Improving teachers' intercultural awareness and communication skills for the benefit of non-native learners' academic performance

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Despite the increasing need for teachers to effectively accommodate students in increasingly multicultural grade-school classrooms, there remains a glaring lack of practical suggestions for teachers to do so. In response to this gap in the literature, the goals of this paper are (a) to highlight the effects of teachers' intercultural awareness and communication skills on the academic performance of non-native students; (b) to generate practical recommendations for teachers to improve their intercultural awareness as well as verbal and non-verbal communication skills in the classroom. In doing so, this paper may function as a response to the call for additional insights on the topic.
Keywords: academic performance; intercultural awareness; non-native students; non-verbal communication; practical recommendations for teachers; verbal communication

1 Introduction[1]

A teacher's verbal and non-verbal communicative behaviours in the classroom can play a significant role in non-native students' academic performance. Ignorance and a lack of intercultural awareness on behalf of the teacher can strain student-teacher relationships, negatively affecting non-native students' academic development and motivation to learn (Taylor, 2010). Yet, despite the urgent need for teachers to effectively accommodate students in increasingly multicultural classrooms, there is a glaring lack of practical suggestions for teachers to improve their intercultural awareness as well as their verbal and non-verbal communication skills. As classrooms become increasingly culturally diverse, it is crucial that teachers are able to confidently build rapport and establish trust with native and non-native students alike (Castro, 2010). Despite the lack of existing practical advice, there are a number of ways in which teachers can improve their intercultural awareness and communication skills for the benefit of non-native students' academic performance.

1.1   Key Definitions

Before beginning the discussion, it is necessary to define the key terms used within this paper. The term "verbal communication" will refer to spoken words and conversations, either between the teacher and the entire classroom or between the teacher and (an) individual student(s), as defined by Sutiyatno (2018). Aspects of verbal communication can include word choice, the volume at which one speaks, verbal emphasis and intonation, as well as the tone of one's voice (Sutiyatno, 2018). Verbal communication most often occurs at the conscious level, meaning a speaker is typically aware that their word choice, volume, and tone are transmitting important messages (Sutiyatno, 2018).

The term "non-verbal communication" will herein refer to non-verbal behaviours which occur either simultaneously or independently of a verbal message. Aspects of non-verbal communication can include eye contact, facial expressions, nodding one's head, pointing, physical touch, and spatial distance between conversation partners (Hans & Hans, 2015). Non-verbal communication frequently occurs at the unconscious level, meaning a speaker is often unaware that their body language and gestures are transmitting messages; however, it is important to note that non-verbal communication is not the same as unconscious communication (Haneef et al., 2014).

Haneef et al. (2014) propose that while unconscious communication is most often non-verbal, non-verbal communication is not always unconscious. While interacting with others, speakers will naturally transmit unconscious non-verbal messages; however, a speaker can also choose to consciously transmit non-verbal messages at any point. For example, a Canadian teacher maintaining eye contact while interacting with a group of students is likely doing so *unconsciously*, considering that casual eye contact is perceived positively among North American individuals (McCarthy et al., 2008). On the other hand, a Canadian teacher maintaining intense eye contact with only one student is likely doing so *consciously*, as holding eye contact (staring) at a single person is perceived as rude, aggressive, and/or punitive among North American individuals (McCarthy et al., 2008). The ability to modify and choose one's non-verbal messages is what ultimately differentiates non-verbal communication from unconscious communication.

Next, it is necessary to define the term "intercultural awareness." Aguilar (2008) writes that intercultural awareness is a "… knowledge, awareness, and understanding of the relationship […] between the 'world of origin' and the 'world of the target community' …" (p. 67). In other words, intercultural awareness involves three core aspects: an awareness of one's own culture and worldview; an awareness of others' culture and worldview; and an awareness of how each culture will mutually influence the progression and outcomes of various interactions.

As for "intercultural communication skills", Moeller and Nugent (2014) define this term as one's ability to interact both appropriately and effectively with those from cultures other than their own; such an ability involves aspects of both

verbal and non-verbal communication. For example, intercultural communication skills can include one's ability to read, write, speak, or understand another language; one's understanding of the customs or values of another culture; as well as one's knowledge of which topics are appropriate to discuss with certain individuals and in certain contexts.

