

**ENGLISH-MAJORED SENIORS’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE
INFLUENCES OF LITERATURE LEARNING ON READING AND
CULTURAL AWARENESS – A CASE STUDY AT A UNIVERSITY IN
THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM**

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Abstract – *Using literature as a subject to gain students’ language comprehension and cultural knowledge has been focused on in those days. Therefore, this study aimed to determine English-majored seniors’ attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ reading and cultural awareness since these are two factors that are directly affected by literary texts. First, eighty-eight seniors who were English majors at a university in the Mekong Delta completed the questionnaire. After that, twenty seniors from the eighty-eight participants were asked to deeply express their thoughts about the topic through the interview. The mean and standard deviation of each closed-ended item in the questionnaire were calculated, and the number of interviewees mentioning each cluster was classified. Regarding the findings about the influences on reading, literature learning was believed to help students enrich their vocabulary, enhance their reading motivation, and improve their reading strategies. For the influences on cultural awareness, the results showed that students could have knowledge about aspects of other cultures and identify multicultural differences after learning literature. Finally, some recommendations were produced based on the findings.*

Keywords: *cultural awareness, English-majored seniors’ attitudes, literature learning.*

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Hamane et al. [1], using literature to teach and learn a language has grown in popularity in recent years. In response to this educational trend, the School of Foreign Languages at a university in the Mekong Delta has applied literature as a subject in English classes for many years. The addition of literature to the curriculum is perfectly suitable for the current background. In contemporary times, the growth of international cooperation and exchange has highlighted the need to foster an understanding of different languages and cultures. Collie et al. [2] proved that students’ language comprehension, particularly reading, and cultural awareness have increased as a result of studying literary texts. Hence, literature must be used in language classes to improve reading and cultural awareness. To confirm the importance of literary writings, many researchers have investigated topics related to students’ attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on their reading and cultural awareness [3–6]. However, there have been few relevant studies on English majors at this Mekong Delta university. Therefore, it is essential to carry out this research to investigate English-majored seniors’ attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ (1) reading and (2) cultural awareness at this university in order to illustrate the benefits of literature learning.

The current research is being conducted to answer the following questions in order to align with the aims:

1. What are English-majored seniors’ attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ reading in terms of reading mo-

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tivation, vocabulary, and reading strategies?

2. What are English-majored seniors' attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors' cultural awareness in terms of knowledge of elements of various cultures, the capacity to compare cultures, as well as the capacity to accept and tolerate the differences?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Literature

'Literature' is a well-known term, but defining it is difficult. Ainy [7] claimed that although many definitions of 'literature' have appeared, all of them are not the same. Miller [8] stated that the origin of 'literature' is from a Latin stem meaning 'letters' and has a direct relationship with its Roman-Christian-European roots. Besides, Lazar [9] listed the genres of 'literature' including novels, short stories, plays, and poems. The importance of literature in class has been investigated by many researchers. Sage [10] highlighted that applying literature in language classes benefits education by aiding language acquisition and providing cultural understanding. In particular, McKay [11] confirmed that literary works are helpful for the development of all language skills by supplying readers with an extensive vocabulary and examples of how to use these terms. Importantly, Littlewood [12] emphasized that the most obvious benefit of using literature in language classes is advancing reading. According to Langer [13], when learning literature, students also expand cultural consciousness, tastefulness, and social knowledge. In this study, literature is literary works that can be used in class to increase learners' reading [12] and cultural awareness [13]. Moreover, only learning English-language literature is focused on in this research.

B. Reading

To determine the effects of literature learning on reading, it is necessary to first define the term 'reading' and identify the factors that influence reading. Reading is one of the compulsory abilities when learning a language [14]. According to

Pretorius [15], reading is a language acquisition activity that includes a number of elements. In order to be skilled readers, students need to have strategies to be able to grasp the meaning of words in diverse contexts, arrange ideas, point out the intent of the authors, make judgments, and assess [14]. Hence, students have to advance reading strategies in both decoding and comprehension to increase reading effectively [15]. Besides, O'Connell [16] added that students' reading motivation also influences their reading. Vocabulary breadth was found to be a strong predictor of decoding by Ouellette [17], whilst vocabulary depth was shown to be more directly connected with students' reading comprehension. Summarily, reading is a language-learning activity that is in relationship with several factors. Therefore, the development of reading is linked to the growth of motivation for reading, vocabulary, and reading strategies. To become reading masters, students must have the ability to improve these characteristics.

C. Attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on reading

Multiple studies have been conducted to examine the attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on students' reading, with favorable outcomes. The participants in the research by Wasikiewicz-Firlej [6] thought that learning literature is an effective way to make students thirsty for reading. In addition, literature is believed to advance students' vocabulary [4, 5, 18, 19]. The students in the research conducted by Hasan et al. [4] believed that the use of literary texts in class allows them to encounter lots of new words with both literal and figurative meanings. Chou [20] claimed that when engaging with literary works, students must employ various reading strategies; thus, improving reading strategies is also a benefit of literature learning. In particular, Hasan et al. [4] discovered two commonly recognized reading strategies that can be improved by literature learning: activating background knowledge and developing critical thinking. In short, it is widely believed that the study of literary texts not only

enhances students' reading motivation but also facilitates the development of their vocabulary and reading strategies. Significantly, this study mainly concentrates on the notable reading strategies obviously influenced by literature learning, as identified by Hasan et al. [4].

D. Cultural awareness

The definition of cultural awareness and its characteristics also need to be considered before mentioning the influences of literature learning. According to Tomalin et al. [21], the term 'cultural awareness' refers to the understanding of culturally influenced behaviors. It includes comprehension of aspects of different lifestyles, societies, beliefs, human values, costumes, events, and so on. Cultural awareness is important in language classes [12]. Adamson [22] believed that cultural awareness helps learners change the way they behave by comprehending other people's behaviors, beliefs, customs, traditions, and history. Additionally, students are unable to develop their cultural awareness until they are aware of cultural sensitivity and have a better understanding of norms and multiple values [23]. Stern et al. [24] claimed that by finding out the similarities and dissimilarities between cultures, as well as accepting the gap, learners have the ability to gain cultural awareness. To summarize, cultural awareness entails the knowledge of aspects of various cultures (cultural sensitivity, lifestyles, multiple values, norms, behaviors, beliefs, customs, traditions, history, events, and so on), the capacity to compare cultures, as well as accept and tolerate the differences.

E. Attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on cultural awareness

Literature is thought to have a significant impact on students' cultural awareness in a variety of ways [3–5, 19]. Ainy [7] claimed that gaining knowledge about other cultures is also an advantage of learning literature since literature is a mirror of facts and existence. In addition, Carter et al. [25] claimed that literature is an

efficient resource that motivates and helps students enhance their cultural insights. Therefore, the students in the study by Ceylan [3] thought that they are knowledge and appreciation about other cultures and values that are not the same as their own through learning literature. Moreover, students pointed out that they can compare cultures and have sympathy for their differences, as well as they learn moral values based on the stories [3–5, 19]. To sum up, by dint of literature learning, students cultivate an understanding of different values, norms, beliefs, lifestyles, behaviors, events, traditions, customs, and history. In the light of this, students can sharpen their cultural sensitivity. Importantly, students have the ability to compare varied cultures and accept the differences after reading masterpieces.

F. Justification of the present study

The participants of this research are English-major seniors. In addition, this study investigates the attitudes towards influences of literature learning on reading and cultural awareness in a totally different area, specifically, at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

A. Research design

The data was gathered using a mixed methods design to address the research aims and questions. A mixed-methods design incorporates both quantitative and qualitative research methods into a study [26]. Dörnyei [27] showed that the reliability of data gathered by more than one instrument is ensured since the statistical information and non-numerical information may complement each other.

