

A Review of Literature on Language Assessment Literacy in last two decades (1999-2018)

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This paper aims to explore the development of language assessment literacy (LAL) through the period of the last 2 decades from 1999 to 2018. It commences with a review of AL studies in the last 20 years. Which follows evaluating 14 journal articles related to LAL. These studies are demonstrated by a discussion of the various components of LAL and their effect on each other. As a result of our analysis, three major themes emerged which demonstrated the development of LAL in the last 20 years. The themes were (i) impact of teachers' assessment knowledge and beliefs on practices and outcomes, (ii) impact of training and teacher education program on assessment literacy, and (iii) impact of assessment literacy on testing, testing resources and its washback. This paper concluded by proposing a number of unexplored aspects of LAL and some practical implications.

Key words: *Language assessment literacy, Review, Literature, Language testing*

Introduction

There are several factors which contribute to the effectiveness of any educational environment. Among these factors, perhaps the most crucial is Teachers' assessment knowledge and competence. Indeed, in absence of good assessment, good teaching is impossible (Eckhout, Davis, Mickelson, & Goodburn, 2005). Popham (2004) emphasizes the significance of assessment literacy by stating its ignorance as a professional suicide for teachers.

Although the importance of Assessment Literacy is acknowledged in determining the quality of good teaching however literature shows evidence that teachers universally suffer from poor assessment literacy (Volante & Fazio 2007). An extremely lower level of educator's



assessment literacy is also pointed out stated by Popham (2010) as one of the worst problems in the profession of education today.

It is also acknowledged as a matter of fact that an accurate assessment in the classroom ensures that learners are meeting instructional goals. However, the literature implies that teachers overlook the assessment in their classrooms. This may be because they may not feel it necessary to acquire assessment knowledge which ultimately results in low assessment literacy (Karimi & Shafee, 2014; Razavipour, Riazi, & Rashidi, 2011).

Although there has been an emphasis on classroom assessment, research studies have revealed that many teachers and instructors are inadequately trained as they start their teaching career without an adequate knowledge of assessments that can help them in test development, administration, and interpretation. It reveals that they do not have the proper understanding about basic conceptions and purposes of assessments, and validity and reliability of assessment (Gotch, 2012). Resultantly, it shows a lack of clear connections between their instructional goals and assessment practices that cannot encourage a high degree of meaningful learning.

Teachers equipped with a solid background knowledge in area of assessment are well prepared to integrate assessment with instruction and yield meaningful learning. Therefore, assessment literate teachers would appear to have significant impact on improving the quality of the teaching and learning.

In this regard, there have been studies exploring the huge impact of assessment Literacy on different aspects that includes the impact of teachers' assessment background, language assessment literacy, impact of training, teacher education programs, teachers' beliefs and practices on their language assessment literacy (LAL), impact of LAL on writing outcome, and instructional practices and testing washback. The present study attempts to review the literature related to language assessment literacy in last 20 years from 1999 to 2018.

Definitions

Heaton (1990) proposes the functions of assessment more comprehensively by stating it as an understanding strengths and weaknesses of students' learning ability, assisting teachers in monitoring student learning progress, evaluating students' learning, and placing students in learning groups based on given institutional standards. Stiggins (1992) ,argues assessment as an opportunity for teachers to have meaningful reflection on learning deliverance, collection of relevant evidences, and using those pieces of evidence to improve their teaching.

Language Assessment Literacy has its origin in educational assessment literacy (Deluca & Klinger, 2010; Stiggins, 1991; Willis, Adie, & Klenowski, 2013). The significance of assessment knowledge is affirmed by the argument that a lack of assessment knowledge can “cripple the quality of education” (Popham, 2009, p. 4).

Scholars, such as Popham (2004), McMillan (2000), and Stiggins (1999), establish assessment literacy as a centre of achieving and maintaining the overall quality of teaching and learning by understanding the principles of assessment and connecting this understanding to what and when use assessment methods to gather reliable information/data about students’ achievements (Chan, 2008).

However, in context of language teaching, researchers demonstrated assessment literacy in ‘teacher’ and ‘testing’ perspective; familiarity and ability of teachers required to plan, administer, understand and apply the outcomes of assessments accurately and efficiently (Boyles 2005; Stiggins 1999; Stoyhoff & Chapelle, 2005) and a guideline for teachers in scoring, grading, and making judgments about students’ academic performance (Taylor, 2010; Volante & Fazio, 2007; Weigle, 2007; White, 2009).

