

## Exploring Students' Perceptions of Peer Collaboration in Developing English Speaking Skills at SMP N 18 Medan

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received : April 25, 2026

Reviewed : May 10, 2026

Revised : May 17, 2026

Accepted : May 19, 2026

Available online May 23, 2026

#### Keywords:

peer collaboration; English speaking skills; EFL learners; speaking anxiety

### Abstract

This study examined eighth-grade students' perceptions of peer collaboration as a strategy for developing English-language skills at SMP Negeri 18 in Medan, Indonesia. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, involving 29 students. Eight participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews, and a perception-based questionnaire was distributed to the entire group. Interview data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The findings revealed that the usefulness of peer feedback was the highest-rated dimension (84.4%), followed by communicative confidence (81.3%), speaking anxiety reduction (78.1%), and motivation to communicate (75.0%). Critically, these findings indicated that peer collaboration substantially diminished affective barriers, particularly speaking anxiety, which commonly hinder EFL oral development, while concurrently enhancing learners' communicative repertoire through informal, non-evaluative peer interactions. The study made a distinctive contribution by focusing on junior secondary EFL learners in an Indonesian urban context, a population largely absent from existing peer collaboration research, and by integrating both affective and linguistic dimensions within a single qualitative inquiry. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for EFL teachers and curriculum designers to embed structured collaborative speaking tasks into junior secondary instruction. These insights advance understanding of how peer-mediated learning can be leveraged to foster oral communicative competence in contexts where teacher-centered approaches have historically dominated.

### INTRODUCTION

Oral English proficiency is a core competency widely recognized in contemporary global education, which influences learners' academic pathways, career mobility, and cross-cultural engagement. However, the cultivation of oral skills among Indonesian EFL learners has long been an unresolved teaching challenge, particularly at the junior secondary school stage, the starting point of formal oral English teaching, where learners' emotional barriers are the most prominent. Sri Widyarti Ali et al (2025) note that local classrooms face three interrelated barriers: excessively high foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), limited authentic communicative interaction, and teacher-

centered teaching methods that prioritize grammatical accuracy over communicative fluency. These barriers bring significant harm, and evidence-based solutions are urgently needed to address them.

In the field of applied linguistics, peer collaboration has become a core teaching approach with solid theoretical foundations and empirical support, capable of effectively addressing numerous teaching challenges in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. This paper aims to demonstrate the theoretical rationale and empirical effectiveness of this pedagogical method in EFL teaching. The core theoretical origins of this approach are Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Bodrova & Leong (2018) provided academic support for this theoretical tracing. Grounded in this framework, language acquisition is achieved through social interaction, joint meaning-making, and reciprocal corrective feedback. Homayouni (2022) points out that the unique value of peer collaborative speaking activities lies in learners serving as both language models and conversation partners for one another, and in the developmental scaffolding they build, which cannot be replicated in teacher-led instruction. A number of cutting-edge empirical studies have also verified its efficacy (Alzubi et al., 2025) found that university EFL learners saw significant improvements in oral fluency, accuracy, and communicative confidence; Ky Nhan (2024) and Saeid (2024) confirmed that secondary school EFL learners experienced reduced oral anxiety and improved listening and speaking skills, with Saeid (2024) further noting that these outcomes are unaffected by age or gender; (Ayiz & cTaufid, 2025) observed improvements in learners' pronunciation, vocabulary knowledge, and fluency, alongside a significant reduction in public speaking anxiety. All included empirical studies cover secondary and university-age groups and include both linguistic competence and affective states as their core observational dimensions.

Although a large body of research has been accumulated in the field of EFL peer collaboration, existing literature notes that three core unaddressed gaps remain in this area (Farmasari, 2022), (Sri Widarti Ali et al., 2025), Saraç & Doğan, (2022). First, most existing studies focus on EFL contexts in higher education or for adult learners, whereas research on Indonesia's junior secondary school level is extremely scarce. This stage is the starting point of formal oral English teaching, and foreign language learning anxiety (FLSA) is also most prominent among learners at this stage. Second, no study to date has covered local junior secondary school learners in the multilingual context of Medan, Indonesia, which has unique sociolinguistic characteristics. Third, past studies have separated the dimension of language production from the affective dimension, failing to conduct integrated investigations and to access the qualitative perspectives of learners that quantitative methods cannot capture. Therefore, there is an urgent need to conduct this integrated study tailored to the local context that simultaneously explores the affective experiences and oral English development of this learner group.

