TEACHER AUTONOMY IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract
With the rise of learner autonomy as an important goal in second foreign language education, the idea of teacher autonomy has recently come to the fore. In this paper, I first review the literature to explore various definitions and meanings of teacher autonomy. Then present an overview of current perspectives on the relationship between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. This is illustrated through a discussion of the literature about teachers' responsibility and capacity to support learner autonomy. Finally, I examine how action research, reflective practice, and exploratory practice are argued and demonstrated in the literature as major processes of teacher autonomy development in second language education.

Key words
teacher autonomy, learner autonomy, second foreign language education

Background of autonomy in second language education

Over the past 25 years or so, the idea of autonomy has become increasingly influential in the field of second foreign language education. See a thematic bibliography by Benson (2006). Most of this work in the past two decades is concerned with learner autonomy, however, the idea of teacher autonomy has gradually come to the fore in the past decade. See a review by Smith (2003).

Teacher autonomy is now recognized as a major factor that affects the development of learner autonomy in second language learning. Researchers argue that to enhance learner autonomy, we must enhance teacher autonomy. Benson (2000), Little (1995), Little (2001), Ridley (2003), Ushioda (2003), McGrath (2000), Thavenius (1999). To better understand why the idea of teacher autonomy has begun to gain momentum in recent years, it is helpful to briefly examine a wider background of second language education. In the last few decades, the pendulum in language teaching has swung dramatically from an emphasis on language teaching methodology to a focus on the learner. Oxford (1998). The emergence of learner-centred models of education is one of the outcomes from this shift of emphasis. However, the swing of the pendulum, or the development of learner-centred models of language learning, does not imply diminished teacher responsibilities. Arnold (1999), Nunan (1988, 1999). But rather a reorientation of teacher roles to share out the power with learners and to give them opportunities to take greater control over their learning. Dickinson (1996). This reorientation of classroom roles may constitute a great challenge to teachers, and the success of meeting this challenge depends largely on teacher autonomy development. In broader terms, teacher development.

Head (1997), Taylor (1997) explore the notion of teacher development in terms of teachers own

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understandings of how they go on learning and becoming better at what they are doing. According to them, teacher development is a self-reflective process which is centred on teacher personal awareness of the possibilities for change and of what influences the change process. While space does not allow a fuller discussion of the relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher development, in this paper I take the development of teacher autonomy as an important aspect of teacher development, as it is argued in the literature that genuinely successful teachers and learners are always autonomous. Little 1995 and that teacher development is one of the major strands associated with the concept of teacher autonomy. 

Teacher autonomy is a multifaceted concept, but there has been so far little attempt to clarify its various definitions and possible meanings. In this paper I first review the literature to explore various definitions and meanings of teacher autonomy. But to do this I need to present briefly what is meant by learner autonomy. Next I explore possible links between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. Finally, I examine how action research/reflective practice and exploratory practice are presented in the literature on second language education as tools for teacher autonomy development.

Definitions and interpretations of learner autonomy

Learner autonomy can be concisely defined as follows:

- "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec 1981)
- "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" (Little 1991)
- "learner's ability and willingness to make choices independently" (Littlewood 1996)
- "the capacity to control one's own learning" (Benson 2001)

In Benson 2001, the construct of "control" appears to be more open to investigation than the constructs of "take charge" and "responsibility." He 2001 also explains that "it is neither necessary nor desirable to define autonomy more precisely than this [because control over learning may take a variety of forms in relation to different levels of the learning process]."

The four definitions above are widely quoted in the literature and provide us with a useful reference point, but this is not to say that we have fully understood the notion of learner autonomy. As Oxford 2003 argues that the theoretical framework of learner autonomy in language learning is still far from coherent. However, taking a more positive position, we find that key researchers in the field tend to agree on many important issues concerning learner autonomy. To name a few:

- Autonomy should be viewed from multiple perspectives - technical, psychological, social, cultural and political. (Holec 1998, compare Benson 1997 and Oxford 2003) and is a multidimensional capacity which can take different forms for different individuals and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times (Benson 2001).

