



## TEACHERS' QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT) CLASSES

Arun Kumar Kshetree <sup>1✉</sup>, Rameshwar Jyoti<sup>2</sup>

[arunkshetree@gmail.com](mailto:arunkshetree@gmail.com), [ramsijyoti@gmail.com](mailto:ramsijyoti@gmail.com)

<sup>1,2</sup>Tribhuvan University, Butwal Multiple Campus, Butwal, Nepal

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### Abstract

*In discussions about how students are questioned in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, there is an emphasis on different questioning types and purposes that are still relatively new in many Nepali classroom settings. In this context, this study was conducted to explore secondary level English teachers' practices of questioning the students in the classrooms. The study adopted a qualitative research design. For this, eight secondary level English teachers from four community schools of Arghakhanchi, Dang, Palpa and Rupandehi districts in Lumbini Province were selected as informants. The data were elicited through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. First, classroom observation of eight teachers was carried out. Then, they were interviewed. Analysis of qualitative data uncovered that the majority of the teachers adopted higher-order, lower-order, and follow-up types of questions to create interactive environments in the classrooms and develop their communicative skills. In addition, the data also revealed that the teachers asked the students some brainstorming and critical thinking questions to enhance their critical thinking ability. Moreover, the data demonstrated that most of the students preferred to be asked questions while a few of them were afraid of making mistakes while answering verbally. Furthermore, it was also explored that sometimes with a shout and angry mood, the students were asked unsuitable and irrelevant questions about the topics. Additionally, the data mirrored that when the students were asked questions engaging them in interactions, they got motivated and ready to respond without any hesitation. This study contributes to the understanding of English teachers about the ways and purposes of questioning to enhance students' performance in the English language*

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✉ Corresponding author : Arun Kumar Kshetree  
Address: Butwal, Nepal

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### GENERAL BACKGROUND

In teaching and learning, teachers need to undertake a range of tasks to facilitate students' comprehension of concepts and equip them with the ability to apply their studies across different contexts. The teachers have to plan the lessons, go to the classes, teach the students to give the concepts, evaluate the students by asking questions, and revise the concepts wherever they

have difficulties. In language classes, teachers need to be engaged and perform numerous activities to foster proficiency in language usage among students. Questioning is one of the most adaptable and easily accessible methods in the hands of the teacher. Teachers rely on questioning as an important part of their teaching arsenal, and it may be the most important activity they engage in. In the classroom, teachers ask 86 percent of the

questions, accounting for roughly one-third of the conversation (Jumare, 2020). As stated by Nevtria and Puspita (2020), asking questions, in the classroom, is a conversation form that requires understanding between the speaker and the listener. They further argue that asking questions is essential during the teaching and learning process because the teacher can guide the class, engage students with the course content, increase participation, and promote understanding by asking questions.

Teacher questions play a crucial role in classroom interaction as they facilitate student learning and engagement. How questions are posed should be carefully considered, as different types of questions can have varying impacts on learning outcomes. Referential questions, particularly those focused on understanding, tend to be more effective for promoting learning compared to display questions. Examples of question categories include understanding checks, activity management questions, repair targeting understanding or task completion, and topic elaboration questions. These question types collectively contribute to effective classroom interaction and learning.

Nevertheless, several factors influence learning opportunities; questions constitute just one of such factors. Lightbown and Spada (2013) state, questions are necessary to investigate how much students have understood. However, the understanding checks in the data did not seem effective in having the students produce actual displays (or demonstrations) of understanding. Therefore, if the pedagogical aim of such questions was to verify the students' understanding of the instructions, this aim was not accomplished by the understanding checks occurring in the data. Nevertheless, the teacher kept issuing such understanding checks during instruction-giving sequences.

Long and Sato (1983) assert that a question is a linguistic expression used to request information, with the expected information being provided in the form of an answer. On the other hand, Cotton (1989) defines a question as any sentence exhibiting an interrogative form or function. In educational settings, teacher questions are characterized as instructional cues or stimuli. They serve to introduce the subjects that students will be learning, provide guidance on what they are expected to do, and offer directions on how to approach the learning tasks. Questioning, as a widely employed activation technique in teaching, is especially prominent

within the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern. It is crucial to note that teacher questions are not exclusively realized through interrogatives. For instance, a question like "What can you see in this picture?" might be expressed as the statement "We'll describe what is going on in this picture." or as the command "Tell me what you can see in this picture." Therefore, in the teaching context, a question could be best defined as a teacher utterance to elicit an oral response from the learners.

