

Teaching foreign languages at the pre-primary level in a monolingual setting: the case of Poland

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ABSTRACT: In Poland, teaching a foreign language to very young children, i.e. aged 6 and below, has had a relatively long tradition in both educational services and research, which grew out of strong parental aspirations for their children's educational, and consequently vocational, achievements in the globalized job market.

The goals of the paper are twofold: firstly, it aims to outline the evolution of research directions in language teaching methodology to very young learners (i.e. below 6) over the last three decades. In this respect three major strands are distinguished, i.e. the language acquisition approach, the pedagogical approach and the ecological approach. Secondly, Polish research in pre-primary education is going to be outlined against the backdrop of these major trends in applied linguistics. It is believed that some of the findings may bear relevance to other contexts in which very early teaching of foreign languages is being implemented.

Key words: pre-primary, foreign language, language acquisition, pedagogy, ecology.

La enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en el nivel preescolar en un entorno monolingüe: el caso de Polonia

RESUMEN: En Polonia, la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera a los más jóvenes, es decir, a los niños de 6 años o menos, tiene una tradición relativamente larga tanto en los servicios educativos como en la investigación, que surgió de las fuertes aspiraciones de los padres de que sus hijos alcancen logros educativos y, por consiguiente, profesionales en el mercado laboral globalizado.

Los objetivos de este artículo son dos: en primer lugar, se pretende esbozar la evolución de las orientaciones de la investigación en la metodología de la enseñanza de idiomas a alumnos muy jóvenes (es decir, menores de 6 años) en las últimas tres décadas. A este respecto, se distinguen tres grandes líneas, a saber, el enfoque de adquisición del lenguaje, el enfoque pedagógico y el enfoque ecológico. En segundo lugar, la investigación polaca en la educación preescolar se va a esbozar en el contexto de estas grandes tendencias de la lingüística aplicada. Se cree que algunas de las conclusiones pueden ser relevantes para otros contextos en los que se está aplicando la enseñanza muy temprana de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras clave: preescolar, lengua extranjera, adquisición de lenguas, pedagogía, ecología.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Poland, teaching a foreign language to very young children, i.e. aged 6 and below, has had a relatively long tradition in both educational services and research, which grew out of strong parental aspirations for their children's educational, and consequently vocational,

achievements in the globalized job market. These desires arose in response to opening borders after a nearly 50-year-long period of political isolation as a communist state. Opening borders in 1989 and building a capitalist economy created new opportunities for social mobility, for which foreign language competence was key.

Yet at that time, possibilities of learning a foreign language were limited for a number of reasons. First of all, it was a linguistically homogeneous society, in which 99,7 % of the population spoke Polish as their home language. No minority languages were present in the public space, although they had existed before WWII (Komorowska & Krajka, 2016). Secondly, migration into or out of the country was severely limited, which not only restricted opportunities for use, but lowered motivation to learn foreign languages. Needless to say, due to these socio-political conditions, there was a limited number of foreign language teachers available, not to mention native speakers of other languages.

Over the last 30 years language learning opportunities have improved considerably due to the intensive education of language teachers and the introduction of obligatory foreign language instruction from the onset of schooling, mainly as a result of the 2009 reform (Ministry of Polish Education, 2008). Joining the European Union in 2004 created opportunities for unrestricted mobility, which boosted individual interest and motivation to learn foreign languages. Additionally, the advent of the Internet after the year 2000 increased the amount of exposure to foreign languages. Even so, many Poles restricted their contact with language to formal instruction. Starting to learn a foreign language early, i.e. at kindergarten, was believed to be a remedy for possible failures in later life and created a fertile ground for numerous private institutions.

The goals of the paper are twofold: firstly, it aims to outline the evolution of research directions in language teaching methodology to very young learners (i.e. below 6) over the last three decades. In this respect three major strands are distinguished, i.e. *language acquisition approach*, *the pedagogical approach* and *the ecological approach*. Secondly, Polish research in pre-primary education is going to be outlined against the backdrop of these major trends in applied linguistics. It is believed that some of the findings may bear relevance to other contexts in which very early teaching of foreign languages is being implemented.

