

An Investigation of Cooperative Learning Strategies in Improving Students' Comprehension Skills in the Context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to enhance the reading comprehension abilities of EFL students by implementing cooperative learning strategies. The study aimed to address the following primary research question: What is the influence of cooperative learning on enhancing the reading comprehension skills of EFL students? The study included a total of 70 students from the first and second levels of the Department of English and Literature at the Ar Rass campus of Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. The researchers conducted the study over a three-week period in two classes: the control group consisted of 35 female students ($N = 35$), while the experimental group also included 35 female students ($N = 35$). The experimental group

received instruction through cooperative learning strategies, whereas the control group received instruction through a standard teacher-centered strategy. To address the fact-finding investigation of the study, the researchers employed a pre- and post-test tool to assess reading comprehension skills. This test specifically aimed to identify the levels of literal and inferential comprehension. The researchers employed the t-test to determine the statistical divergence between the average scores of the two groups. This study demonstrated the beneficial influence of cooperative learning approaches on the enhancement of reading comprehension skills among first- and second-level students in the Department of English and Literature. The researchers strongly recommend cooperative learning practices to improve the reading skills of EFL learners.

Keywords: cooperative learning strategies, reading activities, comprehension skills, teaching reading

1. Background

Reading can be defined as an interaction between the reader and a text, which in turn results in reading fluency and automaticity (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). Reading is one of the four language skills that is an essential component of any language curriculum. It is the most crucial receptive skill for students. It is the most crucial receptive skill for students. It is imperative that educators assist their students in achieving a comprehensive comprehension of the reading materials. Additionally, reading is instrumental in the promotion of critical thinking skills, the exchange of information, the expansion of knowledge, and the mastery of content courses (Michael & Lindsey, 2009; Ahmed & AbdAlgane, 2023). Nevertheless, the majority of students are not fond of reading classes and do not have a particular interest in reading a specific passage (Brantmeier, 2002). The teacher-centered approaches do not facilitate students' effective reading and communication. Teachers strive to increase students' comprehension of reading as a process and incorporate some of the most effective and motivating strategies into English reading classes. Consequently, cooperative language acquisition is one of these strategies that can enhance reading.

One of the most interactive methods to establish a more learner-centered environment in reading classes is Cooperative Language Learning (CLL), which allows students to independently encourage and develop their own outcomes (You, 2014). Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) encourages EFL students to effectively contribute to the problem-solving process, thereby improving their comprehension of the subjects (Davidson & Major, 2014). Therefore, if executed effectively, cooperative learning could be a superior method that benefits students. Traditional learning, widely recognized, is a teacher-centered approach that emphasizes rote learning and memorization. Nevertheless, research indicates that cooperative learning may be more advantageous for students than the conventional method (Mohammad, 2004). Research (You, 2014) indicates that students' active and participative engagement in subjects enhances their comprehension. Cooperative learning has the potential to improve students' comprehension by facilitating an entertaining, enjoyable, and autonomous learning experience. Therefore, the researchers anticipate that this investigation will cover the most effective cooperative language learning strategies. This is one of the educational system's objectives, as students at varying levels of education must acquire the ability to read and understand the material they are reading. In the Saudi context, the process of teaching reading to EFL students reveals that they face multiple obstacles to acquiring literacy skills. Most of their reading activities do not enhance their cognitive and metacognitive capacities, and they have a limited understanding of the reading process (Mushait, 2004). On the other hand, cognitive abilities are specifically linked to individual learning tasks and require directly manipulating or transforming the learning content. Metacognitive abilities include the capacity to reflect on the process of learning, strategize for learning, assess understanding or performance during the learning process, and evaluate one's own learning after completing a linguistic task (Aflah, 2017). It is imperative that educators cultivate their students' cognitive and metacognitive capabilities, rather than exclusively emphasizing their cognitive capabilities. This is consistent with the previous research, which addressed reading in the Saudi context in the second language. Alsamadani (2009), for example, found that Saudi EFL students employ

inadequate reading strategies in their reading comprehension classes. Additionally, Al-Seweed (2000) determined that the current reading strategies employed by seniors at Imam University in Saudi Arabia do not enhance the reader's language proficiency. Furthermore, Mushait (2004) noted that the process and product of L2 reading are adversely affected by the bottom-up strategies employed by Saudi EFL university students.