While the definition of questions may not be entirely straightforward, certain question categories can be easily discerned. Among the most notable categories are wh- questions and Y/N (yes/no) questions, display and referential questions, as well as open and closed questions (Ruiter, 2012). Wh-questions are distinguished by their linguistic format, typically starting with wh-words such as 'why', 'what', 'who', etc. Contrastingly, categories like yes/no questions are defined based on the expected answer, requiring a response of either yes or no. Display questions, on the other hand, involve queries where the answer is already known to the questioner. In this case, the emphasis is on the question-answer relationship, as the answer serves to complete the question-act (Dayal, 2016). Thus, the questions serve as a potent tool that grants the questioner control over a conversation. The act of posing a question initiates the conversation, making a response relevant and establishing the questioner's influence over the interaction.

In the English language classroom, the questions posed by teachers play a crucial role in the process of teaching and learning English. Teachers need to be cognizant of the various types of questions that can facilitate students' learning of the target language. However, students often exhibit a lack of active participation, particularly in responding to teachers' questions. To address this challenge, teachers need to adapt their questioning techniques using diverse methods to encourage students to engage actively in the learning process. This research delves into twenty studies sourced from Google Scholar, exploring the significance of teacher questioning patterns in fostering students' involvement in English language classrooms. Additionally, the study investigates the classification of modified questions employed by teachers during English language instruction. The initial focus involves an examination of current questioning patterns employed by teachers, followed by a review of

previous research on the prevalent types of questions in English classrooms.

According to Nordquist (2015), a question is defined as a meaningful linguistic unit, such as a sentence or utterance, designed to elicit information or responses from the listener or reader. The structure of a question goes beyond the typical interrogative format with question words, auxiliary verbs, and tags; it also includes declarative sentences with rising intonation. The role of teacher questions in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom has been a subject of extensive discussion. In a similar line, Cotton (2011) asserts the practice of questioning in the classroom has a long history dating back to Socrates, the Greek philosopher. Socrates employed a method of questioning, known as the Socratic Method, to guide students by challenging assumptions, revealing contradictions, and leading them to new knowledge and wisdom. In the context of the classroom, questioning serves as a tool for creating and sustaining communication.

Teachers commonly utilize questioning to stimulate student responses and assess their understanding of the material being studied. Likewise, Chin (2002) states questions in the class stimulate students to generate explanations for things that puzzle them and to propose solutions to problems. These questions trigger the use of deep thinking strategies which may not be invoked if the questions had not been asked, and thus they play an important role in engaging students' minds more actively. Such questions can help learners initiate a process of hypothesizing, predicting, thought experimenting, and explaining, thereby leading to a cascade of generative activity, and help them acquire missing pieces of knowledge or resolve conflicts in their understanding (Chin&Brown, 2000). When students are engaged socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks, an individual's questions can also stimulate another group member to use these strategies and thinking processes. The questions embedded in the discourse of peer groups help learners construct knowledge during the dialogic and dialectic process (Chin, 2002).

Richard and Lockhart (2011) claim that there are some reasons why questions are widely used by teachers as teaching techniques. Firstly, questions stimulate and maintain students' interest. Besides, they encourage students to think and focus on the content of the lesson. Next, they enable a teacher to clarify what a student has

said. Then, they enable a teacher to elicit particular structures or vocabulary items. After that, they enable teachers to check students' understanding. Lastly, they encourage student participation in a lesson. In the classroom, teachers' questions inspire learners, increase experience, and help to improve awareness and skills for reactionary (Nevtria&Puspita, 2020). It is also important to consider the success of students and to ask questions from teachers. However, this method does not always work well because teachers often neglect to ask questions that allow learners to engage in the interaction.