B. Participants

Eighty-eight fourth-year students from five different classes in the School of Foreign Languages at a university in the Mekong Delta were asked to complete the questionnaire to collect quantitative data. These participants were chosen using convenience sampling. Only seniors were selected

to respond to the questionnaire since they have been learning literature courses in English. In reality, eighty-four student participants, accounting for 95.5%, have completed literature courses in at least three semesters. Hence, their attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on reading and cultural awareness are trustworthy. After that, twenty seniors from a total of eighty-eight participants who wanted to answer the interview were invited to deeply express their opinions about the research questions.

C. The research instruments

In this study, the quantitative data was collected via the questionnaire, while the qualitative data was gathered via the interview.

Questionnaire

Through the use of a questionnaire, respondents are able to indicate their opinions using a Likert scale with five agreement levels: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree [4]. Additionally, data reliability is enhanced as the questionnaire ensures the confidentiality of the respondents [28]. Consequently, this investigation employed a questionnaire.

This questionnaire was designed based on relevant theories and the questionnaires of three studies [3, 4, 18]. Importantly, this questionnaire was drawn up in English because the participants of this research were seniors in the School of Foreign Languages.

There were two main sections in this questionnaire.

The first section required students to answer how long they have been taking literature classes. This question helped to ensure the reliability of participants’ answers.

The second section aimed to survey the students’ attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on reading and cultural awareness. This section contained 21 items divided into two parts: Part 1 including 9 items (items from 1 to 9) investigated the attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ reading.

Part 2 including 12 items (items from 10 to 21) investigated the attitudes towards the influences

of literature learning on English majors’ cultural awareness.

Reliability of the questionnaire

Twenty-one items in the questionnaire achieved a Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of Cronbach’s Alpha = .88 (see Table 1), indicating a high reliability level.

Table 1: Reliability statistics of the questionnaire

Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
.88	21

Interview

McDonough et al. [29] explained that the interview is one of the most usual methods to collect qualitative data. Indeed, participants may give a lot of information to support the findings of the questionnaire. Accordingly, the qualitative data for this study was collected through face-to-face interviews with twenty seniors. In specific, the interview was designed based on the research questions and topic.

For the purpose of making students feel comfortable when answering, they were allowed to use English or Vietnamese. The students’ interview had two questions:

- 1. Do you think that literature learning helps you develop/improve your reading? Why?
- 2. Do you think that literature learning gains your knowledge of different cultures in other countries? Why?

D. Data collection and analyzing

The quantitative data of the questionnaire, which were initially collected via Google Forms, were analyzed utilizing Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics and the mean were clearly shown as a result of the analytical procedure. Moreover, the interpretation of the mean scores in this study is based on the interpretation of the mean scores of Oxford (1990), adopted from Galti [30]. Regarding the qualitative data, the students’ replies to face-to-face interviews were transcribed and analyzed.

E. Research procedure

The data gathering lasted from March to May of 2021. Nevertheless, the process of analyzing the data, revising the research’s content, and finding an appropriate publication took a long time to accomplish.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ reading in terms of reading motivation, vocabulary, and reading strategies

The data presented in this part was obtained from items 1–9 of the questionnaire and the first interview question.

Table 2: Overall mean score of attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ reading

	Mean	SD	Response	Category
Overall	3.99	.49	Agree	High

According to the data in Table 2, the overall mean score of nine items about the attitudes of English majors towards the influences of literature learning on their reading (questionnaire items 1–9) belonged to the ‘High’ category, as determined by the Oxford scale (M = 3.99, SD = .49). It can be stated that the majority of the students held the view that literature learning had effects on their reading.

The order of the subsequent parts is determined based on the order of the questionnaire items.

Reading motivation

It is evident from Table 3 that students agreed that literature learning had an impact on their reading motivation (M = 3.95, SD = .55).

