

Online Communicative Language Teaching: A Case Study of Zoom-Based ESL Instruction in Myanmar

Zachary Robson

Lincoln University College

Corresponding author: zachkrobson@gmail.com

Abstract

This qualitative case study examines the enactment of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in an online English as a Second Language (ESL) lesson for adolescent learners in Myanmar. Primary data were collected in 2024 through non-participant observation of a one-hour Zoom-based session within a volunteer-led English program operating amid ongoing political and educational disruption. The population comprised Myanmar adolescents engaged in remote English learning; using purposive sampling, one session involving two learners was selected for detailed analysis. Data collection relied on structured observational field notes documenting interactional patterns, teacher scaffolding strategies, affective behaviours, and technological interruptions. Secondary data were derived from scholarly literature on CLT, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), online pedagogy, and education in fragile contexts. Primary data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in communicative engagement, negotiation of meaning, and contextual constraints. Findings indicate that open-ended questioning, scaffolded interaction, and meaning-focused tasks facilitated learner participation despite unstable connectivity and anxiety-related camera-off behaviour. The study underscores the necessity of adaptive pedagogical strategies and low-bandwidth multimodal resources to sustain communicative competence development in crisis-affected online environments.

Keywords: *Communicative Language Teaching; Digital Pedagogy; Fragile Contexts; Learner Engagement; Myanmar; Online ESL*

Introduction

English language proficiency has become increasingly important for academic advancement and global communication, especially in regions where educational access is unstable. The rise of online learning has created new opportunities for English instruction, yet it also introduces challenges that affect the quality of interaction between teachers and learners (Sim & Ismail, 2023; Lo, 2023). In Myanmar, political instability and limited access to formal schooling have pushed many adolescents to rely on volunteer-led online English programs as their primary source of language exposure (Hibbs, 2024; Joshi, 2024). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes meaningful interaction and learner participation, remains a widely accepted approach for fostering communicative competence. However, the effectiveness of CLT in online environments—particularly in low-resource and fragile contexts—remains underexplored, with technological constraints, learner anxiety, and reduced nonverbal cues significantly shaping the learning process (Kemaloglu-Er & Şahin, 2022; Nguyen et

al., 2022). This study investigates how CLT principles are enacted during a Zoom-based ESL lesson for Myanmar learners and examines the interactional, affective, and technological factors influencing communication in this setting.

The shift toward online learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has transformed how English is taught globally, particularly in contexts with political instability such as Myanmar (Lo, 2023; Hibbs, 2024). Many Myanmar learners now depend on volunteer-run virtual classrooms to access English lessons when formal schooling is disrupted. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes meaningful interaction and learner engagement, has increasingly been applied in online ESL settings, though challenges such as weak internet connectivity and reduced nonverbal cues persist (Sim & Ismail, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022). This study examines how CLT principles emerge during a Zoom-based ESL session, offering insight into communicative learning within fragile educational environments.

Problem Statement

Although online platforms provide increased access to English learning opportunities for Myanmar youth, the effectiveness of implementing CLT in such environments remains uncertain. Technological limitations, heightened anxiety, and reduced learner visibility disrupt communicative interaction—an essential component of CLT (Kemaloglu-Er & Şahin, 2022; Hibbs, 2024). Existing research rarely focuses on how CLT functions within politically unstable and low-resource settings, leaving a gap in understanding how meaningful communication can be sustained in online ESL contexts. This study addresses this gap by exploring the interactional patterns and challenges observed in a real-time Zoom lesson.

Significance of the Study

This study holds theoretical, pedagogical, and contextual significance. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to the expanding body of research examining how Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories function within digitally mediated environments. While CLT has been widely explored in traditional classroom settings, fewer studies investigate its enactment in low-resource and crisis-affected online contexts (Sim & Ismail, 2023; Kemaloglu-Er & Şahin, 2022). By analyzing real-time communicative interaction in a Zoom-based lesson, this study provides empirical insight into how interactionist and sociocultural principles—such as negotiation of meaning and scaffolding—manifest under technological and affective constraints (Nguyen et al., 2022; Aimin, 2013).

