teacher in Developing Learner Autonomy.
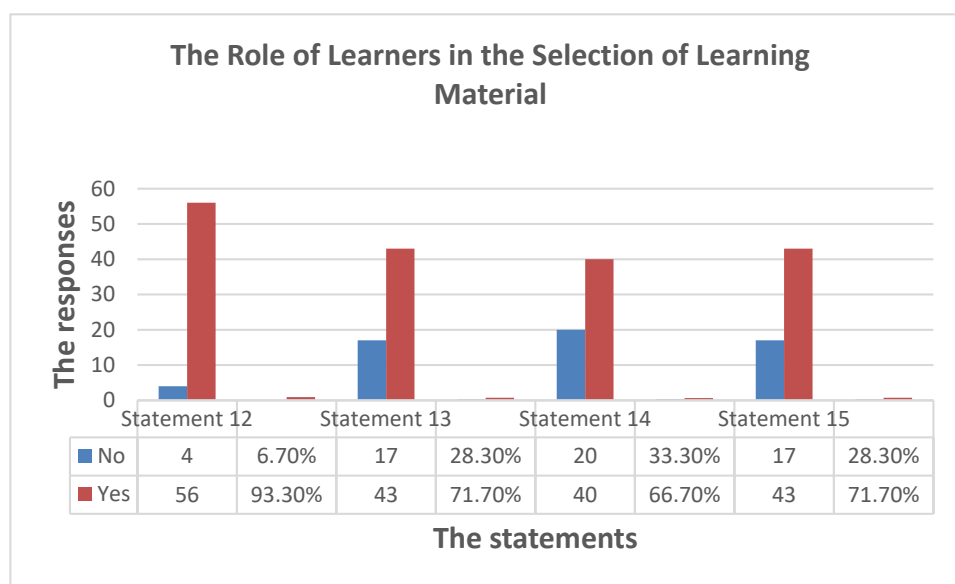

Assessment of the Role of the Teacher in Developing Learner Autonomy

	Statement 7		Statement 8		Statement 9		Statement 10		Statement 11	
No	3	5.00%	25	41.70%	20	33.30%	31	51.70%	19	31.70%
Yes	57	95.00%	35	58.30%	40	66.70%	29	48.30%	41	68.30%

Table (3): The Role of Learners in the Selection of Learning Material

No	Statements	No	Yes
12	I need to take part in planning my own learning programs.	4	56
		6.7%	93.3%
13	I need to decide and choose the strategies I need to execute my own learning process.	17	43
		28.3%	71.7%
14	I must be involved in setting out the objectives of my own	20	40

	learning.	33.3%	66.7%
15	I must be involved in choosing the materials I have to use in learning.	17	43
		28.3%	71.7%

The students think that they have to be involved when preparing the learning syllabus. They also assume that they need to decide the sort of the strategies they need in order to achieve their learning objectives. When setting the objectives of learning and selecting learning materials, the students report that they need to take part. But this issue never takes place in Sudan. Even teachers are not consulted when preparing learning materials. In the future, syllabus designers should consider and regard this issue when designing and preparing learning materials. Considering the role of learner when preparing learning materials motivates and encourages students to engage effectively in autonomous language learning.

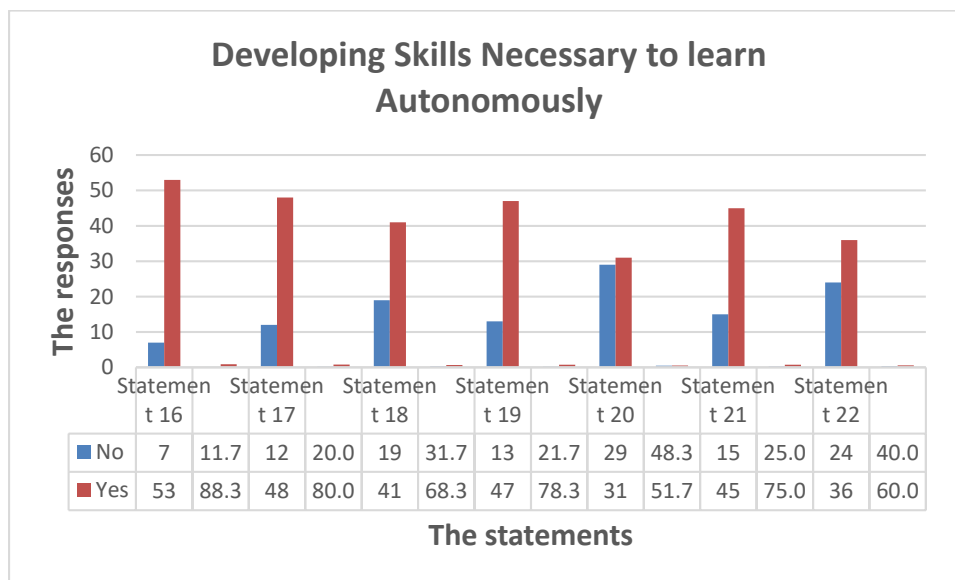**Figure (3): The Role of Learner in the Selection of Learning Material**