The above points of view represent our understanding of the nature of learner autonomy, which also applies to the discussion of teacher autonomy. For two reasons, first, both learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are in the first place concerned with autonomy, and second, teachers are also learners (see discussion below).

Definitions and meanings of teacher autonomy

In this section, I first present several definitions of teacher autonomy which seem to focus on some aspects to the exclusion of others, then move on to a latest "catchall" framework and my own working definition. Little 1995, 179 argues
Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process and exploring the freedom that this confers.

According to Mackenzie 2002, this perspective recognizes teachers’ responsibility only for the classes that they teach and the students’ under them but undermines teachers’ responsibility for or influence over teaching and learning constraints.

Focusing on teachers’ capacity to take control over their own learning of teaching Smith 2000 suggests that teacher autonomy can be defined at least partially in terms of the teacher autonomy as a learner or more succinctly as teacher-learner autonomy. He further recognizes that this definition needs to be reconceptualized and broadened Smith 2003.

Compared with the two definitions above McGrath 2000 defines teacher autonomy in a more comprehensive way. He identifies two different but related dimensions of teacher autonomy: teacher autonomy as self-directed professional action or development and teacher autonomy as freedom from control by others. The two dimensions are mutually constitutive in order to be self-directed teachers need to have freedom from control by others; see also Breen Mann 1997. In order to be free from control teachers need to be self-directed; see also Benson 2001.

Following McGrath 2000 researchers continue to give attention to the multifaceted nature of teacher autonomy. For example Aoki 2002a defines teacher autonomy as below.

If learner autonomy is the capacity freedom and responsibility to make choices concerning one’s own learning teacher autonomy by analogy can be defined as the capacity freedom and responsibility to make choices concerning one’s own teaching.

However Aoki herself 2002a finds this definition problematic because it does not imply in itself that teacher autonomy has any relevance to teachers’ capacity to support the development of the autonomy of their learners’.

In order to catch all the main features of teacher autonomy definitions of teacher autonomy tend to become more extended. One particular example is the one-page Shizuoka definition of teacher autonomy collectively developed by a group of researchers in an international conference on autonomy in Shizuoka Japan Barfield et al 2002. It includes characteristics of and reasons for teacher autonomy relationships between learner and teacher autonomy as well as ways of developing teacher autonomy. It reads like a well-structured essay instead of a working definition although it contributes to the current understanding of teacher autonomy.

Smith 2003 does not claim to “define” teacher autonomy but his understanding of the multiple dimensions of teacher autonomy can help us come up with a concise and more accommodative definition of teacher autonomy which I give after presenting Smith’s model. His “catch all” framework is first presented below.

A catch all framework of teacher autonomy

Building on definitions of teacher autonomy by himself and other researchers Smith 2003 current interpretation of dimensions of teacher autonomy shown in Figure 1 attempts to capture both dimensions of teachers’ teaching and their own learning and all the three perspectives of autonomy technical psychological and political Benson 1997.

Figure 1 Dimensions of teacher autonomy adapted from Smith 2003.

In relation to professional action Domain of teaching
A Self-directed professional action “self-directed teaching”
B Capacity for self-directed professional action Teacher autonomy
C Freedom from control over professional action “Teacher autonomy”

In relation to professional development Domain of teacher learning
Directed professional development, “self-directed teaching”
Capacity for self-directed professional development, “Teaching autonomy”
Freedom from control over professional development, “Learning autonomy”

To clarify the above, Smith’s 2003 makes the following points:

A and D describing self-directed behaviour should be avoided if consistency is to be maintained for the meaning of autonomy capacity for and willingness to engage in self-direction in the learner autonomy literature.
B and E involve a technical and psychological interpretation of autonomy while C and F refer to its political dimension.
“Professional development” is a subset of “professional action”.

Therefore the term “teacher autonomy” can be retained for use when the primary focus is on professional development “teacher learning”.

Smith’s framework reflects the multidimensional nature of teacher autonomy. Its main contribution to the theory of teacher autonomy lies in its differentiation of two independent but interrelated domains of teacher autonomy: domains of teaching and “teaching-learning which broadens the concept of teacher autonomy to integrate teacher autonomy and teacher learning.”