Pedagogically, the study offers practical implications for educators, particularly volunteer teachers supporting learners in unstable educational systems. Research indicates that online ESL instruction presents challenges related to engagement, technological disruption, and reduced nonverbal feedback (Lo, 2023; Kemaloglu-Er & Şahin, 2022). By identifying adaptable strategies, small-group dynamics, and low-bandwidth scaffolding techniques, this study provides context-sensitive recommendations that align with current digital pedagogy research (Sim & Ismail, 2023; Hazar, 2020).

Contextually, this research contributes to limited scholarship on online English instruction in Myanmar's post-2021 educational landscape, where community-led and volunteer-based initiatives have become increasingly significant (Joshi, 2024; Hibbs, 2024). By documenting both the constraints and communicative possibilities within a

fragile setting, the study informs future program design and supports more equitable access to meaningful language learning opportunities.

Review of Related Literature

Communicative Language Teaching and SLA Foundations

Communicative Language Teaching is grounded in the premise that language is best learned through the purposeful exchange of meaning. Rather than emphasizing grammatical accuracy in isolation, CLT centers on the use of language to accomplish communicative goals. Nunan (1991) argues that effective communicative tasks require learners to interpret messages, negotiate misunderstandings, and respond spontaneously—all of which mirror authentic language use outside the classroom.

The theoretical foundations of CLT can be traced to major Second Language Acquisition (SLA) frameworks. Krashen's Input Hypothesis posits that learners progress when they are exposed to comprehensible input just beyond their current competence—input that stimulates cognitive processing without overwhelming learners (Gong, 2023). Long's Interaction Hypothesis builds on this concept by asserting that input becomes meaningful when learners actively participate in negotiation of meaning. Through dialogue, learners may request clarification, repeat problematic phrases, or modify their speech in response to their interlocutor. These interactional moves support noticing, a key process in SLA that helps learners attend to linguistic forms.

Sociocultural theory offers yet another lens for understanding CLT. Rooted in Vygotskian thought, it emphasizes that learning occurs through mediated social interaction, with more experienced speakers providing scaffolding to help learners achieve tasks they cannot yet accomplish independently (Aimin, 2013). Scaffolding might include modeling, reformulating learner errors, or prompting deeper elaboration. In online contexts, such scaffolding may rely on multimodal cues, chat tools, or digital resources.

The integration of these theories underscores the centrality of interaction in language acquisition. CLT operationalizes these principles through communicative tasks, real-world topics, and learner-centered discussions—making it a strong methodological match for synchronous online instruction when technological conditions allow.

Online ESL Teaching and Digital Tools

The rise of digital learning has generated significant interest in how technology can be used to support language learning. Research consistently shows that teachers adopt digital tools when they perceive them to be useful, efficient, and manageable (Sim & Ismail, 2023). Digital platforms—Zoom, Google Classroom, messaging apps—enable synchronous and asynchronous communication, creating multiple channels for interaction.

However, online teaching also presents well-documented challenges. For many teachers, the abrupt transition to online classrooms during the pandemic intensified workload and stress. Lo's (2023) study of Hong Kong ESL teachers reveals substantial frustration related to reduced student engagement, lack of nonverbal feedback, difficulty monitoring breakout rooms, and managing technical issues. These challenges hinder teachers' ability to sustain communicative interaction—an essential component of CLT.

In fragile contexts, the challenges are magnified. Teachers may have limited access to devices or stable internet, and students may struggle with inconsistent connectivity, background noise, or limited digital literacy (Kemaloglu-Er & Sahin, 2022). These factors contribute to inequitable learning experiences and undermine exposure to sustained communicative input.

Digital Tools, Motivation, and Multimodal Learning

Several Digital tools can meaningfully enhance communicative learning by increasing learner motivation and providing varied linguistic input. Hazar (2020) demonstrates that digital games improve vocabulary retention and promote motivation by engaging learners in interactive, goal-oriented activities. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2022) show that using memes in ESL classrooms supports digital literacy while reducing anxiety and increasing classroom participation. These tools leverage humor, visual cues, and social media conventions to make learning more relatable. Digital multimodality is especially important in online CLT settings because it compensates for the limitations of screen-based environments. Images, videos, emojis, and memes can serve as prompts for discussion, negotiation, and creative expression. When bandwidth is low, text-based chat or images can still support communicative participation.