Finally, the term "non-native student" will herein refer to a student who is not a native speaker of the host country's official language(s). Given that certain studies reviewed within this paper do not take place in North America, it would be inaccurate to define a "non-native student" as one who does not speak a particular language, or one who was not raised in a specific country or region. For the purposes of this paper, the term "non-native student" is purposefully broad so as to encompass the various participants of the intercultural classroom studies discussed in the forthcoming literature review.

2   Literature Review

Existing literature provides evidence for the interdependent relationship between culture and communication, as well as the potential for teachers' communicative behaviours to affect the academic performance of non-native students.

2.1   How Culture Informs Communication

Singelis and Brown (1995) state that since culture affects each individual's psychological makeup, in turn, it must also affect each individual's communicative norms and behaviours. Singelis and Brown (1995) asked over 300 participants to determine the meaning of specific messages within several example conversations; results indicate a correlation between participants' self-disclosed ethnicity and their reliance on context to derive meaning from a given message. While this study provides valuable insight regarding the interdependent relationship between culture and communication, it is important to note that one's ethnicity may differ from one's culture; however, neither ethnicity nor culture are rigid social principles and can change throughout one's lifetime. With the fluidity of each concept in mind, this study ultimately supports that one's culture and communicative behaviours are both integrated and inseparable.

Bambaeeroo and Shokrpour (2017) discuss the notion that native (or otherwise long-standing) community members possess an unconscious knowledge of cultural and communicative norms pertaining to their society. Bambaeeroo and Shokrpour (2017) state that "… according to the culture and traditions of the society … community members know which [communicative] behavior is appropriate for every situation" (p. 57). Since much of one's cultural knowledge is gained early in life from family members and childhood social experiences, it can be difficult for visitors, migrants, and immigrants to learn and adjust to a host or target country's norms (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017). As for the impact of teachers' communicative behaviours on non-native students' academic performance, authors Bambaeeroo and Shokrpour (2017) state that

teachers must be both culturally competent and able to communicate effectively with all learners in order to teach in a satisfactory manner. In contrast to these powerful claims, a central limitation of this article is the lack of suggested methods by which teachers may improve their intercultural knowledge and communicative behaviours so as not to negatively affect non-native students' academic performance.

It is evidently indisputable that culture informs communication during interactions. In the context of a classroom, researchers Lum and Marsh (2012) write, "[Culture] encompasses all the decisions that inform and frame the relationship between teacher and learner …" (p. 343). Wahyuni (2018) also writes about teachers' verbal and nonverbal communication, noting that these two forms of communication are inseparable in a classroom setting. Wahyuni (2018) also emphasizes the importance of teachers continually increasing their intercultural awareness in order to make informed choices regarding their communicative behaviours while interacting with students.

2.2 Effects of Teachers' Communication on Non-Native Students' Academic Performance

Given the interdependent nature of culture and communication, several studies have investigated the effects of verbal and non-verbal communication in a multicultural classroom setting. One such study is that of Pogue and Ahyun, who hypothesized that all students would achieve a higher academic performance when the curriculum was presented by highly immediate teachers (2006). Pogue and Ahyun (2006) define "immediacy" as a display of non-verbal behaviours which positively increase feelings of closeness between individuals; thereby, a "highly immediate" teacher is defined as one who regularly employs non-verbal communicative behaviours such as nodding, smiling, and maintaining eye contact while interacting with students. This study involved exposing 586 student participants of undisclosed cultural backgrounds to one of four written scenarios describing teacher-student interactions, and having each participant rank their perceptions of the exemplified teacher's immediacy. Results of this study indicate a significant relationship between perceived teacher immediacy and students' academic achievements (Pogue & Ahyun, 2006). From this, it is interpretable that a teacher's use of non-verbal behaviours can positively influence the academic achievements of non-native students; unfortunately, the applicability of this study's findings is limited by the lack of recommendations provided for teachers to better their non-verbal communication skills so that students may reap academic benefits.