Towards a working definition of teacher autonomy

Building on the various definitions and interpretations concerning teacher autonomy presented above (especially Smith’s catch-all model), I suggest that teacher autonomy can be defined as teacher willingness capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning.

My preference for a concise definition of teacher autonomy draws on Benson’s 2001 argument for a concise definition of learner autonomy. The three terms — “willingsness” “capacity” and “freedom” — roughly correspond to the three broad dimensions of teacher autonomy that I think are important: motivational, technical, psychological and critical. “Teaching” and “learning” correspond to the two interrelated domains of teachers’ classroom life and domains of teacher learning.

Relationships between learner and teacher autonomy

A dominant theme expressed in the relationships between learner and teacher autonomy is that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent, and that the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the promotion of teacher autonomy. Breen, Mann, McGrath, Little, and Little et al. 2003.

Steward’s 2003 study is a good example showing the dynamic interplay of teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. By collaborating with a supportive colleague to talk about their own teaching, he gained greater insight into how teacher and learner autonomy are both illumined and limited by one another. His reflective account interestingly demonstrates the flow of his attention between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. He first attempted to initiate learner autonomy which resulted in his development as a teacher. The more he was concerned with the development of learner autonomy, the more he became reflective about his own teaching and role relationship with his students and the greater he felt a need to foster his own sense of autonomy.

While Steward’s 2003 examines the interplay between a teacher autonomy and his learner autonomy, Sakui’s 2002 explores the relationship between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy here the teacher is the learner. However, both kinds of empirical studies are rare as the current research on teacher autonomy seems to focus on the one-way relationship — how teacher autonomy affects learner autonomy. Although it is pointed out above that teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are interdependent.

In addition, when teacher autonomy is talked about in relation to learner autonomy, researchers’ interest is often on what roles teachers play and what responsibilities they take in order to develop learner autonomy. For example, Dam’s 2003 explicitly states that it is largely the teacher’s responsibility to develop learner autonomy based on her experience of devising and implementing teacher development.
programmes partly reported in Breen et al. 1989 and on her other research projects. Of course, Dam 2003 does not mean that learners have no responsibility in the learning process. Rather, her intention is to reinforce the notion of responsibility sharing between the teacher and the learner that Allwright (1979) 118 has suggested.

Responsible teaching involves the sharing of responsibilities not merely or even mainly because they are too much for any one person to bear but because assuming management responsibility has a very important contribution to make to the learning experience of the learners.

In the next section I first discuss teachers' general responsibility and capacity to support learner autonomy before I move on to the specific roles that pro-autonomy teachers are supposed to adopt.

Teachers' responsibility and capacity to support learner autonomy

Breen & Mann 1997 and Aoki 2002a are among the few researchers who depict a broad picture of teachers' general responsibility and capacity to support the development of learner autonomy.

Breen & Mann 1997 identify three attributes and six roles of the teacher who seeks to promote learner autonomy in the classroom. The three teacher attributes are:

- self-awareness, explicit awareness of the teacher's own self as a learner;
- belief and trust in learners' capacity to learn and to act autonomously;
- genuine desire to foster learner autonomy in the classroom.

These deeper attributes are related to six explicit roles forms of classroom action that may create space for learners to exercise their learning autonomy:

- being a resource, willing to be responsive and able to balance the roles of a resource and a guide;
- facilitating collaborative evaluation;
- managing the risks of surviving the disorienting but developmental phase during which teacher and learners are uncertain and purposes and procedures are seemingly fragmented;
- being a patient opportunist and getting support from colleagues;
- trusting learners.

Aoki 2002a first suggests 15 knowledge/skill components for second language learner autonomy. She then argues that the teacher's role in the development of these knowledge/skill components can be defined as providing scaffolding see discussion later where necessary and for affective dispositions without impairing learners' feeling of being autonomous:

- creating a psychologically safe learning environment;
- providing choices;
- leaving room for negotiation with learners;
- allowing voice to learners;
- providing information;
- articulating the rationale of their decisions made on behalf of learners so that those decisions are transparent to learners and;
- stimulating and supporting reflection on cognitive/affective and social aspects of learning.