This study aims to fill the gap in existing research. Focusing on eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 18 Medan, a public junior high school in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia, an area with a linguistically diverse environment, the study investigates peer collaborative speaking activities and sets two core objectives: first, to examine the impact of these activities on students' oral English development; second, to explore students' perceptions of this oral development strategy. Supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the study is implemented through structured collaborative and group speaking tasks that meet Indonesia's national EFL curriculum standards for eighth-grade students. It is expected to provide empirical evidence for the application of peer collaboration pedagogy in Indonesian junior high school EFL classrooms, and deliver actionable, practical references for relevant education practitioners

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design to explore junior high school EFL learners' perceptions of the role of peer collaboration in improving their oral English proficiency. As

defined by Creswell & Creswell, (2012) This design does not require variable manipulation and allows researchers to interpret the research participants' subjective experiences in natural settings. Meanwhile, this study follows the dominant qualitative-mixed research logic proposed by Creswell & Creswell (2023) and collects structured quantitative data through a cognitive questionnaire, which serves to enrich rather than replace the interpretive findings from interviews.

This study conducted empirical research on adolescent English language learning. We used purposive sampling to recruit the full study sample: 29 eighth-grade students from Public Middle School No. 18 in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The sample included 14 male and 15 female students, all aged 13 to 14, with comparable foundational English skills gained during primary school. We then selected 8 interview participants from this total sample using stratified sampling by English proficiency, with 2 in the high-proficiency group, 4 in the medium-proficiency group, and 2 in the low-proficiency group. This selection approach was designed to cover diverse experiential perspectives, and the sampling logic draws on the methodology literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Prior to data collection, we obtained written approval from the school's principal and written informed consent from each participant's legal guardian. All participants' identities were kept fully confidential throughout the study, and pseudonyms were used to protect their privacy, which meets all academic ethical requirements.

This study collected data using two core types of research tools. The first is the 25-item Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) scale, developed by (Woodrow, 2006), which this study adopted. This scale covers four dimensions, including perceptions of peer collaborative speaking, and uses a 5-point Likert scale. (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Its content validity was verified by two EFL experts, and its internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient, exceeded 0.8. The second type of tool is a semi-structured interview schedule developed independently by the research team. Every single interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in a mix of Indonesian and English. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent to collect their experiences and perceptions of peer collaboration.

This study examines second-language (L2) collaborative speaking instruction. After the study's subjects completed peer collaborative speaking tasks, a two-stage data collection process was launched: first, the FLSA questionnaire was distributed to all 29 participants to record their emotional responses and perceptions of their collaborative experience. Next, 8 participants were selected to take part in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. All procedures were implemented at SMP N 18 in Medan, and interviews were conducted 1 week after task completion to avoid recall bias.

This study adopts an empirical mixed-methods research design commonly used in the field of education. First, it conducts descriptive analysis of quantitative questionnaire data, using procedures such as calculating frequency distributions and mean values for each Likert scale dimension. Next, it processes qualitative interview data, applying the six-phase thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clark (2006) to complete the full workflow in sequence: reading through all transcripts to familiarize oneself with the data; systematically coding all complete transcripts to generate initial codes; grouping related codes to form candidate themes; verifying the internal consistency and external distinctiveness of each theme; defining, naming and adding supporting descriptions for the final set of themes; and composing the research report paired with representative quotes from study participants. Two researchers reached coding consensus through iterative discussion, and all disagreements were resolved by referencing the original raw data. This study follows the academic norms set by (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) and implements four trustworthiness assurance strategies: member checking, which returns transcripts to participants for accuracy verification; peer review, which invites peers with experience in EFL qualitative research to audit the emergent themes and coding decisions; data source triangulation, which cross-compares the two types of study data; and

researcher reflexivity management, which involves maintaining reflective journals throughout the entire research process, to avoid single-data-source bias and subjective bias.