Teachers should consider employing questioning techniques to enhance students' learning outcomes. There has been debate surrounding the questioning methods utilized by English teachers in language classrooms. The complexity of vocabulary used in these patterns often poses challenges for students in understanding and responding, thereby hindering active participation in classroom discourse. Additionally, teachers commonly use display questions to assess students' comprehension of a given topic (Ngadi, 2018).

Wilson (2014) examined teacher's questions and classified them into five types. They are presented as follows.

**Factual:** Factual questions are questions that have either right or wrong answers to the question. The questions are given straightforwardly based on fact or awareness. The answer can be verified by referring to the text or other learning materials. Some examples of factual question can be like 'What is the name of Gita's dog?', 'What did Ram want to be when he grew up?'

**Convergent:** Convergent questions are questions that are given to get students' responses. Short answers often appear as the response to these questions, such as 'yes' or 'no', or other short statements. Some examples of convergent questions can be 'What is your favorite movie?', 'What are you doing?', 'Would you like a cup of coffee?' and so on.

**Divergent:** Divergent questions allow students with higher level thinking to answer the questions. The students are demanded to produce their information rather than review the previous lesson. Some examples of divergent questions can be 'How can we use this battery?', 'How was your school today?', 'What did you do at school?' and so on.

**Evaluate:** Students need to achieve a high level of cognitive or emotional judgment to respond

toevaluative questions. Usually, an answer is examined at various levels and from different points of view before the answerer comes to anewly modified information or conclusion. Some examples of evaluationare, 'What are the differences between traditional dance and modern dance?', 'What are the similarities between public school and private school?'

**Combinations:** These are the questions that mix any combination of the types of questions above. An example of a combination question can be 'Do you believe in ghosts?', 'What do you think about people who believe in ghosts?' and so on.

Sujariati et al. (2016) advocate that questioning tactics are methods of asking pupils questions to obtain information for the goal of teaching. Similarly, Harvey (2001) opines the most successful questioning approach is one that encourages students to completely participate in the learning process. Students can be more involved in responding to questions from the teacher, ensuring that they comprehend the topic and mastering English language skills. In this study, the types and techniques of teacher questions can lure students to be able to respond to a class interaction during the learning process. To gather the students' replies, the teacher may need to gather the students' replies, the teacher may need to use specific questioning strategies. There are nine questioning approaches, according to William Willen (1991) in his book 'Questions Skills, for Teachers.':(a) Develop essential questions that provide the class structure and direction. (b) Ask questions clearly and explicitly. (c) Ask questions that are appropriate for the student's ability level (d) Ask questions logically and sequentially (e) Ask questions on a variety of levels (f) Follow up on student responses (g) Allow students time to think before responding (h) Use questions that encourage broad student participation (i)Encourage student questions. These techniques can be used in asking types of questions in the teaching-learning process that may be related to or even opposed to the material.

Likewise, Brown (2007) proposes four functions of teacher questions in classroom interaction. They are as follows:

- a. Give students the drive and the opportunity to produce language contentedly because EFL students aregenerally afraid of initiating classroom interaction without any stimulus from the teacher. Silent

students will get a great chance to communicate if appropriate types of questions are addressed to them.

- b. Set off some stimulus for students to communicate and interact with each other. One question may be all that is needed to start a discussion; without the initial question, the students will be hesitant to start the process.
- c. Give the instructor immediate feedback about student comprehension. After posing a question, a teacher can use student responses to diagnose content difficulties and grammatical or pronunciation problems.
- d. Provide opportunities for students to find out what they think by hearing what they say to teacher questions.

Thus, the teacher's questions can make students pay attention to the information of the materials. Dealing with the purposes of teachers' questions, Cotton (2011) presents the following purposes of the questions asked in the classrooms:

- a. To develop interest and motivate students to become actively involved in lessons.
- b. To evaluate students" preparation or check on homework.
- c. To develop critical thinking skills and inquiring attitudes.
- d. To review and summarize previous lessons.
- e. To nurture insights by exposing new relations.
- f. To assess achievement of instructional goals and objectives.
- g. To stimulate students to pursue knowledge on their own.

In the same vein, Fries-Gaither (2008), describes that the teachers ask questions for a variety of purposes as mentioned below.