It is possible that cooperative learning strategies may assist learners in improving and comprehending the target language by utilizing it in real-world contexts, as indicated by the aforementioned issues with reading instruction. Cooperative language techniques can facilitate student interaction, thereby resolving their reading comprehension challenges. It also provides students with the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to a discussion, which is challenging to accomplish individually. Additionally, it fosters a class environment that encourages collaboration among students.

The objective of this study is to augment students' reading comprehension by implementing cooperative learning strategies in English reading classes. It also examines the influence of these techniques on the development of reading comprehension abilities in first- and second-year students at the Department of English & Translation at Ar Rass, Qassim University. It also intends to evaluate the hypothesis regarding the influence of cooperative learning techniques on the progress of reading comprehension skills in EFL learners. The study's importance was underscored by its focus on the influence of cooperative learning on the teaching of reading, which was directed at EFL instructors and students. Additionally, to investigate the influence of cooperative learning on the attainment of comprehension reading skills among students in the first and second grades.

2. Literature Review

Cooperative learning is an instructional approach that involves students collaborating to accomplish their academic objectives (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). Recently, education research, theories, and practices have recognized cooperative learning as a remarkable and productive approach. It fosters collaboration among students in order to accomplish their academic objectives (Gömleksiz, 2007). When English classrooms implement cooperative learning, students become more engaged and motivated to learn, expanding their understanding and knowledge. The integration of cooperative learning strategies to enhance the reading proficiency of EFL students have emerged as a fruitful approach in educational settings. By encouraging collaborative interactions among students, this method facilitates active participation, peer support, and shared responsibilities, thereby leading to improved comprehension and critical thinking skills. Through structured activities such as reciprocal teaching, jigsaw reading, and peer tutoring, students engage in meaningful discussions, clarify doubts, and jointly tackle complex texts, ultimately enhancing their overall reading competence (Smith & Johnson, 2021).

Additionally, they may be able to solve problems with their peers (Robyn, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2020). In reality, students can acquire knowledge from their peers by engaging in cooperative learning environments (Dallmer, 2007). Cooperative learning provides numerous benefits for developing English language skills. For instance, it enhances students' comprehension of

reading texts, academic accomplishments, and classroom engagement (Robyn, 2014). Cooperative learning would expand students' comprehension and knowledge of the subjects, allowing them to acquire significant interpersonal skills through group participation (Davidson & Major, 2014). One of the most popular and effective strategies for achieving a variety of outcomes is cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). The majority of studies on the efficacy of cooperative learning have consistently demonstrated that it fosters higher achievement, higher self-esteem, and more positive interpersonal relationships (Gomleksiz, 2007). Reading skills improve in a learning environment that encourages learners to socially construct meaning through language use and interaction (Zoghietal, 2010). The implementation of cooperative learning facilitates learners' effective participation in reading classes. Cooperative learning necessitates that students participate in group activities that enhance their learning and introduce additional critical components (Ahmed, 2019). Increased personal and social development, enhanced race relations, and academic gains are among the favorable outcomes (Brown & Ciuffetelli, 2009). Ahmed (2018) states that students are more likely to achieve better test scores and course grades by the end of the semester if they work in groups, participate in group activities, display collaborative behaviors, provide constructive criticism, and work together (Tsay & Miranda, 2010). In such a setting, active education, like cooperative learning, is key to students' academic achievement. In their study, Mohammed et al. (2023) observed that in recent decades, the educational method known as "Cooperative Learning" has gained significant interest and popularity. This conceptual approach is grounded in a theoretical framework that offers overarching principles for organizing collaborative learning activities in a teacher's particular subject area, curriculum, students, and environment. Teachers can employ this strategy to foster students' acquisition of knowledge and development of interpersonal and team skills. Historically, courses have typically comprised high-achieving learners and low-achieving students. Students with a poor proficiency level are isolated, leading to a decline in their confidence in acquiring English language skills. Collaborating in groups is thought to be beneficial in addressing this issue. Introverted students who are averse to reading aloud in a large class find it more preferable to express themselves in smaller groups (Mohammed et al., 2023).