	Statement 12		Statement 13		Statement 14		Statement 15	
No	4	6.70%	17	28.30%	20	33.30%	17	28.30%
Yes	56	93.30%	43	71.70%	40	66.70%	43	71.70%

Table (4): Developing Skills Necessary to learn Autonomously

No	Statements	No	Yes
16	I read a lot of useful materials to improve my reading skills.	7	53
		11.7%	88.3%
17	I listen to recorded materials to develop my listening abilities.	12	48
		20.0%	80.0%
18	I write a lot of e-mails to improve my writing skills.	19	41
		31.7%	68.3%
19	I try to communicate in English with my classmates and friends	13	47

	to develop oral abilities.	21.7%	78.3%
20	I always engage myself with activities which are not compulsory to develop language proficiency.	29	31
		48.3%	51.7%
21	I make study plan as serious and practical step to achieve my learning objectives.	15	45
		25.0%	75.0%
22	I assess and reassess my learning to see how much I learn and what remains to me to learn.	24	36
		40.0%	60.0%

The table above indicates that the students read a lot of additional materials in order to improve their reading skills. It also reveals that they listen a lot to recorded materials so that they can develop their listening abilities. The students write a lot in order to develop their writing skills. In order to develop their oral abilities, the students attempt to communicate in English inside and outside classroom. The students do not restrict themselves only to the material to which they are exposed in the classroom to learn language. They engage themselves with the sort of the activities that could pave their way towards developing their language proficiency. The students plan for their learning process and follow the plans they set in order to achieve their objectives. They assess and reassess their learning to see how far they are from their goals and see what remains for them to achieve.

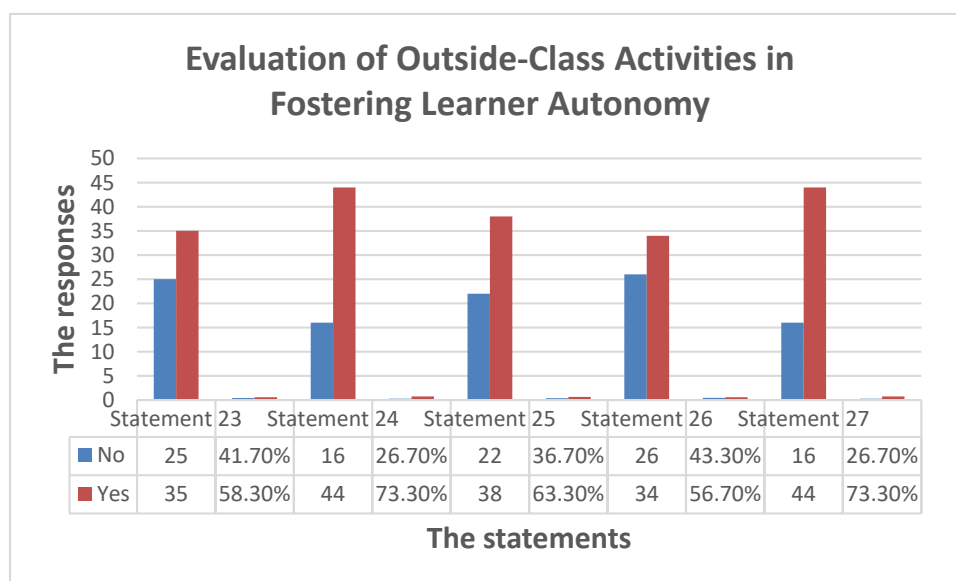**Figure (4): Developing skills Necessary to learn Autonomously**

Developing Skills Necessary to learn Autonomously

	Statement 16		Statement 17		Statement 18		Statement 19		Statement 20		Statement 21		Statement 22	
No	7	11.7	12	20.0	19	31.7	13	21.7	29	48.3	15	25.0	24	40.0
Yes	53	88.3	48	80.0	41	68.3	47	78.3	31	51.7	45	75.0	36	60.0

The statements

Table (5): Evaluation of Outside-Class Activities in Fostering Learner Autonomy

No	Statements	No	Yes
23	It is possible for me to use English outside the class.	25	35