2. THE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION APPROACH

The author traces the language acquisition approach back to the 1990s when the early teaching of foreign languages to very young learners was only germinating. Its popularity originated from popular myths, such as, ‘the earlier one starts learning a foreign language, the better’ or ‘children learn the second language in the same way as the first one’, rooted in the ‘critical period’ (Lenneberg, 1967) or ‘identity’ hypotheses (Ervin-Tripp, 1978) respectively.

Since Poland opened its borders after the fall of communism in 1989, the chances of social mobility precipitated the strive to learn foreign languages, which, in turn, boosted the private educational market. The evening schools which emerged across the country seemed to operate on the two aforementioned myths, promising prospective clients miraculous linguistic achievements in the future on condition they start teaching their children a foreign language early.

The idea of seeing early childhood as a ‘window of opportunity’ for second language learning started in the 1970s and was based on the observation of how children acquire two languages with ease in naturally bilingual situations. These observations led to the development of second language acquisition theories (e.g., the Natural approach by Krashen & Terrell, 1988) and teaching methods that aimed to imitate natural conditions. Their assumption was that the second language can be acquired in the same way as the first one if only similar conditions and a similar amount of exposure can be provided. The Total Physical Response method (Asher, 1977) is a case in point as it claimed to follow the natural order of skill acquisition, i.e., first the learners were to listen to language and show its understanding by obeying orders and only when they felt ready, could they attempt to communicate.

The Direct method also gained in popularity, as used in e.g., Berlitz® chain of schools. Its effectiveness lay in the sole target language instruction by a native speaker, which imposed on the learner the necessity to use the target language as well. The method imitates the ‘one person –one language’ approach, known from natural bilingual upbringing of a child. It needs negotiation of meaning between interlocutors by means of recasting and adaptation of language to the learner’s level. Naturally, for this method to realise its goals, small groups and relatively frequent contact with the tutor are a necessity.

The assumptions of the two aforementioned methods have been used up till present day. Such features as using only the target language in class, small groups, frequent contact with language (preferably daily), the use of play (songs, games) and meaning-oriented methodology, in which the second language is used for authentic communication, are elements of many contemporarily offered teaching solutions in early language pedagogy, although they are often disguised under novel brand names. Additionally, syllabus content is tailored to the child’s current conceptual knowledge, which means the learners are taught words which they have already acquired in their L1 and concern the child’s immediate environment, such as food, clothing, vehicles, toys, routines etc. as evident in e.g., child language development inventories (Fenson et al., 1993).

Little has been known about the effectiveness of such early teaching, except for the research of Rokita (2007). In the project conducted, she investigated lexical development of very young learners of a foreign language (henceforth: L2), aged 2;0-4;0 over a 2 year-long course. The children attended a course in a private language school once a week for 30 min, accompanied by their parents. The school belonged to a chain of schools based on the franchise principle, which means they offered ready tailored syllabuses, teacher training and materials for learners. These measures guaranteed consistency of teaching in various branches of the school. The relatively low contact with the second language was to be complemented by listening to recordings with class material twice a day, in order to either reinforce or even make children accustomed to the language prior to its presentation in class.

The results of the study showed that the final outcomes depended on the child’s regularity in course attendance as well as parental support in regular revision of course material. These children surpassed others in the number of words both understood and produced. Also, older children generally learnt more words than younger ones. Yet, none of the children entered the stage of joining words into sentences and only one child used words in novel contexts (Rokita, 2007), which could prove that innate mechanisms for language acquisition were activated. It must be noted that some of the children taking part in the study did not even speak their L1 at the onset of the course. In that case the child remained silent over the

first year, during which she probably tried to ‘crack the code’ and indeed she did acquire some L2 words in preference to L1 words, namely those which were phonetically easier to pronounce. This gain, however, was not long-lasting.

The findings of the study show that in an instructed setting, i.e., when the amount and quality of L2 input are limited, it is not really true that “the earlier one starts (learning), the better”, as in fact the older children learnt more due to their growing metalinguistic awareness. The progress of very young children is slow, dependent on external factors (regularity of attendance, engagement of parents), and not on the child’s age. These findings corroborated those found in a group of slightly older Spanish young learners (aged 8 and 12) (Muñoz, 2006), where similarly, older children surpassed younger ones due to better developed cognitive functions, especially memory and strategy use.