These categories of teacher roles identified by Breen & Mann 1997 and Aoki 2002a share a lot of similarities. Encouraging learners to make choices and decisions being a resource facilitating the learning process negotiation and providing affective support. While these combined categories are by no means an exhaustive list we can take this as a point of departure for a closer scrutiny of a pro-autonomy teacher's specific roles, which are discussed in greater detail by other researchers. Given space constraints I briefly describe the following six areas of teacher role which are often argued in the literature as being crucial to the development of learner autonomy:

- Bridge gaps closing
- Facilitation
- Scaffolding
- Negotiation and dialogue
- Mediation
- Taking a critical political stance towards teaching.

These teacher roles and responsibilities overlap to varying degrees and a
separation of discussion below is only for convenience

1  Bridge

Crappe, 1993, notes a gap in the current language curriculum between public classroom activities shared classroom activities and private learning activities the learner personal learning activities He argues that for a pro-autonomy teacher the focus of attention is on both these domains and the interface between them As such teachers should attend to the minute-minute classroom practice that indirectly fosters or discourages learner autonomy In short teachers should help bridge the gap between these two domains of learning Ways that Crappe, ibid, suggests for fulfilling this purpose include classroom discourse about tasks, teachers holding “learning conversations” with students and the actual design of tasks

The public domain of learning and the private domain of learning roughly correspond to “classroom learning” and “out-of-class learning” Benson, 2001 Benson, 2001 argues that out-of-class learning is essential to the promotion of learner autonomy but also notes that out-of-class learning is a relatively new area of research which is of great importance to the theory and practice of learner autonomy Therefore further research on out-of-class learning should focus on how teachers can help integrate classroom learning and out-of-class learning to promote learner autonomy

Another type of bridge role that teachers should play is to narrow down mismatches between learning and instruction Benson, 2001 Huang, 2006a Nunan, 1995 Here the emphasis on how teachers can help bridge learning instruction mismatches arising from the different learners teacher agendas

2  Facilitation

The ideal role of the teacher as facilitator, seen as providing support for learning, is one of the most commonly used terms in the discussion of autonomous language learning Building on Hole, 1985 Volle, 1997 characterizes the facilitator role as the provision of psychological support and technical support The key features of psychological support are the personal qualities of the facilitator being caring, supportive, patient, tolerant, empathic, open, non-judgemental, a capacity for motivating learners, and an ability to raise learner awareness The key features of technical support are helping learners to plan and carry out their independent language learning by means of needs analysis, helping learners to evaluate the resources, helping learners to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to implement the above Volle, ibid, argues that one way to ensure this sort of teacher support is through negotiation (see discussion below)

If our focus of attention is on affect in language learning being a facilitator implies a progressive reduction in the psychological distance between teacher and student and an attempt to take more account of the learner’s own agenda (even to be guided by it) Underhill, 1999 see also Aoki, 1999 In facilitation control becomes more decentralized democratic even autonomous and what the facilitator saves on controlling is spent on communication curiosity, insight and relationship in the group Underhill, 1999

3  Scaffolding

A similar role to facilitation that teachers can play in fostering learner autonomy is to provide learners with scaffolding Aoki, 2002a Drawing on the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development Vygotsky, 1978 and Bruner, 1983 idea of scaffolding Mariani, 1997 discusses the relationship between teacher support and teacher challenge in promoting learner autonomy That is teachers use scaffolding strategies in connection with tasks and interaction to balance challenge and support to promote autonomy within and towards the borders of the Zone of Proximal Development Using scaffolding strategies and gradually removing them is a concrete example of challenge and support in action and is at the core of the process of learning and teaching for autonomy Mariani, ibid, also explains that the balance between support and challenge is an ongoing process of decision making on the teacher’s part and on the students part

It is important to note that the teacher is not the only person who can provide the learners with
scaffolding. Thomessen 2003 demonstrates how scaffolding can be provided not only in teacher-learner interaction but also in learner-learner interaction in an English classroom at a Danish school. However, in both types of scaffolding the teacher plays an important role to engage learners in target language use and the learning process. The content and the process of learning.