Webb (2002), projected LAL in a new perspective by defining it as “knowledge about how to assess what students know and can do, interpret the results of these assessments, and apply them to improve student learning” (p.1). This definition shifted a focus of LAL from ‘teacher’ and ‘testing’ to ‘student’ and ‘learning.’

Inbar-Lourie (2008), demonstrates assessment Literacy as a self-reflection process for language teachers in which, along with possessing language-specific competencies, they have capacity of asking and answering critical questions about the purpose for assessment, about the fitness of the tool being used, about testing conditions, and about what is going to happen on the basis of the results.

Moreover, in recent years, the concept of language assessment literacy is not only restricted to language testing knowledge required for teachers (Inbar-Lourie, 2008; McNamara & Roever, 2006), but it is extended as a required competence for various stakeholder groups; (e.g. policy makers, examination boards, parents, and the general public). Similarly, Taylor (2009), emphasizes the concept of assessment literacy not mandatory only for test developers, researchers, applied linguists and language teachers but more in broader perspective for public for understanding function and values of assessment tools and their outcomes across society.

LAL encompasses teachers’ ability to integrate their knowledge within historical, social, political and philosophical frameworks to better understand its practices (Fulcher, 2012).



Although in general researchers explored the concept of language assessment literacy as the ability to understand, analyse and apply information on student performance to improve instruction (Falsgraf, 2005). However, much of research defined the concept of LAL as static knowledge.

It is encouraging that the concept of LAL is maturing with understanding it in wider context such as LAL as self-reflection, significance of LAL for various stakeholder groups, integration of LAL knowledge within historical, social, political and philosophical frameworks. However, active and practical perspective of LAL concepts, for example, professional competency aspect as mentioned by Taylor (2013), needs to be defined as an integral part of LAL conceptual framework.

Methodology of the Review

The relevant studies on the assessment literacy were identified by conducting an extensive online search of databases for the time span specified from 1999 to 2018. The search was restricted to journals listed as high impact (Quartiles 1-3) by Scientific Journal Ranking, SJR (www.scimagojr.com). During the first phase, search was performed in Google Scholar by entering different search terms in combination such as ‘assessment literacy’ ‘teacher assessment knowledge’ ‘concept of language assessment’ and ‘assessment literacy training’. As a result of this search, many journal articles and book chapters were found; however, the focus of the current article was journal articles published in Q1-Q3 journals under the time span of 1999-2018.

The researchers individually read the abstracts of these articles were to select the relevant studies. The key journals that were reviewed included:

1. *Teaching and Teacher Education, Assessing Writing, and Language Testing* (Q1),
2. *Theory into Practice, Australian Journal of Teacher Education, English Language Teaching, and International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* (Q2), and
3. *Canadian Journal of Education, Cogent Education, International Journal of Instruction, and Pedagogika* (Q3).

Around 20 research articles were found under relevant search headings. However, only 14 out of them were directly related to the area of language assessment; the remaining 6 were related to clinical investigations and other disciplines.

Themes of the Review

As a result of our qualitative analysis we categorized the reviewed journal articles under three different themes:

1. Impact of Teachers' assessment knowledge and beliefs on practices and outcomes,
2. Impact of training and Teacher education program on Assessment Literacy, and
3. Impact of Assessment Literacy on testing, testing resources and its washback.

Table 1 presents the studies conducted in the last two decades, listed chronologically under the three distinct categories.

Table 1: Emerging themes from the studies on LAL (1999-2018).

Themes	Source, Type of study	Context, Participants	Methodology
Impact of Teachers' assessment knowledge and beliefs on practices and outcomes.	Kalajahi & Abdullah (2016), Quantitative	Malaysia, 65 tertiary level lecturers	Survey Questionnaire
	Crusan, Plakans, & Gebrilc (2016), Exploratory	Global, 41 countries (Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, South America), 702 ESL/EFL writing instructors from tertiary institutions	54-item survey instrument administered through Survey Monkey
	Ashraf and Zolfaghari (2017), Quantitative	Iran, 120 Iranian EFL teachers	Assessment literacy inventory, Reflective teaching questionnaire, SEM
	Mellati & Khademi (2018) Qualitative, Quantitative, & Exploratory	Iran, 26 EFL instructors	Teachers' assessment literacy inventory, semi-structured interview, non-participatory observation, and Writing Competence Rating Scale
	Fernando (2018), Qualitative & Exploratory	United Kingdom, 15 postgraduate Level international students	Open-ended questionnaire, Follow-up interviews.