Online Learning in Fragile or Low-Resource Contexts

Educational research in developing contexts underscores systemic challenges that affect digital learning. Poor infrastructure, socioeconomic inequalities, insufficient teacher training, and limited technical support hinder effective online instruction (Kemaloglu-Er & Sahin, 2022). In Myanmar, these obstacles are exacerbated by political instability, safety concerns, and restricted access to reliable electricity and internet. Despite these limitations, many learners remain highly motivated to participate in online English instruction, recognizing its value for future opportunities.

- Research Objective 1: To explore how CLT principles are demonstrated during an online ESL lesson delivered to adolescent learners in Myanmar.
- Research Objective 2: To identify the technological, affective, and pedagogical factors that influence communicative interaction in an online classroom setting.
- Research Objective 3: To examine how learners engage, respond, and negotiate meaning during Zoom-based CLT activities.

Research Questions

- Research Question 1: How are CLT principles enacted during a Zoom-based ESL lesson for Myanmar adolescents?
- Research Question 2: What challenges—technological, affective, or pedagogical—affect communicative interaction in this online learning environment?
- Research Question 3: How do learners engage and negotiate meaning during CLT-oriented online activities?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the enactment of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) within a real-time online ESL instructional setting. Qualitative case studies are particularly suited to investigating complex, context-

dependent educational phenomena where researcher control is limited (Yin, 2014). The primary data were collected in 2024 through non-participant observation of a one-hour Zoom-based ESL session conducted within a volunteer-led “English Corner” program serving adolescents in Myanmar. The population comprised Myanmar adolescents participating in community-based online English instruction during ongoing political and educational instability. Using purposive sampling, one instructional session was selected for in-depth examination because it reflected typical program structure and communicative teaching practices. The sample consisted of two adolescent learners and one volunteer instructor.

The primary data source was naturalistic classroom interaction observed synchronously via Zoom. Data collection tools included structured observational field notes documenting interactional moves (e.g., clarification requests, negotiation of meaning), teacher scaffolding practices, affective indicators, and technological disruptions. Secondary data were derived from scholarly literature on CLT, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), online ESL pedagogy, and education in fragile contexts (Nguyen et al., 2022; Sim & Ismail, 2023; Kemalolu-Er & Şahin, 2022). Primary data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework to identify patterns related to communicative engagement, technological constraints, and affective influences.

Participants and Setting

The observed session took place in a volunteer-led online “English Corner” program serving adolescents in Myanmar. The two learners participating represent typical students within Myanmar’s post-2021 educational climate—youth who have experienced prolonged school closures, political uncertainty, and uneven access to technology. As documented in international crisis education research (Hibbs, 2024; Ramzan et al., 2023), learners in such contexts often rely heavily on online learning opportunities to receive any form of consistent instruction. The volunteer instructor, an experienced English speaker trained in communicative teaching strategies, provided a stable and supportive presence in the online environment. The session was conducted on Zoom, a platform widely used for synchronous language instruction but prone to difficulties in low-bandwidth contexts such as Myanmar.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through a one-hour non-participant observation of the Zoom session. Non-participant observation is frequently used in classroom-based SLA research because it allows the researcher to document authentic learner behavior without influencing the instructional interaction (Gass & Selinker, 2008). The field notes recorded:

- interactional moves such as clarification requests, negotiation, and self-corrections
- teacher scaffolding practices, including reformulation, modeling, and probing questions
- affective indicators (e.g., hesitations, pauses, camera-off behavior)
- technological disruptions and their effect on communication flow

This documentation approach mirrors qualitative data collection methods used in many case studies which use naturalistic observation to analyze communicative processes.

Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, drawing on the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). After multiple readings, field notes were coded for patterns related to communicative engagement, affective behavior, technological barriers, and classroom interaction. Codes were consolidated into higher-order themes that aligned with the study's research questions and relevant SLA theories. This analytical strategy is consistent with other studies involving online communicative interaction, including Nguyen et al. (2022) and Sim & Ismail (2023), both of which used thematic analysis to examine teachers' and learners' perceptions of digital tools. Through this approach, the analysis highlighted not only what occurred in the session but also how these events connect to broader pedagogical and theoretical implications.

Active Communicative Engagement

The observed session demonstrated consistently active learner engagement, with both students responding to questions willingly and expanding on their ideas when prompted. They frequently drew upon personal experiences, which helped anchor communication in authentic contexts—an essential characteristic of CLT. Learners also exhibited behaviors associated with Interactionist SLA, such as requesting clarification, rephrasing their statements, and modifying their output in response to teacher feedback. These interactional moves reflect negotiation of meaning processes central to language development (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Such communicative exchanges align with the principles of CLT, which emphasize purposeful interaction and meaning-focused language use (Nunan, 1991). Overall, the high level of engagement suggests that even in fragile contexts, motivated learners can participate meaningfully in online communicative tasks when supportive conditions are present.

Advantages of the Small-Group Format

The intimate two-student structure created an environment highly conducive to communicative language development. With fewer participants, the teacher was able to allocate more speaking time to each learner and maintain careful control of classroom dialogue. This structure minimized the common online challenge of students withdrawing from interaction in larger groups, a difficulty frequently reported in digital ESL settings (Lo, 2023). It also allowed the teacher to tailor scaffolding and feedback more effectively, reflecting sociocultural principles of guided support within the learner's zone of proximal development (Aimin, 2013). The small-group format therefore functioned as a pedagogical strength, helping to offset technological and affective challenges commonly associated with online instruction.

Affective Factors: Anxiety and Camera-Off Behavior

A significant affective pattern emerged in the form of periodic camera-off behavior, primarily from one student who appeared hesitant during particular questions. Anxiety is widely recognized as a barrier to second language performance, often reducing learners' willingness to communicate and inhibiting spontaneous interaction (Gass & Selinker, 2008). In online settings, reduced visual presence can further complicate communicative flow by limiting access to nonverbal feedback and emotional cues (Lo, 2023). With the camera off, the teacher had fewer opportunities to interpret learner affect and adjust scaffolding accordingly. Although the learner continued participating verbally at times, the behavior illustrates how affective factors intersect with technological environments to shape communicative engagement.

Technological Disruptions

Technological instability had a persistent impact on the quality of interaction throughout the session. Intermittent audio delays, frozen screens, and brief connectivity losses interrupted the natural rhythm of conversation, forcing participants to repeat or reformulate their utterances. Such disruptions reduce opportunities for sustained negotiation of meaning, a core mechanism of language development (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Research on online learning inequalities similarly highlights how unstable connectivity disproportionately affects learners in low-resource contexts (Kemaloglu-Er & Şahin, 2022). The unpredictability of Myanmar's infrastructure likely increased cognitive load, as learners had to manage both communicative and technical demands simultaneously. Despite these interruptions, participants demonstrated resilience in maintaining engagement.

Successful Implementation of CLT Principles

Despite contextual barriers, the teacher successfully incorporated several core CLT strategies throughout the session, including open-ended questioning, authentic communicative tasks, and scaffolded interaction. These practices align with CLT's emphasis on meaningful communication over isolated grammatical instruction (Nunan, 1991). The teacher's adaptive responses to learner contributions also reflect research suggesting that effective digital tool integration and pedagogical flexibility are central to sustaining engagement in online ESL environments (Sim & Ismail, 2023). Even amid technological instability, the lesson maintained a learner-centered orientation, demonstrating that foundational CLT principles can be upheld in synchronous online settings when instructional practices remain communicatively focused.

Findings and Discussion

Potential of Online CLT

The findings illustrate that CLT can be effectively implemented in an online environment, even in regions experiencing political instability and infrastructural limitations. The learners' willingness to participate and negotiate meaning suggests that synchronous virtual platforms can approximate the interactional benefits of face-to-face instruction when pedagogically structured to prioritize communication. Research indicates that meaningful digital tool integration can support sustained engagement in ESL contexts (Sim & Ismail, 2023). Furthermore, studies examining community-led educational continuity in crisis-affected regions emphasize the growing importance of flexible online instruction in maintaining learning access (Joshi, 2024). Despite contextual constraints, the Zoom-based session provided learners with authentic communicative opportunities that may otherwise be unavailable. These findings reinforce the potential of online CLT as an accessible intervention for learners in marginalized or crisis-affected environments.