4. Negotiation and dialogue

Following Boud 1988 and Volle 1997, advocates negotiated approaches to autonomous language learning. He characterizes the teacher's role in autonomous language learning as one of negotiation about syllabus both with learners and external authorities. Representatives of the educational institution and professionals from the discourse communities to which learners are trying to gain admittance.


Negotiation in language learning is sometimes represented as a form of teacher-learner dialogue about learning in the classroom. Cotterall 1995, 1998, Cotterall, & Crabbe 2002. For example, Cotterall 1999 shows how dialogue between the learner and the class teacher within an EAP course is central to the development of learner autonomy. Cotterall & Crabbe 2002 demonstrate that how a process of teacher-learner dialogue about learning problems is established and how the solution of problems is carried out within a problem-solving framework supported by a database of learning problems and solutions.

5. Mediation between constraints and ideals

The development of learner autonomy largely depends on the extent to which constraints on the exercise of autonomy can be addressed and negotiated. Huang 2006, Benson 2000. Takes autonomy as a learner's and teachers' right but lists four categories of constraints on the promotion of learner autonomy in a given educational context. Policy, institutional conceptions of language, and language teaching methodologies. Compare the two broad categories of macro and micro constraints on teacher autonomy in McGrath 2000. In Benson 2000, view the teacher's role is to mediate between the learner's right to autonomy and these broader constraints that inhibit the exercise of this right by explaining and justifying these constraints to his or her learners. He argues that "in the way in which teachers interpret and enact this mediating role is the key factor in teacher autonomy." because "learner autonomy develops within the space that the teacher is able to open up for it in their interpretation of the broader constraints on the learners' freedom in action in learning".

This line of argument for the teacher's mediating role in fostering learner autonomy and teacher autonomy is echoed or substantiated in other researchers' work. Lamb, Simpson 2003, Little 1995, Vieira 2003, Vieira et al. 2002, and Vieira et al. 2002. For example, demonstrate how constraints on autonomy in the Portuguese educational context are addressed in the pedagogy for autonomy action research programme, see later discussion on action research.

6. A critical stance towards teaching

Drawing on critical theory, the field of language education is realizing that to foster learner autonomy teachers should take a critical and transformational stance towards teaching and learning in the language classroom. Aoki 2002a, Benson 1997, 2000, Lamb 2000, Lamb, Simpson 2003, Smith 2000. However, Lamb & Simpson 2003 argue that in order to facilitate a critical approach to learning, teachers themselves need to experience political autonomy, that is, "teachers must feel in control of, or be able to take control of what they are doing if their learners are to feel in control."
The development of teacher autonomy

Having illustrated the relationship between teacher and learner autonomy and described teacher roles in autonomous language learning [1] now turn to the discussion of how teacher autonomy can be developed in second language education. In general education and in language teaching action research and reflective practice — have been recognized as important tools for teachers’ professional development including teacher autonomy development for some time. More recently a new way for teacher development in the field of second language education — exploratory practice — has been advocated by Allwright [2001, 2003] and his colleagues [3] Gunn 2003 [Perpignan 2003] Wu 2006 [4]. These teacher development tools are discussed below in relation to the development of teacher autonomy in language teaching and learning [5]

Action research [6] AR and reflective practice

AR and reflective practice also “reflective approach” or “reflective teaching” are closely related in terms of teacher development because reflection is an integral process of AR [7] [8]. Kemmis [9]


It [19] Action research represents an “inside out” approach to professional development. It represents a departure from the “outside in” approach [20] one in which an outside “expert” brings the “good news” to the practitioner in the form of a one-off workshop or seminar. In contrast the inside out approach begins with the concerns and interests of practitioners placing them at the centre of the inquiry process [21].

Here it is easy to perceive a connection between AR and the development of teacher autonomy. In a review of research on autonomy in language learning Benson 2001 [181] 83 [22] argues that AR is particularly suited to the field of autonomy because it is a form of autonomous learning which can help teachers develop their own autonomy [23].