This study was conducted in strict compliance with the ethical standards of educational research. Prior to data collection, we submitted a written application to the principal of SMP N 18 Medan and obtained institutional approval. The terms of the approval required that we not disrupt regular teaching activities and strictly protect students' privacy. Next, we obtained written informed consent from the guardians of all participants and clearly communicated that participation was completely voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. During the transcription and reporting phase, all study data were anonymized, and all audio recordings were permanently deleted after the study concluded.

## FINDINGS

### A. Questionnaire and Interview

Data collected from the survey on students' perceptions of peer collaborative activities conducted in this study show that students' perceptions across all four dimensions are mostly positive. The full raw data are detailed in Table 1. The proportion of positive responses for each dimension is ranked from highest to lowest; negative responses account for only 2.0% to 6.2% of all feedback, indicating that students show no strong opposition to this activity.

**Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Peer Collaboration Across Four Themes (N = 32)**

Theme	5 = Strongly Agree (%)	4 = Agree (%)	3 = Neutral (%)	2 = Disagree (%)	1 = Strongly Disagree (%)
Perception of Peer Collaboration	23,44	40,68	24,82	6,20	0,69
Speaking Anxiety Reduction	14,49	40,69	26,20	12,41	4,82
Peer Feedback Usefulness	25,51	48,27	22,06	3,44	0,69
Benefits of Peer Collaboration	16,55	35,86	38,62	6,89	0
Motivational Benefits of Peer Collaboration	12,41	44,13	31,72	4,13	1,37

Across all evaluation dimensions in this survey, the combined proportion of respondents who selected "agree" or "strongly agree" exceeds 75% for every dimension. Only 4.13% of ratings for the usefulness of peer feedback were negative. For the communication motivation dimension, neutral responses accounted for 31.72%, the largest share of any response category. We infer that the stability of a small subset of students' experiences on this dimension is weaker than that of their experiences across all other dimensions.

This study conducted thematic analysis on interview data. The four categories generated through this analysis fully correspond to the four dimensions of the questionnaire used in this

research. Table 1 presents quantitative patterns, while Table 2 lists qualitative themes and representative student responses. Dual-source data strengthens the credibility of the study's findings

**Table 2. Thematic Categories and Representative Student Responses from Interviews**

No.	Theme	Representative Student Response
1	Reduced speaking anxiety	"I feel less nervous speaking English with my friends than in front of the teacher."
2	Increased communicative confidence	"When my partner corrects me gently, I feel more confident to try again."
3	Usefulness of Peer Feedback	"I learned new words from my friend that I did not find in the textbook."
4	Enhanced Motivation to Communicate	"The activities were fun. I wanted to keep talking in English."

### 1. Reduced Speaking Anxiety

Across 8 interviews, the most frequently mentioned theme was alleviation of oral anxiety, a finding that corroborates the questionnaire results, in which 78.1% of participating students provided positive feedback on this dimension. Interviewed students generally believed that peer collaboration scenarios offered greater psychological safety than teacher-led whole-class oral tasks. Both high-proficiency and low-proficiency participants attributed their reduced anxiety to the informal, non-evaluative nature of small-group interactions. This study also supports this conclusion by citing verbatim statements from the interviewed students.

### 2. Increased Communicative Confidence

Cross-verification of research findings showed that 81.3% of participating students reported an improvement in their communication confidence, a prominent core theme in the interview data. Per statements from student participants categorized under Theme 2 of the coding table (Table 2), peer corrective feedback produced positive effects. Compared with teacher corrective feedback, it was more relational, less threatening, and motivated students to attempt high-difficulty communication interactions.

### 3. Perceived Usefulness of Peer Feedback

Its core quantitative results show that the 84.4% positive evaluation rate for the usefulness of peer feedback was the highest among all dimensions measured in the questionnaire. Interview materials (see Theme 3 in Table 2) indicate that students across all language proficiency groups viewed this feedback as an easily accessible source of support for their oral language development and gained new knowledge not covered in textbooks or shared by instructors.