Another noteworthy Polish study on very young and young learners of L2, German in this case, was conducted by Sopata (2009). Taking generative-transformation grammar as a theoretical framework, she traced morphological and syntactic development of selected children (aged 2;6 – 9;1) for over a year who acquired two languages in either a naturalistic or school setting by means of video recording. On comparing the patterns of morphosyntactic development the author observed that in naturalistic settings acquisition of the second language can resemble the acquisition of the first one up to the age of three. Yet, in an instructional setting, second language acquisition is more akin to the one in adult language acquisition, although some elements of similarity to L1 also appeared. This result also corroborates the findings of previously mentioned studies (Muñoz, 2006, Rokita 2007, Sopata, 2009), saying that different language acquisition mechanisms/processes are used in instructed and naturalistic settings. This evidence also provided an argument against the necessity to start foreign language learning as early as possible as the learning outcomes are far from the expected ones as regards the rate and final achievement.

On the other hand, certain benefits of very early foreign language instruction can be observed not so much for foreign language learning but for the development of the mother tongue, and literacy in particular, as Linguistic Coding Differences hypothesis posits (Sparks et al. 2006). In order to verify this hypothesis Łockiewicz et al., (2018) investigated the impact of early exposure to English onto phonological abilities of kindergarten children, which may be relevant for learning to read in an alphabetic writing system by means of an analytic-synthetic method. By using a battery of tests, they identified phonological awareness in the mother tongue and non-verbal IQ to be important predictors of English oral language skills as children develop sensitivity to rhyme, alliteration and learn to distinguish phonemes and syllables more easily. The authors concluded that skills possessed in L1 can enhance oral language learning in an L2 among preschoolers as they have a common linguistic system. Altogether this is a very important study suggesting that both nonverbal IQ and phonological abilities are related to aptitude, and therefore may impact very young children’s outcomes. Additionally, Łockiewicz et al. (2018) observed that English language skills also correlated with age (and likewise the length of learning), which could be explained by the fact that the number of rehearsals of lexical items contributed to their long-term retention.

The studies carried out within the language acquisition strand aimed to show that some reciprocal relationship between L1 and L2 exists and that their acquisition can be governed by similar mechanisms, however their true nature is still based on speculation. What can be measured are the overt linguistic signs of language development, such as the number of

words, combining words into sentences, etc. When considering these signs of development, it becomes clear that children acquiring language in a naturalistic setting surpass those who learn it in an organised instruction. Likewise older children, who already developed a conceptual representation of L1 words, learn the second language faster than younger ones. These findings raise doubts whether it is necessary to start learning a foreign language as early as possible.

3. THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Since no research evidence, and thus a linguistic argument for the necessity of ‘an early start’ in an instructed setting has been found, other reasons for teaching a foreign language early had to be stipulated. It seems the pedagogical strand of research originated from allocated interest in early FLL by the European language policy and using it as one of the major tools for educating plurilingual citizens of Europe, which would endorse the development of such values as social cohesion, democratic citizenship, mutual understanding and linguistic diversity (Council of Europe, 2006). As stated in Barcelona Presidency conclusions (European Commission, 2002), each future citizen of Europe should know and learn at least two languages in the public school system. These goals were aided by research into the best methodology of teaching languages to children and identifying factors that would account for the variability in learning outcomes (Edelenbos et al., 2006). They resulted in formulating guidelines for devising teaching curricula to young and very young learners. Additionally, it must be emphasized that European language policy guidelines aimed to foster learning a diversity of languages, not only English as a language of highest prestige, but also minority and regional ones. What’s more, the significance of an ‘early start’ language policy lay in the fact that it became a model to formulating educational policies beyond Europe (cf. Enever, 2018).

In 2004 Poland joined the EU and immediately followed the guidelines of language education policy as manifested in e.g. educational reform of 2009 (Ministry of Polish Education, 2008), which resulted in starting obligatory language instruction from the onset of schooling (age 7/6). Secondly, the endorsement of the very early teaching of languages sanctioned the private educational market, especially of pre-primary teaching. Private kindergartens were booming and they were first to offer within their curriculum not just one language, usually English, but also other languages, such as German, Spanish, French, Russian or even Chinese (Rokita-Jaśkow, 2013).