The benefit of literature learning regarding assisting in visualizing the events in the story received the highest mean score (M = 4.33, SD = .78). Furthermore, the students agreed that literature learning was an effective method of reading so far (M = 4.06, SD = .81), making them more enjoyable to read (M = 3.89, SD = .89), and helped them learn something new (M =

Table 3: Attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ reading in terms of reading motivation

	Mean	SD	Response	Category
1. I think literature learning is an effective way of learning reading so far.	4.06	.81	Agree	High
2. I feel fun when reading literature.	3.89	.89	Agree	High
3. I can visualize the events in the story.	4.33	.78	Agree	High
4. I read literature because I can learn something new.	3.83	.76	Agree	High
5. I can form my reading habits when reading literature.	3.67	.92	Agree	High
Overall	3.95	.55	Agree	High

3.83, SD = .76). Forming students’ reading habits had the lowest level of agreement (M = 3.67, SD = .92).

Three interviewees stated throughout the interview process that learning literary texts could increase their enthusiasm for reading.

‘The contents of great masterpieces in literature classes have made me feel engrossed in reading.’ [31]

‘I feel excited when reading literary texts.’ [32]

‘When I get used to reading a lot of works, I realize my passion for reading.’ [33]

Other researchers seemed to be unaware of the significance of attitudes towards the literary works’ length. In this study, some interviewees expressed that after learning literature, they realized that they were no longer bored when reading long passages or long writings. It is such an achievement of literature courses at this university since changing one’s attitude is never easy. Importantly, being accustomed to reading long writings may encourage students to read more and improve their reading efficiency. Specifically, two participants conveyed that literature learning increased students’ reading motivation by alleviating the boredom caused by reading lengthy passages or written works.

‘After learning literature, I realize that I no longer feel bored when reading long passages or long writings.’ [31]

Vocabulary

Table 4: Attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ reading in terms of vocabulary

	Mean	SD	Response	Category
6. I can learn the literal meanings of words.	4.35	.79	Agree	High
7. I can learn the figurative meanings of words.	3.93	.78	Agree	High
Overall	4.14	.63	Agree	High

From Table 4, students agreed with the impacts of literature learning on their reading regarding vocabulary (M = 4.14, SD = .63).

In terms of vocabulary, from Table 4, it is evident that helping students learn the literal meanings of words reached a high mean score with a mean of 4.35 (SD = .79). Besides, students also agreed that literature learning assisted them in learning figurative meanings of words (M = 3.93, SD = .78).

Eleven interviewees reported the effects of literature learning on vocabulary.

‘Literature contains a lot of vocabulary which helps students have more new words.’ [34]

‘Reading diverse literary works helps me learn both the literal and figurative meanings of many new words.’ [35]

According to the findings, encouraging students to enrich their vocabulary was an obvious effect of literature courses. Similarly, this impact was presented in four related studies [4, 5, 18, 19]. Indeed, literary texts help students approach words in their most natural senses, making it easier for them to remember these words. Furthermore, the content of the works is so diverse and wonderful that students are able to learn more new terms in a variety of fields. When learning literature, students may even understand words both literally and figuratively since writers usually use figurative language.

Reading strategies

As shown in Table 5, the overall mean score of items related to the attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ reading in terms of reading strategies was 3.95 (SD = .67).

Table 5: Attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ reading in terms of reading strategies

	Mean	SD	Response	Category
8. I can improve my critical thinking after reading literary texts.	3.88	.84	Agree	High
9. I can relate the literary texts with my prior knowledge.	4.02	.88	Agree	High
Overall	3.95	.67	Agree	High

Table 5 demonstrates that students agreed on two effects of literature learning on their reading strategies. Firstly, it supported them in connecting the texts with their background knowledge (M = 4.02, SD = .88), and secondly, it enhanced their critical thinking skills after reading the works (M = 3.88, SD = .84).

Moreover, six seniors emphasized in the interview that literature learning improved their other reading strategies.

‘Reading literary works enables individuals to engage in logical reasoning, connect knowledge, and make predictions to understand the information presented in the texts fully.’ [36]

‘Reading literary writings allows me to hone my strategies to guess contexts without understanding the meaning of individual words.’ [37]

The attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ cultural awareness in terms of knowledge of elements of various cultures, the capacity to compare cultures, as well as the capacity to accept and tolerate the differences

The data reported in this section was derived from questions 10–21 of the questionnaire, as well as the second interview question.