Themes	Source, Type of study	Context, Participants	Methodology
Impact of training and Teacher education program on Assessment Literacy	Volante & Fazio, (2007), Quantitative	Canada, 69 Primary/Junior teacher candidates	Survey
	Baker and Riches (2013), Qualitative Study	Haiti, 120 high school Haitian English teachers	Drafts of the revised exams Feedback form, with closed and Open ended questions, Open-ended survey, Interview following the workshops
	Lam (2014), Mixed	Hong Kong, 5 teacher training programs, 9 instructors, and 40 preservice teachers	Analysis of hypertext, program & government documents, Focus group interviews, Individual interviews, Student assessment tasks, and teaching evaluation
	Deneen & Brown (2016), Qualitative	United States, 32 pre-service and practicing teachers registered in 12-week graduate-level course on assessment	Course assessment results, Pre- and post-course semi-structured interviews
Impact of Assessment Literacy on testing, testing resources and its washback	Razavipour, Riazi, & Rashidi (2011), Quantitative	Iran, 53 EFL secondary school teachers	A test of assessment literacy A questionnaire on English language teaching practices
	O'Loughlin (2013), Mixed	Australia, 84 participants	Online survey and follow-up interviews
	Malone (2013), Qualitative	USA, Two groups of experts, 44 language instructors and 30 language testers	Group interviews and surveys
	Jeong (2013), Mixed	Global, 140 primary & secondary level (Language testers & non-Language	Online Survey Semi structured Interview

Themes	Source, Type of study	Context, Participants	Methodology
		Testers) (N= 13)	

In the following sections, these themes are extended further into discussion, arguments and gaps identification with proposed directions for future research.

The impact of Teachers' assessment knowledge, Beliefs and practices on their instructional practices and outcome

There has been considerable research on teachers' thinking about the nature and purpose of assessment, suggesting the influence of teachers' conceptions of assessment on outcomes and practices (Barnes et al., 2015; Fulmer et al., 2015). But to possess assessment literacy skills is not only requisite for teachers but the language assessment knowledge has expanded itself as necessary for other stakeholders within the education testing culture (e.g., policy makers, examination boards, parents, and the general public) (Taylor, 2009). In this regard, in spite of expansion of assessment literacy concept in different perspectives, it failed to be addressed adequately in the perspectives of important stakeholders such as policy makers, examination boards, and parents. Recent research indicates insufficient evidence that researchers give consideration to the perspectives of important stakeholders in LAL context. However, teachers' perceptions about assessment knowledge is still preferred to be investigated by researchers. Kalajahi and Abdullah (2016) targeted the similar purpose by providing insights into the teachers' assessment beliefs and practices and their relationship. The study reported that in spite of having strong beliefs about assessments, the state of assessment literacy among Malaysian lecturers is unsatisfactory. It not only indicates the failure of theory-practice gap within the assessment context, but it also questions the substantial institutional reliance on lecturers' assessment literacy to assess students' content knowledge and skills. This situation reflects the repeated concern of taking other stake holders' LAL perspective in consideration which current research is definitely missing. Exploring LAL from the point of policy makers, examination boards, parents, and the general public may help to magnify LAL in far-reaching perspective and show the other side of AL which may never have been explored.

Following the similar objective of study by Kalajahi and Abdullah (2016), Ashraf and Zolfaghari (2017) attempted to examine the relationship between EFL teachers' assessment literacy and their reflective teaching, however, said teaching approach was found to be encouraging for EFL teachers for observing their beliefs, theories and teaching practices, utilizing them as a foundation for critical reflection about teaching and by reflecting critically

on their teaching experience, teachers can improve the quality of their own teaching. The past research reveals that there is very little empirical research investigating the relationship between different teaching approaches in specific and teachers' assessment literacy. The existing research in the last two decades attempted to investigate the teaching approaches in general point of view. To elaborate it further, researchers attempted to '*explore*' about teaching approaches by learning it from their participants whereas narrowing down teaching approaches from general to specific and attempting to '*explain*' '*that specific*' teaching approach may prove novel in its nature and provide an opportunity to researchers to testify it in AL perspective in narrower manner.