Chaudhry and Arif (2012) studied the overall impact of teachers' communicative behaviours on non-native students' academic performance. In order to ensure a majority of student participants were non-native English speakers, this research was conducted at a number of schools employing English-medium instruction, a system in which core (or all) subjects are taught primarily in English in countries where the general population does not speak English as a

first language (2012). Researchers Chaudhry and Arif (2012) observed the non-verbal behaviours of 90 grade-school teachers during their interactions with English students; examples of such interactions include lecturing, giving directions, acknowledging students' feelings, listening to students' ideas, and answering students' questions. Results indicate a strong correlation between teachers' positive non-verbal behaviour (such as smiling, nodding, and maintaining eye contact) and improved academic performance (2012). The implications of these results are that teachers' positive non-verbal behaviours can directly and positively affect student academic achievement; however, as with Pogue and Ahyun (2006), this study is limited by the lack of specific suggestions for ways in which teachers might alter their nonverbal behaviours in order to boost students' academic achievement.

Thirdly, Sutiyatno (2018) studied the effects of a teacher's verbal and non-verbal communication on students' achievements in learning English as an additional language. Sutiyatno (2018) hypothesized that the native English teacher's use of culturally competent verbal and non-verbal communication would significantly influence non-native students' success in learning English. Results of polling 76 students learning English as an additional language indicate a positive relationship between the teachers' verbal and non-verbal communication and non-native students' English achievements (2018). In other words, an increase in the teacher's culturally competent verbal and non-verbal communication produced an increase in students' English achievement (Sutiyatno, 2018). The discussion of these results encourages teachers to develop an awareness of their communicative impacts on student achievement, although the most substantial advice offered is for teachers to use "good communication skills" in the classroom (Sutiyatno, 2018, p. 435). While this does not compromise the findings of this study, both the lack of specifics and the absence of advice contribute to the overall lack of available, practical guidance for educators hoping to improve their communication skills for the benefit of their non-native students.

2.3   Limitations of Existing Literature

While the aforementioned works provide a solid foundation upon which teachers may begin to understand the impacts of their communicative behaviours on non-native students' academic achievements, a central limitation of all is the lack of concrete, attainable suggestions for teachers to advance both their intercultural awareness and communicative skills. Nieto and Zoller-Booth (2010) advise, "Educators must be aware of different worldviews they may encounter in a classroom … to reject or demean a [student's] cultural heritage is to do psychological and moral violence to the dignity and worth of that individual" (p. 409). It is crucial that teachers are able to access specific and practical recommendations for improving their intercultural awareness and communicative skills, both verbal and non-verbal, for the benefit of non-native students' academic performance. The glaring lack of suggestions for educators to develop

effective intercultural awareness and intercultural communication skills can place teachers in a unique circumstance of knowing they need to improve, but not necessarily knowing how to do so.

3 Recommendations to Improve Teachers' Intercultural Awareness and Communication Skills

Considering the current lack of practical recommendations, some may conclude that there are few things teachers can do to improve their intercultural awareness or communicative skills. Although it is true that existing advice on the subject is often vague, unattainable, or simply unhelpful, there are several ways in which classroom teachers can improve their intercultural awareness and communication skills. By examining the findings of existing literature, practical suggestions for educators to improve their intercultural awareness and communication skills can be developed in order for non-native students' academic performance to be better supported and enhanced.

3.1 Improving Teachers' Intercultural Awareness

A common proposal when discussing the enhancement of educators' skills is for said educators to attend professional development sessions (Aguilar, 2008). While this is not a poor suggestion in and of itself, simply attending these sessions is inadequate for developing intercultural awareness, as this development is a lifelong process one must dedicate themselves to (Smith & Lander, 2022). Aguilar (2008) writes, "[Teachers should receive] training in communication skills but […] should also [consider] the personal and social development of [each] learner as an individual …" (p. 60). While it is true that development sessions can be useful in equipping teachers with general tactics for combating racism and microaggressions, it is crucial that students are viewed as more than just members of their culture. Additionally, promoting the idea that attending occasional workshops is an adequate standalone effort will only serve to absolve individuals of the enduring, internal processes required to better one's intercultural competence and awareness (Smith & Lander, 2022).

 In addition to (or in place of) attending professional development sessions, teachers may work to improve their intercultural awareness by personally researching significant events, customs, and values of cultures other than their own; attending events hosted by members of different cultures; participating in their colleagues or students' cultural holidays and celebrations (after ensuring they are welcome to join); as well as educating and extending empathy toward all who are making a conscious effort to improve their intercultural knowledge and adjust to new environments (Smith & Lander, 2022).