Table 6: Overall mean score of attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ cultural awareness

	Mean	SD	Response	Category
Overall	4.12	.49	Agree	High

The data shown in Table 6 indicates that the overall mean score for twelve questionnaire items (items 10–21) regarding the attitudes of English-

majoried seniors towards the influences of literature learning on their cultural awareness was 4.12, with a standard deviation of 0.49. It means that most students maintained their opinion that their cultural awareness was influenced by literature learning.

The sequence of the remaining parts is established according to the arrangement of the questionnaire items.

Knowledge of elements of various cultures

Table 7: Attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ cultural awareness in terms of knowledge of elements of various cultures

	Mean	SD	Response	Category
10. Literature learning helps me become aware of intercultural sensitivity.	4.07	.64	Agree	High
11. Literature learning provides me with insights into the norms and cultural values embodied in the texts.	3.94	.76	Agree	High
12. Literature learning helps me get knowledge of the different beliefs and religions.	4.22	.70	Agree	High
13. Literature learning helps me know more about other countries’ history and traditions.	4.25	.78	Agree	High
14. Literature learning helps me get in touch with universal human values.	4.05	.88	Agree	High
15. Literature learning teaches me ethical and moral values of other cultures.	4.07	.83	Agree	High
16. Literature learning gives me knowledge of lifestyles around the world.	4.33	.72	Agree	High
17. Literature learning provides me with a better understanding of different behaviors.	4.16	.76	Agree	High
18. Literature learning gives me knowledge of the events I have never experienced before.	3.98	.83	Agree	High
Overall	4.12	.67	Agree	High

The overall mean score for the items pertaining to the attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on the cultural awareness of English majors, specifically in terms of their knowledge of elements of various cultures, shows that the participants agreed with these items (M = 4.12, SD = .67) (see Table 7).

From Table 7, it can be seen by far that the greatest influence of literature learning on English majors’ cultural awareness was giving them knowledge about lifestyles around the world (M = 4.33, SD = .72). Nine English-majoried seniors also claimed that literature learning introduced them to various lifestyles.

‘I have opportunities to discover different lifestyles of many countries around the world.’ [38–40] This is the similarity between this research and the study of Ceylan [3]. It is obviously seen that the mainstream of the stories must have a neat relationship with the characters’ daily lives. Writers usually choose to rewrite a culture’s real lifestyle in their writings, while others choose to build a fictional world. In general, authors typically base their works on their own lives, cultures, and experiences. As a result, whether reading fiction or nonfiction, students may have a chance to gain awareness of other people’s lives around the world, either directly or indirectly.

Next, the items that emphasized the benefits of literature learning for students’ understanding of foreign history, traditions, and their knowledge of diverse beliefs and religions received the second and third-highest mean scores, respectively (M = 4.25, SD = .78; M = 4.22, SD = .70, respectively). The qualitative data from the interviews reaffirmed these advantages of literature learning.

Enhancing students’ understanding of the customs, history, and traditions of foreign countries received nine responses from the interviewees.

‘I learned in class that Indians have traditional costumes and hand-drawn art.’ [41]

‘Thanks to reading *Pride and Prejudice*, I am familiar with the costumes worn at festivals and have had the opportunity to experience dancing festivals that I may not have had the chance to do in real life.’ [42]

Three responses reported that literature learning provided students with an understanding of religions and beliefs.

‘I understand the problems related to beliefs.’ [43, 44]

‘Literature helps me learn more about the religious beliefs through the religion in *The Merchant of Venice*.’ [42]

Subsequently, the mean score for enhancing comprehension of various behaviors was 4.16 (SD = .76). Two items with identical means but different standard deviations were fostering intercultural sensitivity among students (M = 4.07, SD = .64) and instructing them on other cultures’ ethical and moral values (M = 4.07, SD = .83).

The items that obtained lower mean scores asserted that literature learning facilitated students’ connection with universal human values (M = 4.05, SD = .88), enlightened them about events they had not previously experienced (M = 3.98, SD = .83), and taught them about the cultural norms and values embodied in the texts (M = 3.94, SD = .76).