According to Mohammed et al. (2023) group members have the ability to enhance each other's strengths and compensate for each other's inadequacies in the English language. Every student possesses a unique history and proficiency in English, which they can contribute to the group. For instance, a student with a robust vocabulary can provide support to other students who have a strong foundation in grammar. In addition, disadvantaged learners will get advantages from engaging with more accomplished peers, while high-achieving students will have a sense of pride in their significant contribution towards assisting their less proficient colleagues.

In summary, cooperative learning is an instructional method in which students collaborate in order to accomplish their academic objectives (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). The theory and practice of education regard cooperative learning as a recent and productive research strategy. It fosters collaboration among students in order to accomplish their academic objectives (Gömleksiz, 2007). Cooperative learning is defined by Johnson and Johnson (1994) and Slavin (1997) as an approach to education that encourages students to work together in

groups to accomplish common academic and social objectives. Cooperative learning is a teaching technique that involves the utilization of a variety of educational activities by small groups of learners, each of whom possesses a unique level of capability, to improve their understanding of a subject (Dyson & Casey, 2012; Ahmed, 2019). The aforementioned definitions indicate that students can employ cooperative learning as a learning strategy to achieve their academic objectives under a variety of conditions.

The literature survey clearly demonstrates the importance of reading. Researchers in the field of Family Language (FL) have consistently strived to discover effective strategies for teaching FL literacy. Additionally, the literature review indicates that conventional methods of teaching reading result in the development of inadequate readers. Consequently, it is necessary to employ non-traditional (L2) reading strategies. One of these non-traditional strategies is cooperative learning, which is in accordance with the most recent developments in language instruction. Conversely, there is a scarcity of research on cooperative learning, with the majority of it focusing on pre-university education.

Recent research by Smith and Johnson (2021) underscores the effectiveness of cooperative learning strategies in the context of EFL education. Their study revealed that EFL students who participated in cooperative reading groups exhibited notable advancements in reading fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and comprehension compared to those in traditional instructional settings. This highlights the significant role of collaborative learning environments not only in advancing language skills but also in cultivating critical thinking abilities and promoting a deeper understanding of English texts among EFL learners.

2.1 Cooperative Learning Strategies

Classrooms employ a variety of cooperative learning methodologies. The presented methods include the Learning Together Method (Johnson & Johnson, 1994), Group Investigation (Sharan, 1994), Teams-Games-Tournament, Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (Slavin, 2010), Jigsaw (Aranson, as cited in Good & Brophy, 2000), Asking Together, Learning Together, Think-Pair-Share (Olsen & Kagan, 2004), and Numbered Heads Together (Stone & Kagan, 2004). Here is a brief rundown of various approaches:

1) Johnson and Johnson created the Learning Together Method in 1994. During the collaborative learning process, students engage in their tasks within diverse groups consisting of four or five individuals. This model focuses on promoting collaboration among students with varying levels of achievement, gender, or ethnicity in order to collectively accomplish learning objectives and successfully complete group projects.

2) Sharan and Sharan (1997) developed Group Investigation. The whole class studies a subject, but the students work in smaller groups, with each group covering a different aspect of that course. Members of the group work together to establish the scope of the project, develop a plan for their research, complete assigned tasks, and finally give presentations. Together, the instructor and the students evaluate the final product.

3) Student Teams-Achievement Divisions: Slavin (1999) developed this technique, requiring groups of four to work together to comprehend a subject the teacher is teaching. This

methodology involves students completing quizzes independently and comparing them to previous results. The degree to which students in the group meet the previous outcomes determines the team scores. The researchers evaluate students' learning using both individual and group quiz scores.

4) Teams-Games-Tournament: Slavin (1994) developed it. Under this concept, students form teams consisting of individuals with diverse abilities and characteristics to participate in a competitive challenge against another team. It bears resemblance to Student Teams-Achievement Divisions, with the exception that students do not partake in individual quizzes. Instead, students engage in scholastic competitions with members of other teams and contribute points to their team scores. In this technique, teams compete with each other to respond to questions formulated by the instructor. The competitions have the potential to endure for multiple weeks.