Teaching languages other than English, which have become marginalized, at pre-primary level was connected with finding a market niche. It was hoped that if children start learning other languages early, they may continue learning them at upper stages of school education. Yet, in order to convince very young learners (and their parents) to attend classes of another foreign language, the kindergartens had to offer attractive and enjoyable pedagogical solutions, which prompted educators to develop their own materials, curricula and research projects. The research studies into the teaching of other languages have been frequently conducted as PhD projects, in which the influence of TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners) is visible, in e.g. the use of similar methods and techniques that have been firstly

developed for teaching English, e.g. the TPR method. By the same token popular didactic texts, such as songs, stories, chants have been translated from English into other languages. A case in point is a well-known song “This is the way we wash our face” or the classic story of *Three Little Pigs*, which have equivalents in Russian (Woś, 2017) and German (Iluk & Jakosz, 2017) respectively.

Songs, chants, TPR games and stories are well recognized activities and enjoyed by very young learners. Hence, they constitute the core of lesson content. Few researchers, however, investigated the effectiveness of various teaching techniques for language retention. Leśniewska and Pichette (2014) compared the most common activities, such as songs and stories as sources of language input, and inquired into how the vocabulary embedded in the two types of texts was recognized and recalled by preliterate children. They found that words that were embedded in stories were later better recalled than words which were presented in songs. Also, words characteristic of animacy were more easily recalled than words which were inanimate. These findings show that children find it easier to remember those words whose meaning is clearly definable by context and/or accompanying gestures. Reading stories numerous times, and giving time for additional clarification, proved more effective than rote revision of song texts, even if accompanied by TPR gestures, as it was more difficult to extract meaning of particular words from connected speech of songs.

Teacher language as an important source of linguistic input was a subject of scrutiny in another study by Scheffler and Domińska (2018). They found that variability in teacher language use accounted for the differences in preschoolers’ learning outcomes. A selection of 20 teachers of very young learners both in public nurseries and private educational institutions were interviewed on their perceptions of using both the children’s native language (Polish) as well as the target language English in the EFL classroom. The study revealed that teachers, as well as parents accompanying their children in the class, often resorted to the children’s mother tongue in order to manage their behavior, restore the children’s attention or enhance children’s understanding of class activities. One difference between private and public institutions manifested itself in the presentation of new language, which typically took place by presenting objects in the flashcards. In the public nursery, resorting to the children’s own language was admitted as a means of ensuring the children knew the meanings of words. In the private language school, in which an English-only policy was used, the translation into Polish came from parents assisting their children. Similar differences were noticed in teacher attitudes towards the learners’ output. In the public nursery the children’s need for translation into their L1 was accepted and their frequent codemixing was tolerated. Whereas in the private language school a stricter adherence to an English-only policy was noted, resulting in reminding the children to use L2 only, and lack of appeals for translation. Yet, it was observed that in peer-to-peer interactions the children often resorted to code-switching for metalinguistic functions, i.e., inserted L2 phrases into their L1 speech in order to exhibit their skills. All these findings led the authors to believe that despite monolingual policies placed on educational institutions, putting the child’s emotional comfort and wellbeing in focus should be prioritized and therefore resorting to the children’s own language should be allowed when needed.

In contrast to these findings, Scheffler (2015) identified intensive home exposure to the second language (e.g., through animated series) as much more effective than foreign language learning in an institutional environment. After two years of exposure the children he

had studied could produce the language much more creatively and spontaneously than those learning in the classroom, which reconfirms the advantage of a bilingual upbringing. The potential of watching animated TV series as a valuable input resource was further described by Scheffler et al. (2021). By analyzing vocabulary that was present in 8 episodes of the *Peppa Pig* TV series they recognized that 80% of vocabulary present in the episodes also belonged to the most frequent 2000 words in the British National Corpus, which demonstrates the teaching potential of the series both at home and in the classroom.