The capacity to compare cultures as well as accept and tolerate differences

Table 8: Attitudes towards the influences of literature learning on English majors’ cultural awareness in terms of the capacity to compare cultures as well as accept and tolerate the differences

	Mean	SD	Response	Category
19. Literature learning helps to identify the SIMILARITIES between other cultures and my own culture.	3.93	.91	Agree	High
20. Literature learning helps to identify the DIFFERENCES between other cultures and my own culture.	4.27	.81	Agree	High
21. Literature learning encourages me to accept and tolerate cultural differences.	4.23	.74	Agree	High
Overall	4.14	.65	Agree	High

According to the findings shown in Table 8, it was observed that English majors expressed an agreement on the effects of literature learning on their cultural awareness, specifically in terms of their ability to compare cultures and accept and tolerate differences (M = 4.14, SD = .65).

The highest mean score (M = 4.27, SD = .81) was achieved by assisting students in recognizing the distinctions across cultures. When learning literature, English majors at this university have been allowed to analyze and compare cultures. Maybe because of this, seniors thought that literature assisted them in identifying the differences

between cultures. This idea is in line with the results of four studies [3–5, 19]. In order to appreciate works and form realistic impressions of the target culture, readers must find out and consider cultural assumptions, behaviors, and events that are unfamiliar to them. Importantly, each society has its own set of values. Thanks to this, it is easy for students to point out the dissimilarities.

Furthermore, it was found that students agreed with the positive impacts of literary works on their acceptance and tolerance of cultural diversity (M = 4.23, SD = .74). Two English-majored seniors mentioned that they could feel tolerant and accept the dissimilarities when learning literature.

‘After learning literature, I feel tolerant towards other people and the dissimilarities.’ [43]

‘I certainly have useful information about the differences and get used to them.’ [44]

Surprisingly, helping students identify the similarities between the cultures got the lowest mean score in this study’s findings, with a mean of 3.93 and a standard deviation of 0.91. This discovery contradicts previous research [3–5, 19]. As a matter of fact, Vietnam is in Asia while the majority of stories used in literature classes take place in faraway countries. Many aspects of life and society are not familiar. In this way, it is really a challenge for Vietnamese students to see the similarities between these cultures. However, while researching literature at this university, English majors seem to have an opportunity to discover cultural parallels. Hence, this questionnaire item also received a positive mean score.

Other benefits of literature learning

Thanks to the qualitative data, six students considered understanding the influences of multiple discrimination in other countries in the past as one more benefit of literature. According to students’ answers, the role of men and women in the family and society and the position of different social classes were obviously described in masterpieces.

‘In *Things Fall Apart*, a male is regarded as more important than a woman, and the more titles a man possesses, the more important he is in this tribe.’ [38]

‘After reading *Jane Eyre*, I realized that people with higher social status often used their strength to bully someone with lower social status.’ [35]

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, literature learning is undeniably beneficial to students’ reading and cultural awareness. Regarding the effects of literature learning on reading, the participants in this research concurred that reading masterpieces helped English-majored seniors learn both the literal and figurative meanings of new words, boosted their reading motivation, and developed their reading strategies. The findings of this study on the impacts of literature learning on cultural awareness revealed that students might gain knowledge about elements of various cultures as well as identify and accept intercultural differences after literature courses.

To effectively develop the quality of teaching and learning literature in class, students at this Mekong Delta university should equip basic knowledge of other cultures before attending classes, devote more time to reading literary works, and try to combine different reading strategies to totally comprehend the masterpieces. Literature teachers can organize activities or give mini-tests to assess student’s reading comprehension skills as well as their understanding of culture, history, and society in literary writings. In addition to traditional readings in textbooks, teachers can supply related materials that allow students to read outside of class, if possible.

Intending to motivate students to learn literature, this research only reflects the benefits of masterpieces. Future studies into the attitudes towards the challenges of literature learning are encouraged. Moreover, literature courses do affect not only students’ reading but also their listening, speaking, and writing. These aspects of language acquisition might give researchers a chance to investigate interesting information.

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