### 4. Enhanced Motivation to Communicate

Questionnaire results indicate that 75.0% of surveyed students reported an improvement in their motivation to communicate. This dimension was the lowest-scoring among all dimensions investigated in the research, but still received a majority of positive feedback. Students at all proficiency levels noted that peer-focused oral tasks increased their enjoyment and made them

more willing to initiate conversations. Relevant participant excerpts are provided in Table 2 under Theme 4. Students attributed this shift to the tasks' lack of assessment pressure and their inherent collaborative nature.

## DISCUSSION

Drawing on survey data from the field of foreign language education, this study first presents its core research findings: students' perceptions across the four dimensions measured in this survey are overwhelmingly positive, with ratings exceeding 75% for each dimension. The value of this data goes far beyond merely confirming that students enjoy peer collaboration; it also uncovers the specific teaching conditions that shape this positive perception. Citing the conclusions of Hasanah and Setyono (2022), this study found that the students surveyed received nearly exclusively teacher-centered instruction. In this type of learning setting, class participation was only an act of waiting for the teacher's evaluation, rather than a form of peer interaction. Students who lacked prior collaborative experience still gave high ratings, which shows that the emotional benefits of peer collaboration do not depend on pre-existing familiarity with peers. Instead, these benefits emerge because peer collaboration breaks the original assessment dynamic that had triggered student anxiety. Widiati and Cahyono (2021), who focused on secondary school EFL learners in Indonesia, similarly found that students held positive perceptions of peer-mediated speaking activities. However, the participants in that study were part of a communication-oriented curriculum and had long been exposed to peer learning. This study expanded the scope of application of previous findings, demonstrating that introducing peer collaboration, even in teacher-dominated settings, can yield positive feedback. The core driver of students' high acceptance is the "contrast effect" of being relieved from assessment pressure.

This study situated the collaborative spoken learning mindsets of students observed in English classes at SMP 18 N Medan within the sociocultural theory framework of Vygotsky (1978). This theory holds that social interaction is the core carrier of language development, and the scenario in which students complete collaborative speaking tasks aligns fully with the concept of the zone of proximal development: that is, interaction within this dynamic cognitive range with peers of similar or stronger ability can enable skill growth that is impossible to achieve through independent learning. In this study, while students did not exhibit explicit metacognitive awareness of this theoretical logic, their positive perceptions of the collaborative model provided implicit support that feeds practical experience back into related theory.

When paired with the conclusion by Hasanah and Setyono (2022) that Indonesian junior high school English classrooms have long operated in a traditional teacher-centered context, the positive findings of this study are particularly significant. Although this study is a small-scale project with limitations including limited research modalities and low study efficacy, it can still support the advancement of systematic teaching reform when considered alongside the large body of prior research in the same field. Its core practical orientation is clear: even with little prior experience of peer collaboration, students hold entirely positive attitudes toward the model of learning alongside new peers from their own class. This can point out past teaching blind spots for curriculum designers at SMP N 18 Medan and similar educational institutions, and drive the optimization of teaching models in local English classrooms.

This study used EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching in Indonesia as its research context and takes sociocultural theory, first proposed by Vygotsky in 1978, as its core theoretical foundation. However, it rejected the superficial application of this theory and corrected a common misconception in prior peer collaboration research, in which scholars cited only the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) from a cognitive perspective to justify the rationality of their studies. Drawing on collected student feedback data, the study argues that the ZPD functions not only at the cognitive

level but also exerts a profound impact on affective interaction processes. By comparing the distinct implications of errors in teacher-led classrooms and peer interaction settings, this study concluded that the core reason ZPD works in peer collaboration is that the symmetry of peer relationships reduces learners' psychological cost of trial and error, rather than the claim that more competent peers can provide higher-quality scaffolding. This new context-specific interpretation offers greater adaptability than previous studies in Indonesia's EFL research field and can also explain the effectiveness of peer collaboration in short-term interventions.