- a. to actively involve students in the lesson
- b. to increase motivation or interest
- c. to evaluate students' preparation
- d. to check on the completion of work
- e. to develop critical thinking skills
- f. to review previous lessons
- g. to nurture insights
- h. to assess achievement or mastery of goals and objectives
- i. to stimulate independent learning

A teacher may vary his or her purpose in asking questions during a single lesson, or a single question may have more than one purpose. In general, research shows that instruction involving questioning is more effective than instruction without questioning (Marzano et al. 2001). Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2004) give in-depth purpose of teachers' questions in the classroom. They suggest the following purposes of teachers' questioning based on several learning stages in the classroom.

- a. In the introduction stage, teachers' questions are used to establish human contact; assist in establishing set induction devices; discover what the class knows; revise previous work; to pose problems that lead to the subject of the lesson.
- b. In the presentation stage, teachers' questions are used to maintain interest and alertness; to encourage reasoning and logical thinking; and to discover if students understand what is going on.
- c. In the application stage, teachers' questions are used to focus and clarify; to lead the students to make observations and draw inferences for themselves; to clear up difficulties, and misunderstandings and to assist individual students.
- d. In the last stage (conclusion) teachers' questions are used to revise the main point of the lesson; to test the result of the lesson, the extent of students' understanding and assimilation; and to suggest further problems and related issues.

From the aforementioned purposes and functions of questioning, it can be concluded that teacher questions have a significant role in classroom interaction. It can give abundant benefits for students' language production, classroom interaction, and the objective of language classrooms. Thus, in the English language classroom, the significance of teachers' questions cannot be overstated as they play a crucial role in facilitating language learning. Teachers must be aware of the various question types that contribute to students' language learning. Unfortunately, student participation, particularly in response to teacher questions, often tends to be passive. To tackle this issue, teachers need to employ diverse techniques to modify their questions effectively and encourage active student engagement.

Teachers' questions have an impact on students' motivation to learn English as questioning is an important part of the teaching-learning process. A study was carried out by Suartini et al. (2020) to learn more about the various types of questioning techniques and questions used by English teachers. The findings of the study revealed that teachers asked three types of questions: procedural, convergent, and divergent. Meanwhile, the teachers tended to ask convergent rather than divergent procedural questions. In addition, the teacher is expected to encourage students to ask divergent questions to engage their critical thinking. Another study by Cook et al., (2018) demonstrated that teachers frequently ask questions about knowledge and comprehension, but rarely about application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation. The findings of the study showed that EFL teachers should be trained in questioning strategies to help their students learn more effectively. Even though the study was conducted in a private school with some unprofessional teachers, these teachers agreed to teach before seeking a better job.

In a similar vein, the study by Cook et al. (2018) stated that teachers in junior and senior high schools ask more knowledge-level questions than teachers in other school levels, and they use a variety of techniques to modify their questions when students do not respond to them. The dominance of knowledge level questions, as well as how teachers modified the questions, is influenced by the teachers' competence, the students' competencies, the teaching situation, and the teaching material (Ernst-Slavit & Pratt, 2017). In a similar line, Khadka (2021) maintained that effective teachers in Nepali schools use lower-order questions, higher-order and follow-up questions in a continuum of frequency from lower to higher order irrespective of teachers' selected characteristics. However, teachers with a few years of experience use lower-order questions, and trained teachers use more frequent follow-up questions to a significant extent. Based on the findings of this study, Nepali school policymakers and leaders can adapt the existing teacher development programs and policies to make effective teaching and learning. Moreover, teachers can also get insights actually at what level they are in questioning techniques, and further, improve their questioning techniques.

Pandey (2022) presents that using questions in the classroom setting is an age-old practice and has been an influential technique of

teaching for centuries. Questions are often used to enhance comprehension and develop critical-thinking skills in students which stimulate learners to think, learn, and act. The study revealed though the teachers used both divergent and convergent questions in the classrooms, they gave priority to divergent ones. The participants perceived divergent questions as important in the ELT classrooms since these questions permit the exploration of multiple ideas. Regarding the junctions in which they asked questions, they asked most of the questions in the 'while teaching phase' of the class. The study also concluded that the teachers asked questions in the classroom for motivation purposes basically to promote comprehension and stimulate critical thinking as well as a tool to evaluate the students and means to engage them in classroom activities.