Crusan, Plakans, and Gebrilc (2016) reported that highly experienced teachers were less assessment literate. This situation seems defining an assessment literacy in new manner by highlighting teaching experience as a '*to be not to be*' factor in augmenting assessment literacy. This notion invites exploring LAL in a perspective of teaching experience. Additionally, they add that the teaching context turned out to be an influencing factor in determining assessment literacy and assessment philosophy of teachers; for example, they found that those teachers who reported heavy teaching loads were more inclined to talk about assessment negatively.

The '*teaching context*' as an influencing factor on LAL as indicated by Crusan et al. (2016) leads us to believe that assessment Literacy has enlarged itself from being considered as an internal factor (teacher's beliefs and concepts) to external factor. This '*Move*' is further encouraged by the findings of Mellati and Khademi (2018) study, who investigated teachers' assessment literacy in Iranian context and its impact on their current assessment practices and contributed by expanding LAL to learning outcomes. The study supported that teachers' assessment practices enhance the quality of their teaching as well as the learner outcomes. However, it was found that teachers with low degree of assessment literacy did not consider their lack of assessment knowledge a responsible factor in an ineffective classroom-based assessment; rather, they held environmental factors responsible for it. In a similar line, Crusan et al. (2016), who investigated second language writing teachers' assessment knowledge, beliefs, assessment practices, impact of linguistic background and teaching experience, postulated that participants' diverse contexts are an influencing factor in shaping their beliefs and practices. It is noticeable that both aforementioned LAL studies emphasize external aspect such as environment and participants' context as a responsible factor in developing LAL. It is evidently encouraging for future researchers that the dynamic and multi-faceted concept of assessment literacy can be extended to further investigation in relation to outward influences.

The most recent research by Fernando (2018), probably sets the new possibility of creating a conducive environment by incorporating the physical and the virtual aspects of environment.

This researcher extends the use of digital technology to text composition process to support formative academic literacy. He examines the effectiveness of formative academic literacy assessment in facilitating students' engagement with composing processes and in helping them develop evidence-based writing. Outlines/essays with feedback, student-generated digital artefacts, and questionnaires/follow-up interviews were the sources of data collection. Fernando's (2018) findings support utilizing an online platform in composing processes and academic literacy assessment that lifts students' understanding of text composition and helps to discover and handle difficulties encountered during learning writing. The use of technology for the assessment of written products did not demonstrate any particular educational gains in comparison to what is commonly observed in traditional classrooms. However, it indicates the real value of digital technology in supporting student engagement with processes involved in textual composition with a sure possibility of opportunities for immediate and ongoing feedback which cannot be offered to the same extent in a classroom setting. This study may probably strengthen the argument that environmental factor cannot be neglected as one of the comprising factors of teachers' assessment knowledge.

Conclusively, there are a few major concerns arising for future researchers:

- Do language teachers share a common definition of assessment literacy?
- Do the conception, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs regarding assessment literacy refer to the same phenomenon for language teachers?
- Do language teachers need to attain any required level of assessment literacy before they can teach effectively?
- Are there any criteria to test the assessment knowledge language teachers possess?

Impact of training and teacher Education program on Assessment Literacy

Although there has been an increasing emphasize on assessment trainings for language teachers, in last two decades, there appears to be an inadequate number of studies voicing this concern. The existing research reports an inadequacy of training for teachers/lecturers even after being selected to teach the course and attributes the factor of insufficient assessment training as the major contributing factor for unsatisfactory state of LAL level (Hadigol & Kolobandy, 2018; Jeong, 2013; Lam, 2014; Kalajahi & Abdullah, 2016). However, language assessment trainings can improve language assessment literacy situation of teachers (Volante & Fazio, 2007). In this regard, only a few studies highlight the need for assessment training and education programs for language teachers.