5) Collaborative reading and text analysis are at the heart of this concept: Asking Together, Learning Together. In order to assess the reading assignment, each group comes up with questions that are highly agreed upon, writes them down, and then shares them with the teacher and other groups. Students discuss the questions in small groups before the teacher randomly selects a few to provide their answers.

6) Think-Pair-Share involves a three-step cooperative structure. In the first stage, students think quietly about a question the teacher poses. In the second stage, participants talk to each other in pairs and share their thoughts. The final step is for the pairs to share their answers with either another pair, another team, or the whole group.

7) Numbered heads together. This technique entails the formation of a quartet of four individuals. The researchers assign numerical values ranging from 1 to 4 to each member. Interrogations are intended for the collective. Groups collaborate to collectively respond to the question, ensuring that everyone can provide their answer orally. The teacher designates a numerical value (three) and requests each individual with that value to provide the response.

8) Kagan and Kagan (2004) developed round robin brainstorming. This is a classroom strategy. The strategy involves dividing the class into small groups of 4 to 6 individuals, and designating one person as the recorder. The teacher presents a question that prompts multiple responses and gives students time to consider their responses. Following a period of contemplation, team members exchange their responses with each other in a round-robin fashion. The recorder transcribes the responses of the group members. The individual adjacent to the recorder initiates, and subsequently, each member of the group provides a response in a sequential manner until the designated time limit expires. One of the most effective approaches to cooperative learning is this strategy.

2.2 Reading Activities

Reading activities significantly influence schema theory reading models (Siddiek & Alfaki, 2013; Al Rasheed, 2014). Karakas (2002) asserts that the design of reading activities aims to prevent failure, thereby facilitating the reader's interpretation of the text. Typically, Ur (1996) classifies reading activities into three categories: pre-reading, during-reading, and

post-reading.

1) Pre-reading activities: Studies on schema theory provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of pre-reading exercises that encompass providing a summary of the text and introducing the essential cultural notions. According to Lipka and Siegel (2007), engaging in pre-reading activities stimulates readers to engage with the text. When readers are motivated, they are more likely to successfully finish the task with less exertion and a greater willingness to participate, as they have developed a sense of confidence. Foster (2003) suggests that language instructors should promote learners' critical assessment of their reading material. Preliminary reading exercises might assist the instructor in assessing the pupils' reading abilities. The instructor ought to furnish their students with foundational knowledge. Prior to reading, engaging readers' existing knowledge on a subject might enhance pupils' understanding of the book (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Grabe, 2009; Ur, 1996). Ur further contends that tasks enhance the level of engagement in reading by providing readers with a clear objective, such as finding the answer to a specific question. Additionally, the reading teacher can assess the comprehension of the text by assigning tasks before and/or after reading.

2) During reading activities, Brown (2001), Alshammari (2013), and Muchtar (2019) have identified skimming and scanning as the most effective reading tactics. According to Flowerdew and Peacock (2001), the skimming method allows the reader to anticipate the intended goal of the material. Readers typically do not engage in a comprehensive reading of the entire text; rather, they are expected to grasp the overarching concepts presented in the text. Conversely, Brown suggests that readers engage in scanning to extract particular information from a text, such as names, dates, and so on. Alderson (2000) suggests that skimming is a metacognitive ability employed by proficient readers. Bachman and Cohen (1998) and Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) assert that skimming enables readers to comprehend the general meaning of a text. According to Karakas (2002), scanning and skimming are more effective when they are accompanied by evaluation activities. Surveying allows readers to gain a preliminary understanding of the content and structure of the text (Muchtar, 2019). Essentially, its purpose is to efficiently examine the pertinent additional categories within a text, including data for references, graphics, and typography. Karakas (2002) suggests that improved comprehension can be attained by prompting readers to articulate their thoughts on the subject matter and subsequently evaluating these views with their peers. Readers can engage in productive dialogue with writers through activities like re-reading, inferring, and reciprocal teaching; on the other hand, skimming, scanning, and clarifying help readers create a clear mental image (*ibid.*).