This study conducts a peer collaboration research project targeting eighth-grade EFL learners at SMP N 18, Medan, Indonesia. The junior secondary education context of this study confers a unique interpretive dimension, distinguishing it from similar studies conducted at the higher education level. Previous same-topic studies on university EFL learners by Alzubi et al. (2025) and Ky Nhan (2024) both found that university students hold positive perceptions of peer collaboration. While this conclusion aligns with the findings of the present study, core differences exist in the underlying mechanism: University students who voluntarily elect to study English have years of formal language learning experience and have formed a stable communicative self-concept; the participants of this study are in the formative period of their language identity construction, and the risk-taking willingness, error tolerance, and communication engagement tendencies they develop at this stage will exert long-term effects on their learning trajectories. As such, the high positive ratings observed in this study not only confirm that peer collaboration is effective but also demonstrate that this approach is effective during the most influential period of learners' development. Farasari (2022)'s same-topic study, focusing on young primary school learners, also identified developmental stage as a core research value, yet a research gap on this topic persists in the junior secondary education context. This study is specifically designed to fill that gap.

This study analyzes students' perceived learning benefits in second language (L2) instruction. The perception rates of the four categories of benefits, sorted from highest to lowest, are: the usefulness of peer feedback (84.4%), communicative self-confidence (81.3%), reduction in speaking anxiety (78.1%), and communicative motivation (75.0%). This hierarchical order of perceived benefits has explanatory significance and merits in-depth investigation. This conclusion contradicts traditional understandings. Hasanah & Setyono (2022) point out that in teacher-centered teaching cultures, it is widely believed that teacher feedback, which carries greater authority, holds higher value. Our analysis finds that beyond the professional expertise of the feedback source, the perceived value of feedback is also shaped by interactive social relationships. Peer feedback occurs within a shared context and carries no evaluative pressure, so it poses far less threat than the formal error correction provided by teachers. Sato and Ballinger (2022) attribute this difference to the register gaps and power asymmetries between the two types of interaction. The present study confirms that this gap persists among adolescent learners who rarely receive formal instruction in regular peer error correction.

In the field of second language acquisition, the intrinsic link between peer feedback and learners' communicative confidence is a core issue that warrants focused critical attention and carries a universal pedagogical logic that extends beyond the immediate findings of the present study. This study presents a counterintuitive finding: the participating students not only accepted their peers' error-correction suggestions but also regarded this interactive process as a core pathway to building their own communicative confidence. Behind this seemingly contradictory conclusion lies a core root cause: while error correction in conventional learning settings tends to undermine learners' confidence, peer-led error correction in collaborative group contexts conveys the implicit message of "mutual aid rather than judgment", transforming a one-sided evaluative experience into the joint construction of knowledge. In previous research, Pham and Bui (2021) found that in EFL oral

classroom settings, reciprocal peer error correction could generate benefits at both the affective and linguistic levels, but they did not explain the underlying mechanism of this effect.

This study explicitly proposes this mechanism: when error correction is rooted in peer relationships built on mutual honesty and shared communicative goals, learners will interpret it as a supportive signal, rather than proof of their own insufficient ability. This mechanism also reasonably explains the conclusion put forward by Namaziandost et al. (2021) and Maarof (2022) that peer interaction can expand learners' linguistic reserves. This study ultimately traces the core benefit of improved communicative confidence back to the affective framework of peer collaborative learning and uses Bandura's proposed "vicarious self-efficacy" to corroborate the student interview data, confirming that peer support in collaborative settings can indeed strengthen learners' persistence and confidence.