As mentioned above other foreign languages are also taught in kindergartens with a view to ingraining interest and guaranteeing continuity of learning in upper levels of education. One of the most frequently taught languages at the pre-primary level is German, particularly in the areas which had historical connections to German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria), and where knowing German was treated as a way of maintaining heritage identity among language minority groups. Consequently, methods for attractive teaching of the language had to be developed. This need was realized in creating either intensive exposure bilingual (e.g., Content and Language Integrated Learning) of the kindergarten curriculum which imitated the one language/one environment strategy (Olpińska-Szkiełko 2013, Bielicka, 2017) or promoting a narrative approach, i.e. the use of storytelling (Iluk, 2015, Iluk & Jakosz, 2017). Both methods emphasized authenticity of the environment and of materials as key features of the curriculum. Such an immersion type of instruction was investigated by Bielicka (2017) who traced patterns of grammatical development of preschool children in German, only to conclude that older children learnt morphosyntactic aspects of the language faster than younger ones.

In another study, Iluk and Jakosz (2017) investigated the application of the narrative approach in 3 kindergartens and 1 primary school, which comprised in total about 100 children. The children participated in classes of German in which a story was a major organizing principle for lessons, i.e. both for the presentation of the new language and for its practice. The authors observed that the prolonged period dedicated to story comprehension and its multiple repetition resulted in longer retention of the story's words as well as comprehension of long utterances (comprising up to 12 words). The authors argued that it was counterproductive to prompt very young learners to produce language too early and believed that the prolonged period of comprehension contributed to the children's overall cognitive and emotional well-being. While adherence to 'the silent period' phase is highly debatable nowadays, the shift from outcome-oriented approach in teaching very young learners to catering for the whole-child growth is worth noticing.

As regards research into teaching other languages, Konderak (2019) focused on children learning French. She used mainly observational analysis (based on recordings and a checklist) of learner engagement in class. She found that the teacher's frequent use of elicitation techniques, frequent praising, as well as the teacher's own recitation/singing provoked not only child foreign language production, but also their interest, positive attitudes and engagement in class. No such link was observed between giving small gifts, such as labels and raising child learner interest. This finding highlights the important role of the teacher, and her/his energizing behavior, in developing interest and intrinsic motivation of very young learners.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the introduction of obligatory foreign language teaching in kindergartens in 2015 boosted the development of various methods, such as the Good Start Method for English by Bogdanowicz et al. (2015), or whole teaching solutions

including curricula, materials and teacher preparation. The examples of such methods include *Early Stage*, *Teddie Eddie*, *Mala Lingua*, whose common feature is that they operate under a franchising principle, i.e. the author of the method sells the know-how in the form of teacher guidelines for classroom activity as well as the whole package of materials (books, workbooks, flashcards, worksheets, additional book readers etc.). Such methods, patented as new products, rely in fact on well-known techniques, such as songs, drama, the use of puppets, theme-based teaching, a CLIL-immersion type of kindergarten, project work or the use of ICT. All these solutions have been well known in the teaching methodology of older learners. These innovative methods should be credited for the fact that they do not only focus on teaching single words, but on engaging children in the whole discourse, embedded in real-life situations that are meaningful for the child. Yet, the teaching solutions that they have borrowed from (i.e., from teaching older learners) have not, as yet, been empirically verified.

It can be concluded that inventive teaching originates from the private market, which subsequently initiates research projects. As can be seen from the abovementioned review, the pedagogical strain of research into very early foreign language learning focuses mainly on either finding the most attractive teaching solutions, or on the person of the teacher, their skills and capacities, as it is on them that the quality of teaching depends most. This strand of research also allowed to distinguish one more influential group of agents involved in the process of very early foreign language learning, i.e., parents.

4. THE ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

At the cornerstone of the ecological approach lies the assumption that no learning takes place in a vacuum, thus idealistic conditions in which one's intellectual potential could be realised to the full are hard to achieve. Conversely, the teaching-learning process depends on a network of relations with other agents in the outside world, such as parents, kindergarten headteachers, educational decision-makers etc. As Van Lier (2010, p.2) posits the ecological approach is "an approach that focuses primarily on the quality of learning opportunities, of classroom interaction and of educational experience in general" (Van Lier, 2010, p. 2). Thus a child's language learning takes place in an ecosystem that is dynamic, emergent and influenced by various agents at the micro- and macroscale.