The study by Baker and Riches (2013), aimed to examine the language assessment literacy development of both teachers and language assessment specialists during their collaboration in a week-long series of language assessment workshops facilitated the notion of 'LA training in improving LA level of Teachers'. Improving teachers' assessment knowledge such as

reliability and validity regarding assessment, improvement in assessment skills, facilitating technical issues such as development and revision of reading comprehension questions, vocabulary and grammar items, and writing prompts with related grading rubrics were reported as some of the effects of LAL training (Baker & Riches, 2013; Stohlmann, Yang, Huang, & Olson, 2019). It is noticeable that training plays a significant role in broadening teachers' views by altering their beliefs regarding exams as an opportunity for students to demonstrate their best work, rather than mousetrap for students and understanding their role as facilitators of students' success. Teachers' knowledge related to the local cultural concerns and teachers' personal beliefs regarding its significance in common pedagogical and assessment practices are facilitated during Baker and Riches' (2013) study via training.

The need for assessment literacy and training of teachers is emphasized by Volante and Fazio (2007). In their survey which aimed to explore levels of assessment literacy of candidates at a teacher education program in a Canadian university, they inquired teachers to remark on their knowledge about purpose and methods of assessment and to describe their training in assessment. Results indicated relatively lower assessment confidence across the four years of the program. However, it was revealed that the majority of teacher candidates used assessment primarily for traditional summative purposes. There is another noticeable finding emerged through the study that is the higher number of female candidates (57) in comparison to male teacher candidates (12). Does it indicate the rise in gender disparity of preservice teachers, particularly at the primary/junior level? Moreover, the respondent teacher candidates ranged from 19-51 years of age. It seems logical to assume that variance in their age could affect these teachers' beliefs? Variations in age and gender could be a possible area of research interest in relation to assessment knowledge in future.

On the contrary, on the notion of LA training in improving LAL level of teachers, Deneen and Brown (2016) reported contradictory results in their study. An increase in assessment literacy did not necessarily change the conceptions of the purpose and nature of assessment fundamentally in the teachers. It may be rooted in participant's personal history and relationship to assessment derived from their own assessment career (Deneen & Brown, 2016; Panachev, Zelenin, Opletin, & Legotkin, 2018; Selomo MR, Govender KK. 2016). Future research can address this contradicting gap between change of the conception of the purpose and nature of assessment despite an increase in LAL. Although it is an unrealistic expectation that short time span training can change the assessment beliefs of teachers, further investigation in relative context can help to come up with some practical ways to focus a shift to conceptual understanding of LAL, aligned to teachers' instructional practices. In the same vein, Crusan et al. (2016), report in their research that the lower percentage of instructors (nearly 26%) had little or no training and knowledge of writing assessment, but the confession of lacking confidence in their assessment abilities, particularly in rubric creation raises a concern about the theory-practice gap.

Impact of Assessment Literacy on testing, Testing resources and washback

Testing has always been a central part of every educational system. Therefore, with an increased influence of testing, teachers' assessment literacy background is emphasized for the sake of implementing classroom assessment correctly but concerns arise when instructors' background assessment knowledge is limited. It arises the question how instructors with limited testing background meet the expectations and needs of the student. To address this concern, Jeong (2013) targeted two instructor groups. Language testers (professionals whose primary research interest is in areas of language testing) and Non-language testers (those whose primary interest is in other areas of language teaching with experience in language-assessment-related activities, e.g., developed standardized tests). Jeong (2013), reported that LTs spend more time on test theory while non-LTs' emphasis is more on classroom assessment and test accommodations. This indicates the difference in outcome of the course which is attributed to the fact that majority of the instructors come from a non-testing background. In addition, their past experience or education in language testing is not considered seriously (Jeong, 2013; Shahghasemi & Shad, 2018).

With an expansion of understanding LA to testing area, the concept is not restricted to classroom testing, but it can be seen extended to high-stakes test such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). O'Loughlin (2013) extends it to the neglected group that is educational policy developers and test users, such as university admissions staff who interpret and use language test scores. The participants mostly needed information about IELTS for advising prospective students about English language entry requirements and making admission decisions. They mainly focused on the minimum test scores required for entry and believed their informational needs were reasonably well met by their institution's entry regulations and the IELTS official website.