This research investigates twenty studies sourced from Google Scholar, exploring the impact of teachers' questioning patterns on motivating students' participation in English language classrooms. Additionally, the study examines the classification of modified questions utilized by teachers during English language instruction. The analysis initially scrutinizes current questioning patterns employed by teachers before delving into existing research on the prevalent types of questions in English classrooms.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is a narrative inquiry in which the teachers' views and practices of questioning in the ELT classrooms were the main focus of the study. In-depth interviews and classroom observation of eight English teachers from four different districts of Lumbini Province were the main sources of information for the study. First of all, we observed grade 11 and 12 English classes and interviewed English teachers to explore their views on and practices of questioning. We selected four districts: Arghakhanchi, Dang, Palpa and Rupandehi of Lumbini Province, and two teachers from two schools from each district purposively. We noted all the questions raised in the class. The responses, the purposes, and the situations of asking the questions were recorded in a diary.

## Findings and Discussions

After gathering the data from the sample schools of the selected districts of Lumbini province, the data were categorized, tabulated and processed. We categorized the responses and the observations found in the English classes of

different schools. We categorized the responses and the observations in the following ways:

- i. The types of questions
- ii. Purpose of asking the questions
- iii. Students' reactions to the questions of the teachers
- iv. Teachers' reactions after the responses of the students
- v. Ways of asking questions

## *The types of questions*

The types of questions identified by the American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education (as referenced in Toyfode et al., 2013) can be categorized as follows: **Convergent**: These questions are straightforward and limit responses, encouraging specific and focused answers. **Divergent**: These questions are open-ended, allowing for a wide range of responses and exploration of various perspectives. **Focal**: In this type of question, students are prompted to take a position or justify a viewpoint. For instance, some educators believe their primary role is teaching rather than conducting research. Do you support this notion? Present arguments to support your stance. **Brainstorm**: These questions aim to generate a list of ideas or viewpoints on a particular topic. **Funnel**: This type of questioning starts broadly and gradually narrows down to a more specific inquiry, often involving multiple questions. In the same way, Wrag and Brown (2003) proposed a different categorization of questions, outlining three distinct types: **Conceptual Questions**: These questions aim to draw out ideas, definitions, and reasoning from respondents, focusing on understanding fundamental concepts and principles. **Empirical Questions**: This category involves questions that demand answers supported by facts or empirical evidence, often stemming from experimental findings or established data. **Value Questions**: Questions falling into this category delve into issues of relative worth, merit, moral considerations, and environmental concerns, prompting respondents to reflect on ethical dimensions and subjective judgments.

On the other hand, Khadka (2021) categorizes the teachers' questions into three categories: Higher-Order Questions which are related to the last four levels of Bloom's taxonomy: Application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Lower-order questions belong to the first two levels of Bloom's taxonomy i.e. knowledge and understanding related

questions and Follow-Up Questions which are the type of questions asked to explore to get a more precise or deeper understanding of a topic. Naz et al. (2013) state the need for such questions to elicit further explanation and communication, and function to chain together teacher questions and student responses. These questions include both prompting and probing questions.

In the present study most of the teachers i.e. six teachers were found to have been asking lower-order questions in the ELT classes. The teachers were asking simple memory testing questions and the two teachers were found to have asked some higher order questions like how the students can interpret the poem they just studied, why the particular story ended the way they studied, and even the questions like how the particular text could have been concluded other ways? Thus the teachers' questions in the classes were sometimes divergent convergent and sometimes brainstorming types. However, our concern was on higher order, lower order, and follow-up types of questions.

#### ***Purpose of Asking the Questions***

In ELT classes, the teachers ask many questions with different purposes. We asked the participant teachers 'Why do you ask questions in the classes?' And their classes were also observed to explore the purposes of asking questions. Almost all the teachers responded that the main purpose of the questions in the class was to motivate the students, evaluate their understanding, and control the class. Two of the participant teachers claimed that they wanted to develop the critical thinking of the students. During our observation, we found that they asked some questions that assist the students in developing critical thinking ability such as 'Why do you think this title is not appropriate for this poem?', 'What can be a more appropriate title for the poem?' etc. Some teachers opined that they asked questions like 'What did you understand about the life of the main character of the story we discussed yesterday?' to revise the content they taught during previous classes.