			41.7%	58.3%
24	My family usually encourages me to study hard so that I can improve my autonomous learning skills.		16	44
			26.7%	73.3%
25	I and my classmates like to communicate in English during our daily interaction.		22	38
			36.7%	63.3%
26	I sometimes get the opportunities to communicate in English with native speakers.		26	34
			43.3%	56.7%
27	My friends enjoy communicating in English during our social interaction.		16	44
			26.7%	73.3%

The table above shows that it is possible for the students to practice and use English outside the classroom; the environment is suitable for practicing a foreign language. The table also reveals that students' families encourage them to improve their learning abilities and this in turn contribute to the effort they exert to develop their autonomous learning skills. The students like to interact through English to develop their linguistic competence. The students claim that sometimes they can communicate with native speakers which helps them to know the sort of the language they need to communicate. The students believe in the importance of social learning. They state that their friends like to communicate through English. This procedure can foster and enhance students' opportunity to practice English outside classroom and benefit from the other individuals of their society.

Figure (5): Evaluation of Outside-Class Activities in Fostering Learner Autonomy

Evaluation of Outside-Class Activities in Fostering Learner Autonomy

	Statement 23		Statement 24		Statement 25		Statement 26		Statement 27	
No	25	41.70%	16	26.70%	22	36.70%	26	43.30%	16	26.70%
Yes	35	58.30%	44	73.30%	38	63.30%	34	56.70%	44	73.30%

Analysis of the Results of the Interview

The students were asked to express their own appraisal of the autonomous learning in form of questions for which they wrote short answers. Different views were discovered analyzing the interview with students. With regard to the first question of the interview, "How do you view autonomous learning?", the students consider autonomous learning as being important because it leads them to improve their learning styles and strategies which empower them when it is necessary to learn by themselves. But they report that they need their teachers' guidance developing their autonomous learning skills. They also claim that in order to learn autonomously, they need to develop their reading skills. Reading can help them develop their linguistic abilities which in turn paves their way towards being autonomous. Some of the students think that being autonomous depends on the nature of the material to be learnt. They hypothesize that if the activities incorporated in the learning material are meaningful to them, this might make it easy for them to achieve their tasks without receiving the aid of the teacher. A few students think that it is not a good idea having the students do their learning by themselves. That is, all learning and teaching activities and practices should be monitored and executed by professional experts. The second question of the interview, "Do you think you are prepared to develop your autonomous learning skills?" reveals students' readiness to develop their autonomous learning skills. Some of them assume that they already depend on themselves; they read short stories, novels and discuss what they have read with their classmates. In the third question, "What strategies and procedures do you adopt to develop your autonomous learning skills?" the students report that they listen to music and listen to recorded materials which helps them develop their listening skills. They also report that they read a lot of books to develop and increase the range of the vocabulary needed to produce effective and appropriate language. For the fourth question, "What problem do you encounter trying to develop your autonomous learning skills?", the students think that lack of secure learning environment is the greatest challenge they experience during their learning process. In question five, "Do your teachers help you to develop your autonomous learning skills?", the students state that their teachers exert effort to help them develop their autonomous learning skills. They also maintain that their teachers motivate and encourage them to exert effort and engage in more learning activities which can facilitate autonomous learning for them. In the sixth question, "Do you think university community helps you develop your autonomous learning skills?", the students contend that university community offers them opportunity to develop their autonomous learning skills. However, sometimes they experience difficulties attempting to use and practice English with their classmates. The environment is not always ideal for them to put what they learn in practice. In question seven, "Does your learning syllabus incorporate activities which help you develop your autonomous learning skills?", students think that the learning syllabus needs to be revised and rectified to incorporate activities which could encourage them to become better prepared for autonomous learning.

Conclusion

Results from the questionnaire and the interview revealed the students are prepared to depend on themselves and that they could become autonomous learners. Their teachers guide them on how they can approach learner autonomy. The students reported that they seek additional materials to develop their linguistic abilities which could ultimately help them become autonomous in language learning. Furthermore, the students claim that university environment contribute positively to their development of autonomous learning skills. They also assumed that their families encourage them to develop their learning quality so that they can be cognitively prepared to become autonomous. The learning syllabus should incorporate the sort of the activities that lead learners to learn autonomously. Learners need to be guided on how to set specific and achievable goals and objectives for their learning. They need to access and evaluate the resources and materials that enhance and foster learner autonomy. They need to think objectively and positively so that they can raise their awareness on learning and learning autonomously. Furthermore, learners need to know how to manage their time effectively which could help them improve their learning performance and achieve adequate learning outcomes.

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