Reflective teaching is equally important in fostering teacher autonomy [24]. Thavenius 1999 [25] asserts that awareness is a key concept in both teacher autonomy and learner autonomy and that reflection comes in as a key term in both teacher awareness training and learner awareness training. Vieira 1999 [26] illustrates that there is an integral relationship between reflective teaching and learner autonomy through collaborative AR between university researchers-trainers and in-service school teachers-trainees. A central idea in Huttenen 2003 [27] is that learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy especially on teachers’ ability to reflect on what they do. Drawing on current theoretical perspectives on learning and reflection [28]. Huttenen 2003 [29] examines the role of teacher reflection in the process of planning learning [30].


Exploratory practice [EP]

EP is another form of practitioner research as AR action research Allwright 2001 [52] argues that EP resides in the middle of the three major processes of teacher development in the order of reflective
practice [exploratory practice] and action research. It arises from a perceived need for practitioner research to be rethought to be refocused on understanding and ultimately on a concern for the quality of life in the language classroom for both teachers and learners. Allwright 2003 [113] emphasizes in the original literature about EP terms such as “puzzles” “understanding” and “quality of life” replace words such as “problems” “solution to problems” “change” “improvements” “innovation” “efficiency” and “effectiveness” associated with AR Allwright 2003 [125] argues.

EP questions the common notion of “change” that advocates prioritizing a constant search for ever more effective teaching techniques not because we have no wish to help language learners and their teachers but because “improvement” seems all too frequently reduced to a scramble for “better” teaching techniques to the exclusion of any attempt to take the logically prior step of trying to understand the circumstances under which the new techniques will be expected to bring about improvements.

What brings EP more directly relevant to autonomy is that EP is taken as collegial activity Allwright 2003 [114] The promotion of collegiality between teachers and learners and among teachers in the same institution by involving also learners to investigate the “puzzles” and developing more equal and collegial teacher-learner and teacher-teacher relationships is especially beneficial to the development of learner and teacher autonomy Hall Kenny 1995 Huang 2006d In contrast AR seems to contribute less to the sort of collegiality that EP seeks to promote because AR practitioners seem to “isolate the professional” as the source of topics to investigate and as the only people willing to work for understanding Allwright 2003 [131].

The above discussion of EP indicate that EP has a great potential for fostering teacher and learner autonomy but so far there has been little attempt to explore this link between EP and the development of teacher and learner autonomy. At least such a link is not made explicit see Chuk 2003 [116] for an exception and terms like “learner autonomy” and “teacher autonomy” have not appeared in the discussion of EP as often as in the literature on AR and reflective practice.

EP critique on AR as a tool for teacher development is helpful but is also open to question A line of argument running through the EP literature is that the work for understanding itself can sometimes deal with the original problem and that change prior to sufficient understanding of a given situation should be avoided However we may wonder how we can easily judge when our understanding of the classroom life is sufficient to decide for a change And in actual practice it is not always possible for us to wait for the ideal conditions to start changing the reality in educational institutions Usma Frodden 2003 [117] On the other hand experience has told us that in many cases we have gained sufficient understanding of a given educational situation but we choose not to improve or change it not because anticipated improvements and changes are not desirable and possible but because we lack the extent of commitment required or because we just do not want to get into some sort of predictable trouble In this sense EP can be easily used as an excuse to maintain the status quo which AR aims to change.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to examine the definitions and meanings of the multifaceted concept of teacher autonomy in second language education and the relationship between teacher and learner autonomy and three major processes for teacher autonomy development action research [reflective practice and exploratory practice] There has been a growing body of research on teacher autonomy during the past decade but research grounded in hard empirical evidence is still scant on what is meant by teacher autonomy and how teacher autonomy can be developed in both private and public second language teacher education in different sociocultural and educational contexts.

In the general introduction to a collection Little et al 2003 Little 2003 [31] points out the deficiency that the collection attempts to remedy.

In none of the many publications of the past decade have addressed the theory and practice of learner autonomy from the complementary perspectives of all the roles learners teachers teacher trainers curriculum designers examiners and agencies especially curriculum and examination
boards that together make up secondary education.

This absence of the complementary perspectives of various roles and agencies is also a research gap in the field of teacher autonomy. More urgently we need to explore insider perspectives on teachers' own views and attitudes towards the notion of teacher autonomy in second language education.

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