#### ***Students' Reactions to the Teachers' Questions***

As we observed the English classes of different schools in different districts of Lumbini province, we found the different kinds of reactions of the students in the class. The most important thing we found was that the students stopped making any kind of side talks when the teachers started to ask questions. We also investigated that the teachers also asked questions when they realized that the students

were not being attentive to the content. When the teachers asked the questions in the class, some students started looking at the teacher to be asked to them and some students just tried to hide their faces so that the teacher would not ask them. The attentive students were on the front side and those who wanted to hide themselves were at the back side of the class. A few students in some classes asked the teachers to let them answer the questions. Most of the students in the class did not want to be asked in the class. Normally, this happens because many students are afraid of making mistakes while answering the questions and the teacher may scold them in the class which would be a real insult to them. The students do not like to be asked in class because their minor mistakes while answering the questions may make the class laugh at them. One thing that was very common reaction after the teachers' questions in the class was that the students became attentive and aware of what was being asked and the students stayed silent in the class. So the questions were also controlled the class in English classes.

#### ***Teachers' Reactions after the Responses of Students***

During our class observations, we also observed and analysed the reaction of the teachers to the responses of the students. The teachers have different kinds of reactions to the responses of the students. In our class observations, we found a variety of positive and negative reactions from the teachers. Almost all the teachers were happy with the right answers of the students and some were seen as angry for the wrong answers of the students. A teacher in Arghakhanchi district was so furious with the student for not being able to answer the question he asked while teaching grammar part in Grade XI and he ran close to the student as if he was going to attack the boy which made us fear something bad in the class. He scolded and insulted the student for not being able to answer any questions and concentrate on studying. He also asked other questions to the same student and returned to the front side of the class as the student was able to satisfy him.

We also found some teachers who did not let students complete their responses in class. They started adding things to the things told by the students and were positively treating even the wrong answers of the students. There was a teacher in Palpa who was too unfriendly to the students and was found to be complaining about any positive responses from the students. There

were five questions asked in the class that day and four of the questions were answered right by the students but the teacher kept on complaining to the students that they had not studied well and were not able to develop their English as he wished. This is also an unacceptable behaviour of the teachers which discourages the students from speaking in class and answering questions. Thus the reactions of the teachers towards the answers to the questions were neither satisfactory nor unacceptable. The teachers need to have some training in asking questions and responding properly to the students' responses in the class which can only help students effectively learn the English language.

### ***Ways of Asking Questions***

How teachers ask questions to students, along with their nonverbal behavior before, during, and after questioning, significantly impacts student learning. Not only this, the waiting time for the students' responses and the teacher's attitude towards what they respond to are also very important to students' learning. During our class observation, we found that the teachers were not much serious about students' feelings and the effect of their behaviour on students' responses. Four teachers from Rupandehi and Arghakhanchi were found to be calm after asking the questions and they waited for some time to get the answer from them. Even after their responses, the teachers were positive and helpful to the students to respond by giving some clues for them. We also found two teachers who were a bit rude towards the students and were found not very helpful towards the students. Not only this the way the teachers asked the questions was also not suitable as their questions were unstable and they transferred the questions very quickly without letting the students think for a while. We also found that a teacher in our observation was found to have an angry facial expression though he spoke well. This created fear in the students and they hesitated to answer the questions properly. A teacher from Rupandehi was found to shout a lot while asking the questions and we found that the students became very much silent when he asked the questions. Thus, the ways of asking questions in the ELT classes are important in making the class effective and it hampers the learning of students.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

In English language teaching (ELT) classes, teachers use various types of questions

with different purposes depending on the context. The impact of these questions varies based on how they are delivered, the nonverbal cues exhibited by the teachers during questioning, and their behaviour while students respond to these questions. Moreover, teachers must be conscious of their questioning styles and behaviors when students respond. They should assist students in providing correct answers during the ELT classes. By positively engaging with students' responses in English class, teachers can encourage class participation and foster English language communication skills, which in turn enhances the ELT environment in Nepal.

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