3.2   Improving Teachers' Verbal Communication Skills

The findings of certain works translate into practical advice for educators to improve their verbal communicative practices for the benefit of non-native students' academic performance. For instance, an increase in teachers' use of phrases that show empathy, kindness, and praise when interacting with students has been associated with increased student motivation and affective learning (Christophel, 1990; Rodriguez, Plax, & Kearny, 1996). It is reasonable to first recommend that teachers remain aware of their word choices, and especially aware of the influence that language can have on their relationships with non-native students. For example, if a teacher is unsure that their word choice will convey the appropriate message when providing instructions to (a) non-native student(s), the use of simplified vocabulary can help to mitigate any potential for confusion (Amsberry, 2008). Additionally, it is recommended that teachers avoid the use of jargon or idioms, speaking as clearly and intentionally as possible to avoid misunderstandings (Amsberry, 2008).

Researchers find that verbal praise from the teacher has the power to positively enhance teacher-student interactions, which in turn can positively affect non-native students' perceptions and attitudes toward their teacher, as well as students' attitudes toward learning in general (McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006). Based on these findings, another suggestion for teachers is to incorporate verbal praise for students wherever applicable and appropriate so as to encourage all students to participate, thereby increasing opportunities for positive interactions which can improve non-native students' attitudes and motivation to learn (McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006).

A fourth suggestion for teachers is to adopt the process of improving their verbal communication skills as a conscious, daily practice. Nieto and Zoller-Booth (2010) find that non-native students are often deemed problematic or troublesome when they struggle to follow the communicative and behavioural norms of the host country's dominant culture. To combat this, it is suggested that educators develop a consciousness of the prejudice they carry and reject any prejudicial treatment of non-native students. In doing so, non-native students are more likely to feel accepted and supported in their academic endeavours (Nieto & Zoller- Booth, 2010). Aguilar (2008) notes that it can be extremely difficult for native speakers to change their verbal behaviours; this difficulty can apply to both native teachers and non-native students' adjustment to the shared learning environment. Practicing patience and extending empathy toward non-native students is yet another way in which educators can improve their verbal communication skills for the benefit of non-native students' academic performance (Wahyuni, 2018).

3.3   Improving Teachers' Non-Verbal Communication Skills

The findings of certain works can also translate into practical advice for educators to improve their non-verbal communication skills. It is necessary to

note that non-verbal communication has a unique relationship to verbal communication; as stated by Chaudhry and Arif (2012), "[word choice] turns out to be far less important than tone of voice, [facial] expressions, eye contact, gestures and posture of the teacher … the medium becomes the message" (p. 57). In other words, when one is sending a verbal message, their simultaneous non-verbal behaviours have the power to alter the receiver's perception of the message itself. In some cases, non-verbal messages can replace verbal messages entirely, such as nodding, pointing, and using emphatic facial expressions (Bunglowala & Bunglowala, 2015). Due to this, one suggestion for teachers is to ensure they comprehend the impact of non-verbal behaviours and employ non-verbal behaviours as intentionally as possible when interacting with students.

Aguilar (2008) asserts that "… normal conversational practice in one culture is often construed as rude behavior in another … awareness of […] the important differences between the [conversational] norms is very important for conversational competence" (p. 49). In the context of non-verbal communicative behaviours in the classroom, this is to say that teachers must have a conscious awareness of the conversational norms of a non-native students' culture; from this, a suggestion can be derived in which teachers may wish to research the cultural communicative norms of (a) non-native student(s). While this can be done in a number of ways, teachers may wish to visit online communities to learn about conversational norms outside of their own culture. The work of Tseng and Kuo (2014) suggests that online communities of practice (CoPs) can be beneficial for teachers wishing to expand their cultural knowledge. CoPs are online forums or discussion boards designed to be used by global community members who share a profession, such as teachers (Tseng & Kuo, 2014). Through the use of CoPs, teachers worldwide are able to mutually access and share personal knowledge, resources, and problem-solving strategies with other educators. Another suggestion for teachers is hereby developed: teachers can use CoPs to explore non-verbal communicative behaviours, such as asking teachers across the globe about the cultural politeness of various stances and gestures.