Digital Tools as Enhancers of Interaction

The study's results echo existing research indicating that digital tools can enhance engagement and lower affective barriers in online ESL environments. Although this particular session relied primarily on video and audio, there is clear potential for integrating low-bandwidth digital resources such as images, polls, memes, and simple games. Such tools could provide additional communicative prompts and opportunities for learner expression while offsetting the inherent limitations of screen-based communication. Prior research supports the idea that digitally mediated interaction encourages motivation, especially among younger learners who are accustomed to

multimedia environments (Hazar, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022). Integrating such tools could therefore amplify the communicative affordances of online CLT in fragile contexts.

SLA Theory and Observed Learner Behaviors

Interactionist and sociocultural perspectives offer valuable frameworks for interpreting the communicative patterns observed in the session. Learners' clarification requests, reformulations, and self-corrections reflect negotiation of meaning processes central to second language development (Gass & Selinker, 2008). These interactional adjustments demonstrate how communicative exchanges facilitate noticing and linguistic refinement. Simultaneously, the teacher's modeling and guided prompting align with sociocultural principles of scaffolding within mediated social interaction (Aimin, 2013). However, affective factors—particularly anxiety and camera-off behavior—illustrate potential constraints on these processes, as reduced social presence may limit opportunities for collaborative meaning-making. Together, these findings suggest that while online CLT environments can support core SLA mechanisms, they require deliberate affective and interactional scaffolding to optimize learning outcomes.

Contextual Constraints Unique to Myanmar

The Myanmar context introduces systemic constraints that extend beyond typical online classroom challenges. Unstable electricity supply, inconsistent internet connectivity, and broader sociopolitical uncertainty contribute to heightened stress and unpredictability in learning environments. Research on online learning inequalities highlights how infrastructural limitations disproportionately affect learners in socioeconomically disadvantaged settings (Kemaloglu-Er & Şahin, 2022). Additionally, prolonged exposure to crisis conditions may increase emotional strain for both learners and educators, influencing participation and engagement patterns (Hibbs, 2024). Despite these obstacles, the sustained motivation observed in the session reflects a strong commitment to educational continuity. These findings underscore the importance of context-sensitive pedagogical adaptation when implementing CLT in fragile or conflict-affected environments.

Recommendations

Small-Group Instruction

Maintaining small-group formats in online ESL environments maximizes communicative opportunities by ensuring that each learner receives adequate speaking time and individualized feedback. Research on digital ESL classrooms indicates that reduced student visibility and participation are common challenges in larger online groups (Lo, 2023). Smaller instructional groups help mitigate these issues by fostering more equitable turn-taking and sustained interaction. Additionally, sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of guided support within manageable interactional spaces, where teachers can scaffold learners effectively within their zone of proximal development (Aimin, 2013). In fragile contexts, small-group instruction may therefore function as both a pedagogical and affective support mechanism, strengthening communicative engagement despite technological instability.

Low-Bandwidth Multimodal Scaffolding

Integrating low-bandwidth multimodal resources can significantly enrich communicative interaction in environments with unstable connectivity. Research suggests that thoughtful digital tool integration enhances engagement when tools are perceived as accessible and manageable (Sim & Ismail, 2023). Simple multimodal elements—such as images,

memes, icons, or text-based prompts—require minimal data yet stimulate meaningful discussion and language production. Studies on digital literacy in ESL contexts demonstrate that visually mediated materials can increase participation while lowering affective barriers (Nguyen et al., 2022). In low-resource settings, such tools offer practical means of sustaining communicative interaction even when bandwidth constraints limit full audiovisual participation.