The need of producing online educational materials emerges noticeably emphasizing building the assessment literacy of test users. It can help test user to be assessment literate and enable them to exercise their responsibilities as informed test users resultantly for valid and ethical practice (including both advice-giving and decision-making) in their educational institutions. The concern arises to understand the significance of need of educating the test users for making valid and responsible interpretation of test scores. A step forward, Malone (2013) developed assessment literacy resource by developing a tutorial for foreign language instructors (CAL, 2009) to describe the basics of language assessment and assist with test selection. The inclusion of an essential technical information is emphasizing while meeting the real and practical needs of teachers. Moreover, the inclusion of such materials depends on their perspective. The specific and global reflections of language instructors can be seen

servicing as a basis for both future revisions and for designing future assessment literacy projects.

The expansion of LAL from test to the ‘effects of testing’ on educational program has been under discussion for a long time. However, the significant role of language teachers’ assessment literacy on testing washback and its predicting influence on the education alignment with the demands of high-stakes tests is a recently explored issue. Current research indicates that teachers do alter their teaching following the pattern of final examinations to help their students succeed on such tests (Kimora, Abdolmehdi & Naser, 2011; Jaramillo LE. 2019). However, more assessment literate language teachers seem to be more likely to include non-washback practices in their English teaching. The situation of negative washback of testing emphasizes an immediate call to action to address extremely low assessment literacy of EFL pre- and in-service teachers through training courses (Kimora et al., 2011). The similar situation is also reported by Abdullah et al. (2016) in their review article discussing assessment related important concepts. They encourage teacher’s assessment literacy as a contributing factor in an increase in the incidences of positive washback of tests. However, assessment courses that focus on theoretical issues of assessment cannot help achieving it. Involving both in-service and pre-service teachers in practical cooperative workshops can help improving their assessment practices (Abdullah et al., 2016).

It is important to notice that the language assessment background of Language instructors who are teaching language assessment courses are significantly influential on the way testing process carried out by teachers. In addition, it is directly/indirectly responsible for positive/negative washback of testing and directly connected to the development of testing resources. However, their LA background is rarely investigated.

Conclusion

As the results of our review show, a number studies were conducted in different countries such as the US, Australia, Canada, Iran, Haiti, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the UK. The number of these studies is certainly far from sufficient but LAL seem to be more popular topics in some countries than in others. In the Malaysian context, we need more LAL studies even though two of the studies reviewed were carried out in Malaysia. It is important to note that the reviewed studies and their findings are limited to their local context which limits the generalisability of their findings. This geographical gap can be bridged by investigating commonalities and differences between the teachers’ assessment beliefs and practices around diverse parts of the world at a broader level.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers/instructors were majorly involved as the participants of the studies. This shows that there is need to expand LA research to English as



a Second Language (ESL) context. Research indicates that most of the studies are conducted with tertiary level participants; however, immediate attention needs to be paid to primary and junior level which can help investigating LA conceptions and practices at grass root level.

So far researchers have attempted to investigate LAL majorly through surveys, questionnaires and scales based on survey and cross-sectional studies. To reach a deep understanding of the phenomenon, it is necessary to understand the LA conception thorough other research approaches such as experimental, action, and in-depth qualitative studies. Moreover, there is only a single study which has utilized multivariate statistical methods. We need more studies which use more sophisticated statistical methods in the area of LAL. The present review article revealed that although this area is currently studied widely, it is still under-researched.

The concern of training teachers for assessment is repeatedly addressed in the literature. It should be noted that for a training programs to achieve its purpose, it should be both practical and comprehensible. Integrating teachers' assessment knowledge and skills into pedagogical content knowledge can help in bridging the theory–practice gap and it can effectively enhance teachers' awareness and competence while assessing their students. Benefits of training can be enhanced by ensuring local cultural concerns as a significant part of teachers' assessment knowledge. In addition, there is an immediate need to encourage authentic approach towards assessment training which can be supportive in expanding conceptions of assessment in new ways.

It is noticeable that there is still little attention paid to the social and cultural dimensions of assessment which can prove to be significantly influential on teaching and learning in certain educational settings. In line with this, investigating students' beliefs regarding teachers' assessment practices and instructional practices may produce some interesting findings. Finally, it is time for teachers also to take the responsibility by understanding the significance of selecting and implementing the assessment practices which can aid in improving the learning of their students.

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