While encouraging teachers to maintain an awareness of non-native students' cultural communicative norms, one must caution that teachers do not further alienate non-native students through obvious differential treatment. For instance, students may find it divisive to watch their teacher point directly at some students but not others; students may mistakenly infer favoritism or draw other conclusions by observing their teacher explicitly change their non-verbal behaviours when interacting with certain students. Moreover, teachers of largely multicultural classrooms may find it difficult to remember which students' cultures permit or encourage certain stances and gestures, and which do not. One suggestion is for teachers to avoid the use of any unnecessary non-verbal communicative behaviours altogether, such as pointing at students, folding their arms, or standing with their hands on their hips. Through such efforts, students are less likely to notice changes in non-verbal behaviours and feel alienated in the classroom, which may improve the academic performance of non-native students as a result (Soćko, 2021).

As it can be difficult to monitor and alter one's own non-verbal behaviours, an additional suggestion for educators looking to eliminate unnecessary non-verbal behaviours is to record themselves teaching a lesson (even if to an empty room) in order to observe their gestures, gaze, and posture throughout the lesson. If this is uncomfortable or difficult, the teacher could instead ask that a colleague watch the video to observe and recount their non-verbal behaviours (Ali & Ali, 2011). In any case, it is important that teachers develop an awareness of their non-verbal behaviours for the benefit of non-native students' academic performance. For example, if a teacher were to point at a student with their index finger (a common practice in Western classrooms), a non-native Japanese student may become uncomfortable and left at a disadvantage against their native classmates due to their cultural norms which convey that pointing at someone in such a manner is disrespectful (Hidayatullah, 2019). As a result, there is greater potential for the Japanese student's academic performance to suffer (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017). By reviewing and modifying their own non-verbal behaviours, teachers can become more self-aware and work toward eliminating culturally polarizing non-verbal behaviours for the benefit of non-native students' academic performance.

As with both verbal and intercultural communication, it is suggested that teachers try to view the improvement of their non-verbal communication as a conscious, daily practice. Adopting this view may help teachers practice patience for themselves and extend empathy to others throughout the process of increasing self-awareness, a practice which is especially valuable considering the oft-unconscious nature of non-verbal communication. All in all, by developing an awareness of their own non-verbal behaviours and making conscious efforts to improve, teachers can better support the advancement of non-native students' academic performance (Wahyuni, 2018).

4 Recommendations to Improve Students' Intercultural Awareness and Communication Skills

Having established several practical suggestions for improving teachers' intercultural awareness and communication skills, it is essential for educators to remember that communication is reciprocal. It would be erroneous for teachers to assume student passivity while they are improving their intercultural awareness and communication skills; there are several additional ways in which teachers can share their cultural learning with their students. Including students in this process allows them to acknowledge how their cultures inform their communicative behaviours and invites students to consider ways in which they might improve their own intercultural awareness.

One suggestion for teachers looking to expand students' intercultural awareness and communication skills is to establish respectful classroom behaviours at the beginning of the year. This may be done through a "classroom contract" activity, which allows for transparency regarding what is expected of all students and additionally relieves non-native students of the burden to figure

out which words and behaviours are appropriate for the classroom. Should the teacher collect input from all students and take the time to discuss what constitutes classroom-appropriate behaviour, they will demonstrate to all students the potential consequences of their actions. When native students develop a heightened sense of intercultural awareness, they are better able to perceive and respond to non-native students' needs in the classroom, which in turn can facilitate non-native students' feelings of being supported and accepted by their peers (Nieto & Zoller-Booth, 2010). Increasing all students' intercultural awareness and tolerance through collaborative activities will unquestionably benefit non-native students' academic performance, as non-native students are reported to have greater academic success when their instructor and classmates demonstrate acceptance of their culture (Nieto & Zoller-Booth, 2010).