Affective Support and Camera-Use Flexibility

Providing affective support is essential in online CLT environments where anxiety and self-consciousness may inhibit participation. Second language acquisition research highlights how affective variables can influence learners' willingness to communicate and overall performance (Gass & Selinker, 2008). In online classrooms, reduced nonverbal feedback and social presence can intensify these challenges (Lo, 2023). Teachers should therefore adopt flexible camera-use policies and structured turn-taking strategies that reduce performance pressure while encouraging meaningful interaction. Creating a psychologically safe environment allows learners to take communicative risks, which is fundamental to the successful implementation of CLT principles.

Interactive Digital Tools

The integration of interactive digital tools can enhance communicative learning by increasing motivation and diversifying task types. Research on digital tool adoption in ESL classrooms emphasizes that interactive platforms can support sustained engagement when aligned with pedagogical objectives (Sim & Ismail, 2023). Additionally, studies on digital game-based learning demonstrate positive effects on vocabulary acquisition and learner motivation through playful, goal-oriented interaction (Hazar, 2020). In fragile contexts, even simple interactive activities—such as polls, quizzes, or collaborative documents—can create dynamic communicative opportunities without requiring high-bandwidth infrastructure. These tools align with CLT's emphasis on meaningful language use within authentic, engaging contexts.

Teacher Training for Online CLT

Effective implementation of CLT in online settings requires targeted teacher preparation, particularly for volunteers working in crisis-affected regions. Research indicates that educators often experience increased workload and reduced engagement in digital classrooms when insufficiently trained in online pedagogy (Lo, 2023). Furthermore, inequalities in online learning environments highlight the need for context-sensitive instructional adaptation in low-resource settings (Kemaloglu-Er & Şahin, 2022). Training programs should therefore emphasize strategies for facilitating communicative interaction despite technological disruption, managing small-group dynamics, and providing scaffolding through limited visual cues. Strengthening teacher capacity in these areas will enhance instructional consistency and improve communicative outcomes for learners in fragile educational contexts.

Justification of the Study

Understanding how CLT operates in online environments is essential for improving instructional quality, particularly in fragile contexts where digital learning has become a primary mode of education (Ramzan et al., 2023; Joshi, 2024). This study contributes to the limited literature on online communicative practices in politically unstable regions and provides practical insights for volunteer educators supporting Myanmar learners. Findings may inform the development of more effective, culturally responsive, and

technologically adaptable online ESL pedagogies aligned with CLT principles (Nguyen et al., 2022; Hazar, 2020). By identifying both strengths and limitations of online CLT, the study offers evidence-based recommendations to enhance learner engagement and communicative competence.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its small sample size, as it focuses on a single online ESL session with two adolescent learners, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Because the session was observed in a naturalistic setting, factors such as inconsistent internet connectivity, environmental distractions, and learner anxiety may have influenced performance independently of instructional approach (Kemaloglu-Er & Şahin, 2022; Hibbs, 2024). Additionally, the study relies on observational data without supplementary interviews or learner reflections, limiting deeper insight into students' internal experiences and motivational factors. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory, offering contextual understanding rather than broad conclusions about online CLT practices.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in a Zoom-based ESL lesson for adolescent learners in Myanmar, a context shaped by political instability and technological constraints. The findings demonstrate that meaningful communicative interaction can be sustained in online environments when instruction prioritizes open-ended questioning, scaffolded dialogue, and learner-centered tasks. Despite infrastructural disruptions and affective challenges such as anxiety and camera-off behavior, learners actively negotiated meaning, reformulated responses, and engaged in authentic exchanges. These interactional patterns reflect key principles of Interactionist and sociocultural Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, suggesting that core mechanisms of language development remain viable in digitally mediated spaces.

At the same time, the study highlights the persistent influence of contextual constraints. Technological instability disrupted communicative flow, while affective factors limited full participation at certain moments. However, the small-group format and adaptive teaching strategies mitigated many of these barriers, underscoring the importance of flexible, context-sensitive pedagogy in fragile learning environments. Future research should examine multiple online sessions across diverse learner groups to determine whether similar communicative patterns emerge in larger samples. Longitudinal studies exploring the sustained impact of online CLT on communicative competence development in crisis-affected contexts would further strengthen the empirical foundation of this field.

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