3) Post-reading activities: Post-reading activities can help to clarify ambiguous ideas by shifting attention from grammar and vocabulary to the overall meaning (Lipka & Siegel, 2007). Ur (1996) examines a post-reading task in which readers are prompted to condense the content into a concise summary consisting of one or two sentences. Alternatively, it is feasible to administer this post-reading task in the native language. Activities like summarizing, question and answer, and drawing conclusions can help readers understand the text and show how the questions relate to the answers, according to Karakas (2002). Thinking aloud, talking it out, and summarizing can also help one find any pieces of the mental model that are lacking.

4) Reading is a critical component of acquiring knowledge and information from written texts, as previously stated. While fluent decoding is a critical aspect of proficient reading, it should be considered a prerequisite for robust comprehension rather than an aim in itself (Ahmed, 2020). According to Ahmed and AbdAlgane (2023), comprehension involves connecting the read information with the reader's prior knowledge and reflecting on the information until it becomes clear. The ultimate objective of reading instruction is comprehension (Block & Pressley, 2002). Consequently, reading comprehension is the process of comprehending the significance of a text (Brown, 2007). Consequently, in order to acquire knowledge and absorb new information, students require an interactive reading skill. Nevertheless, it is evident that the majority of students are not capable of doing so. This is because most EFL instructors use conventional strategies in their classrooms. These conventional teaching strategies result in the acquisition of competitive and individual performance (Robert & Slavin, 2005; Ahmed, 2020). Consequently, an excessive amount of competition may result in a decrease in the effectiveness of teaching and a negative interdependence. Therefore, in order to facilitate students' comprehension of the material they are reading, EFL instructors have implemented alternative methodologies to establish an engaging and productive environment in the English classroom. One of these strategies, the cooperative learning technique, has been the subject of research in recent decades. As previously stated, cooperative learning in the classroom has a beneficial impact on students' reading comprehension abilities.

3. Method

Rather than using a random assignment method, this study used a quasi-experimental design with two groups of participants. In order to teach the control group English reading passages, the researchers used traditional methods. The second group of students, known as the experimental group, engaged in cooperative learning activities and received identical reading passages. Cooperative learning was the independent variable in this design, whereas reading comprehension abilities were the dependent variable. Instruments for gathering data comprised both pre- and post-tests. The researchers compared four sets of pre- and post-tests to determine the potential impact of the cooperative learning technique on the scores of both the experimental and control groups.

The research population included seventy third-year English language and literature students. The study involved 70 participants, with 35 randomly assigned to the control group and 35 to the experimental group. They received the same treatment as ordinary students during the first half of the 2022–2023 school year. The researchers chose the students in this level due to their strong commitment to improving their reading skills, which are crucial for academic success. Because they would be required to read more books and cite more sources to support their critical thinking, they should have strong reading skills.

The researchers tested the study question in two separate trials. Students received the pre-test at the start of the first semester. Both the experimental and control groups took a reading exam to assess their reading abilities. The pretest was a reading comprehension exam. All students, whether in the control group or the experimental one, had to read two sections to complete the paper. There were no significant differences between the control and experimental groups, according to the results. There was no difference between the pre- and post-tests. The

subsequent test also tested reading comprehension. The experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test, demonstrating quick improvement in reading comprehension abilities. This discovery further proved that the cooperative learning method was useful for teaching reading in the English language and literature program.

4. Results and Discussion

This subsection presents a discussion of the statistical analysis conducted on the data collected from both the control and experimental groups. After evaluating the data's characteristics, it became clear that a comprehensive analysis of both inter-subject and intra-subject elements would be required in order to confirm the study's goals. Therefore, the study's methodology entailed measuring the dependent variable, which corresponded to the scores from the four tests, and analyzing its correlation with the independent variable, the control group's reading comprehension proficiency. To obtain a thorough understanding of the relationship between these connections and factors, it was necessary to conduct both between-group and within-group investigations. The table presents the conducted tests and the individuals involved in the study. The four tests, namely Pre-test1, Post-test1, Pre-test2, and Post-test2, are considered to be dependent variables. Furthermore, this study categorizes the two groups involved—the control group and the experimental group—as between-subject variables.