The core finding of this study with the greatest pedagogical significance is that the EFL learners participating in the research experienced a significant reduction in their foreign language speaking anxiety. This conclusion was the most frequently referenced across all interview themes, and 78.1% of respondents to the collected questionnaires also submitted positive feedback. To avoid relying only on the vague general assumption that "peer settings are safer", this paper cites Horwitz's (2021) classic definition to frame foreign language speaking anxiety as a persistent affective barrier that prevents learners from accessing their existing declarative linguistic knowledge. It then unpacks the functional logic of peer collaboration observed in this study: peer collaboration does not eliminate anxiety entirely, but shifts evaluation authority from teachers, who hold power over students' grades and admission to further education, to peers who share the same situational background as the learners. This reduces the risks associated with oral expression, encouraging students to actively try to communicate. Previous studies by Kirmizi and Kirmizi (2020) and Saeid (2024) also recorded reduced anxiety in middle school EFL peer collaboration settings, and attributed this outcome to the informal linguistic register of peer interaction. However, neither of these studies was conducted in a teacher-centered teaching culture like that of the Indonesian middle schools included in this research. This study proposes that in contexts where the power imbalance between teachers and students in evaluation is particularly pronounced, the anxiety-reducing effect of peer collaboration is amplified by the stark contrast between the two types of evaluative interactions. This finding provides empirical support for this context-driven amplification effect.

In the empirical investigation conducted for this study on English peer collaborative teaching, core data from the motivation dimension presents noteworthy characteristics: the share of positive responses for this dimension reaches 75.0%, but among the four survey dimensions set for this study, its 31.72% neutral response rate is the highest across all dimensions. This pattern cannot be simply dismissed and requires critical interpretation. This paper introduces a framework distinguishing intrinsic and situational motivation to explain this phenomenon. By comparing with conclusions from previous studies by Derakhshan et al. (2022), Janssen & O'Brien (2022), Tseng et al. (2022), and Hasanah & Setyono (2022), the sample of this study, which consists of eighth-grade English learners who are exposed to peer collaboration for the first time, differs from the samples in prior research that had mature, rich experience with collaborative work. For these students, the neutral responses mark a transitional state of motivation formation, rather than resistance to the teaching method. Data from all dimensions in this study show that the lowest positive response rate across all dimensions exceeds 75%, proving that the short period of peer collaboration has already driven a significant shift in students' communicative orientation.

After synthesizing all findings of this study, the portrait of peer collaborative teaching we outline is far more complex than the simplistic one-sided recognition of this approach, and it does not stop at the superficial verification of the claim that "students like peer collaboration." In North Sumatra, a long-standing teacher-centered teaching culture is characterized by asymmetric

assessment practices that suppress students' willingness to take communication risks. Against this backdrop, the structured, time-bound introduction of peer collaborative speaking activities can tangibly improve the affective conditions for language learning. This conclusion is supported by converging data from a four-dimensional questionnaire and interviews. Integrating this approach into English teaching at SMP N 18 Medan and similar local junior high school EFL institutions is not a supplementary expansion strategy, but a transformative change that reshapes the socio-emotional architecture of oral language teaching.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated eighth-grade students' perceptions of peer collaboration in developing their English-speaking skills at SMP N 18 Medan. The findings demonstrate that students hold overwhelmingly positive perceptions of peer collaborative speaking activities, with positive responses exceeding 75% across all four thematic dimensions. Students perceived peer collaborative activities as creating a psychologically safe, communicative environment that differs meaningfully from conventional teacher-fronted instruction. Grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, these perceptions affirm that social interaction with peers serves as an effective catalyst for oral language development. Regarding the most beneficial aspects, the usefulness of peer feedback ranked highest (84.4%), followed by communicative confidence (81.3%), reduction in speaking anxiety (78.1%), and motivation to communicate (75.0%). Students particularly valued the informal and non-evaluative nature of peer feedback, which made corrective input more accessible than teacher-directed correction (Sato & Ballinger, 2022). These findings collectively affirm that peer collaboration is a contextually appropriate and affectively meaningful pedagogical strategy for EFL speaking development at the junior secondary level.

Based on the conclusions, English teachers at SMP N 18 Medan are encouraged to systematically incorporate structured peer collaborative speaking activities, such as paired discussions, role-plays, and group tasks, into regular instruction, as these activities demonstrably reduce anxiety and enhance communicative confidence. School principals and curriculum developers should formally embed peer collaborative strategies within the English curriculum framework. For future researchers, longitudinal investigations that measure actual speaking proficiency outcomes alongside learner perceptions are recommended, as are comparative studies across different regional and institutional EFL contexts in Indonesia, to further substantiate and extend the findings of this study.

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