Another suggested method for teachers to include students and improve their intercultural awareness is to create assignments on the topic of one's cultural heritage and have students share their work with one another. Nieto and Zoller-Booth (2010) find that, "… when students are given the chance to consider their own personal ideas about their culture and to compare them with [non-native cultures], there are more positive responses toward the [non-native] culture" (p. 410). Emphasizing not only pride in one's culture, but also pride in sharing their culture with others, can encourage students to celebrate their differences as much as their similarities. Alternately, teachers may assign work in which students research a culture other than their own, and then share their new knowledge with their classmates. No matter the chosen activity, teachers should make use of discussion-based activities, as inviting curiosity and respectful discussion of culture can promote increased intercultural tolerance, which in turn will improve non-native students' academic success (Nieto & Zoller-Booth, 2010).

Respectful and productive classroom discussions of culture can aid in students' understanding of themselves as well as one another, though non-verbal communication in particular can be difficult to explicitly teach (Hurley, 1992). To mitigate this difficulty, another suggestion to improve students' non-verbal communication skills is to introduce drama-based activities where appropriate (Surkamp, 2014). For those who teach language classes, including lessons regarding the non-verbal communicative behaviours of the target language can be helpful for learners (Wahyuni, 2018). For example, a Japanese teacher could inform students of Japanese customs surrounding eye contact and have them adopt these appropriate eye contact practices during class time. For those who do not teach language classes, Eryilmaz and Darn (2005) suggest an activity in which students attempt to communicate with one another using only gestures and facial expressions, which allows students to see the differences in their peers' choice of non-verbal behaviours as well as practice negotiating meaning from non-verbal behaviours in real-time. If non-native students are unable to communicate non-verbally with their teacher or peers, their academic achievement will be negatively influenced (Alsubaie, 2015); therefore, teachers

should both teach and encourage intercultural communication in the classroom to support non-native students' academic achievement.

When students are exposed to cultures outside of their own, they have greater opportunities to continuously construct a more diverse worldview (Nieto & Zoller-Booth, 2010). Including students in the process of expanding intercultural awareness and communication skills is an important pillar of non-native students' academic success. By providing opportunities for students to improve their intercultural awareness, including a recognition of and appreciation for different communication strategies, teachers can promote an environment of cultural integration in order to support and enhance non-native students' academic performance (Rienties et al., 2012).

5   Conclusion

Teachers' intercultural awareness and communication skills can play a significant role in non-native students' academic performance (Alsubaie, 2015; Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017; Chaudhry & Arif, 2012; Haneef et al., 2014; McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006; Pogue & Ahyun, 2006; Rienties et al., 2012; Soćko, 2021; Sutiyatno, 2018; Wahyuni, 2018). The expectations for teachers to adequately support non-native students' learning would be more attainable if there were adequate practical suggestions for teachers to apply intercultural learning and communication knowledge to the classroom environment. As educators are called to accommodate students in increasingly multicultural classrooms, it is imperative that future research addresses the gap in the literature by creating a solid foundation of practical recommendations from which teachers can begin to advance their intercultural knowledge and skills.

As supported by the findings of numerous studies, non-native students perform best academically when they feel accepted and supported by the teacher as well as their peers (Aguilar, 2008; Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017; Bunglowala & Bunglowala, 2015; Chaudhry & Arif, 2012; McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006; Nieto & Zoller-Booth, 2010; Rienties et al., 2012; Sutiyatno, 2018; Wahyuni, 2018). Despite the lack of practical suggestions in existing literature, there are a number of ways in which teachers can improve their intercultural awareness and communication skills for the benefit of non-native students' academic performance. Teachers do not need to become experts in intercultural communication in order to support the academic performance of non-native students; maintaining a conscious awareness of the impact of communicative behaviours as well as extending empathy toward those who are adjusting to a new environment can begin to facilitate positive change and intercultural tolerance within their classroom. As long as teachers are prepared to dedicate themselves to the processes of gaining as much intercultural knowledge as possible, incorporating culture and communication-based activities into their classroom, and adjusting their communicative behaviours as needed, there is excellent potential to benefit non-native students' academic performance. By working to improve their intercultural awareness and communication skills,

teachers can ensure that non-native students leave the classroom at the end of the year feeling accepted, supported, and proud of their academic performance.

6   About the Author

Erin earned a Bachelor of Arts in French and Developmental Psychology from the University of Victoria in 2021, and is currently earning a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics at the University of Victoria. As Erin works toward a career in second-language instruction, she finds the interplay of culture and communication within the classroom setting both fascinating and in need of further research.

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