Table 1. Types of tests and number of participants

Types of tests and number of participants				
test 2	test	Dependent Variable	Groups	N
1	1	Pre-test1	Control group	35
	2	Post-test1	Experimental group	35
2	1	Pre-test2		
	2	Post-test2		

Table 2. The mean scores and standard deviation for the experimental and control groups in the pre-test and the post-test

Group	Test Condition	Mean	Standard Deviation
Experimental	Pre-test	4.00	.92
Control	Pre-test	2.84	.90
Experimental	Post-test	5.33	.83
Control	Post-test	3.62	.99

The researchers employed descriptive statistics in SPSS to ascertain the mean scores and the comprehensive distribution of the data. According to Table 2, the mean value of the experimental group's posttest 1 is the highest, with a value of 5.33. The experimental group's pretest 1 average is significantly higher than the control group's (4.00). Moreover, there is an

increase in pre-test 2, namely by 2.84. Figure 1 depicts the variations of the two groups based on the average score of each group on each test.

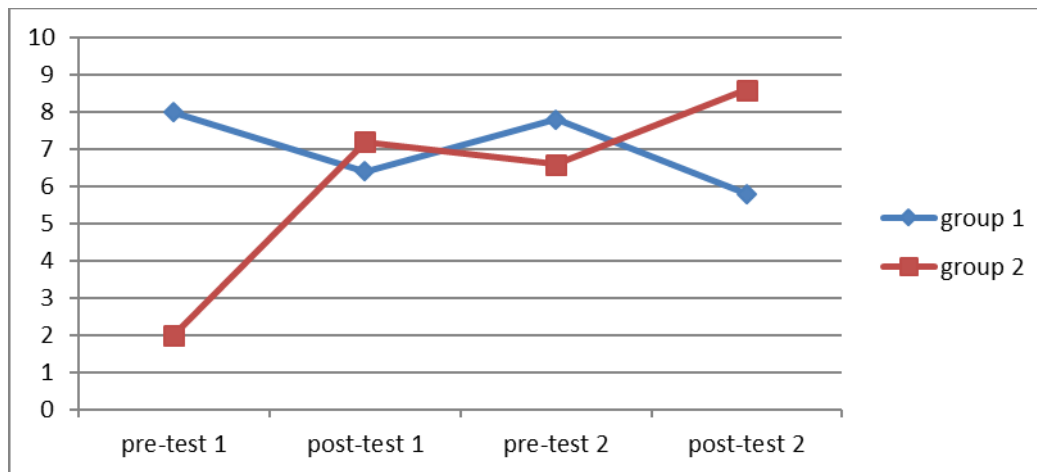


Figure 1. The variation of the two groups according to the mean of each group in each test

To check the significance of the study's question between the two groups, the researchers set the P value to 0.05. Table 3 displays the contrast between the control group and the experimental group.

Table 3. The contrast between the control group and experimental group based on the test results

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	17.152	1	16.181	194.65	.000
Group	.075	1	.078	.937	.353
Error	.680	8	.083		

The results derived from Table 3 demonstrate a substantial disparity between the two groups. Based on a P value of 0.05 and a difference value of 1, it could confidently be inferred that the research has produced statistically significant results in support of the hypothesis.

The research findings suggest that the subjects demonstrated enhanced performance from post-test 1 to post-test 2, with a significant improvement after each session. The data unambiguously demonstrates that the experimental group exhibited a markedly higher average (4.00) in comparison to the control group (2.84). The second session verified that the experimental group is achieving significantly superior outcomes compared to the control group. The findings demonstrated that the experimental group surpassed the control group in all subsequent assessments they undertook. However, the data collected from the control group

did not show consistent results across all tests. . Instead, they exhibit a recurring pattern of reversal for each pre-test and a slight increase for the post-test.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how cooperative learning strategies promote reading comprehension in EFL learners. The results indicated that the reading comprehension skills of the experimental group and the control group exhibited statistically significant differences in their means. These variations were responsible for the use of cooperative learning. This implies that students were able to comprehend the fundamental level of reading comprehension texts as a result of the implementation of effective cooperative learning strategies. Therefore, the researchers suggest that language teachers should implement cooperative learning strategies to improve the reading comprehension skills of their students. This includes the use of effective learning aids, role-play, and brainstorming (Ahmed, 2018).

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