On the microscale these are the young child's parents that play the most important role in early foreign language education. First of all, it is them who decide to enroll their children to such instruction, which often reflects their aspirations and visions of their children's future (Rokita-Jaśkow, 2015, 2013). Class differences, partly marked by parents' own knowledge of foreign languages and their socioeconomic (henceforth SES) status, proved to be a discriminating factor in shaping parental visions of their children's future. In collected interview data, it was shown that middle class parents who had achieved their position thanks to a command of foreign languages, were positive about their children reaching plurilingual competence. They signed their children up for early foreign language education as they regarded it to be "an important investment towards the children's future but not as an ultimate goal in itself" (Rokita-Jaśkow, 2015, p. 465), and saw the children's future

identity as cosmopolitan, belonging to a largely understood international society. Those parents who were of a lower-class status, and who had not managed to grasp the command of foreign languages themselves, saw 'an early start' as an absolute precondition, a means and a goal for the children to achieve a higher social status in the future. They considered an 'early start' in foreign language learning as a kind of parental obligation. Not having their own experience of successful language learning was also visible in parental involvement in out-of-kindergarten practices oriented at the FL mastery (Rokita-Jaśkow, 2019). Lower SES parents' practices were limited to revision and reinforcement of class material, as this was the only solution they could think of. Higher SES parents' involvement manifested in the provision of additional stimuli, such as occasional switching into a FL in daily activities, joint reading of FL picturebooks, watching TV series, playing Internet games. In other words, they were more skillful in searching for additional L2 input resources. Needless to say, foreign languages were a part of their linguistic capital, to use Bourdieu's (1991) words, which often showed in traveling abroad, having foreign visitors at home, working in an international environment etc. Such experiences, although indirectly, are believed to shape children's foreign language attitudes as well as learning opportunities. These findings also show that distal variables of the child's family environment, such as socioeconomic status and parental knowledge of languages, may impact the quality of foreign language contact and consequently, learning outcomes.

At the macro level of the language learning ecosystem these are educational decision makers, such as the Ministry of Education, that create conditions for early language learning. In Poland, introducing the policy of an early start sanctioned parental aspirations on the one hand, and on the other followed European Commission guidelines (2011), which recommended introducing obligatory early foreign language instruction to all children, with a view to guaranteeing equity, quality, consistency, and continuity. Meeting these criteria in the Polish educational context was particularly urgent, as disparities in access to good quality early language education were evident. These differences could, in turn, minimize chances of learning success at higher levels. Furthermore, planned investments into retraining Early Childhood Education and Care teachers so that they would be equipped with qualifications to teach foreign language skills aimed to increase the number of teachers who placed children's socio-emotional and cognitive development in focus. The introduction of a foreign language into the preschool curriculum is one more way to contribute towards this goal. The intervention of the state also helps to specify realistic goals and possibilities of such early instruction. It should be noted that it is not possible to create such classroom conditions that would imitate real-life settings and thus employ implicit mechanisms for language learning (Rokita-Jaśkow & Pamuła-Behrens, 2019).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this paper was to show the reasons for the popularity of very early teaching of foreign languages as well as key research directions in this field, setting Poland as an example. As can be seen in the aforementioned overview of research projects, foreign language learning has been an object of (often unfulfilled) aspirations for many Poles, who

place their ambitions and desires in their children, treating an early start as an investment towards future plurilingual achievement. It has been also shown that in response to this need, a buoyant educational market has arisen, offering novel pedagogical solutions. Any research that has been conducted is secondary to these educational initiatives and enterprises. The evolution of the research strands in early language pedagogy could be observed as proceeding in parallel to those in second language acquisition research, pedagogy and in educational psychology. Another specificity of the Polish landscape is the monolingual mindset, i.e., seeing monolingualism as a deficiency that has to be eradicated. This leads many parents and educators to strive for bilingual achievement, in extreme cases even at the cost of mother tongue development. Such situational conditionings led to the initial popularity of immersion-type instruction that would trigger mechanisms for natural language acquisition. They also led to a boost in the (mainly private) educational market which offered pedagogical solutions enhancing the process. The intervention of the state in the form of obligatory pre-primary instruction did not weaken interest in the very early learning of languages outside the public system. Yet the myth that 'the earlier one starts (learning), the better' slowly gave way to more realistic expectations. This shift is visible in e.g., allowing children to use their own language in instruction and treating early foreign language learning experiences as a component of the whole child growth.

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