



## Teacher's Strategies for Teaching English Vocabulary to Slow Learner in Inclusive Classroom

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2026-04-24 Revised: 2026 05-07 Accepted: 2026 05-011</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Differentiated instruction, inclusive classroom, Slow learner, special needs students, teaching strategies.</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> 10.24256/ideasv14i1.10229</p> <p><b>Corresponding Author:</b> Tuti Alawiyah Ramadani Nasution <a href="mailto:tuti0304221010@uinsu.ac.id">tuti0304221010@uinsu.ac.id</a></p>	<p><i>This study aims to identify teachers' strategies for teaching English vocabulary to slow learners in inclusive classrooms, as well as to uncover the challenges faced and the solutions implemented. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and documentation, and then the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results of the study revealed six strategies used by teachers: repetition, Total Physical Response (TPR), explicit phonics instruction, the use of visual media, games, and task differentiation. The challenges that emerged included a lack of parental support and difficulties with the pronunciation of consonant clusters, which teachers addressed through the Family Literacy Movement (GLK) and a step-by-step phonics approach. These findings underscore the importance of multisensory and adaptive strategies in vocabulary learning in inclusive classrooms, while also providing practical guidance for English teachers.</i></p>

## **1. Introduction**

Vocabulary mastery is the main foundation in language learning. Hamawati et al. (2025) affirm that vocabulary is the basis for the development of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Without adequate vocabulary, students will have difficulty understanding the text or expressing ideas. Nation (2001) suggests that effective vocabulary learning includes four main components: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. This framework provides a comprehensive alloy for teachers in designing balanced learning. Schmitt (2008) emphasizes that meaningful repetition and relevant context are key to vocabulary retention. Without both, the vocabulary learned tends to be easily forgotten.

Various studies have identified diverse strategies used by teachers in teaching vocabulary. Azisa et al. (2025) found six main strategies, namely translation, games, guessing from context, assigning tasks, memorization, and the use of pictures. This finding enriches the understanding of the variety of strategies that can be applied. Saniyah and Baehaki (2021) reported the use of discussion, repetition, and memorization in non-formal institutions. These strategies have been proven to help students remember vocabulary. Magfira (2021) identified strategies of translating texts, memorizing vocabulary, and using dictionaries.

These conventional approaches are still widely used today. Fauziningrum (2023) found the use of repetition, visual media, and game-based activities in elementary schools. These strategies are considered enjoyable for students. Gultom et al. (2022) states that the use of translation, dictionaries, stories, and games. This diversity of strategies indicates that teachers have many options in teaching.

However, such strategies are generally designed for normal classroom conditions, whereas in practice, classes do not always consist of students with uniform abilities, especially in the context of inclusive classes where students with different characteristics study together in a single environment (Ainscow et al., 2006). In this situation, there are students who take longer to understand the material, including in the mastery of vocabulary, known as slow learners. Street (1975) defines slow learners as students with an IQ range of 75–90 who need more time to understand and remember material.

So, they need more time to understand and remember learning materials. Borah (2013) explains that slow learners tend to experience difficulties in completing complex tasks, show limitations in social interaction, and face obstacles in academic skills such as reading and writing. Lichtenstein et al. (2024) states that limitations in executive functions, such as working memory and cognitive flexibility, also affect their ability to process new information. Consequently, vocabulary mastery of slow learners tends to be lower compared to other students. This is reinforced by the findings of Cahyono et al. (2024) showing that slow learners in inclusive elementary schools have limited vocabulary and experience difficulties in

reading and writing. Therefore, Hartini et al. (2017) emphasize that slow learners require more structured, systematic, and repeated learning strategies.

The need for such specific strategies becomes increasingly complex in the context of inclusive classrooms. Soukakou et al. (2018) define inclusive classrooms as learning environments that provide equal opportunities for all students, including those with special needs, to learn together in regular classrooms. In this context, teachers are required to accommodate differences in students' abilities without neglecting learning objectives. However, the implementation of inclusive learning still faces various challenges. Moreover, Black-Hawkins et al., (2021) states that teachers need to provide more intensive guidance and demonstrate extra patience in assisting students with special needs. Social and emotional support also constitutes an important factor in creating an inclusive learning environment. In this regard, Tomlinson (2014) asserts that differentiated instruction is an effective strategy for accommodating student diversity through adjustments in methods, materials, and assessment.

Most existing studies are still limited to the stage of identifying and describing vocabulary teaching strategies in a general context. Research by Azisa et al. (2025), Saniyah and Baehaki (2021), Magfira (2021), Fauziningrum et al. (2023), and Gultom et al. (2022) has provided a comprehensive overview of the strategies teachers use. However, the studies have not explained how the strategy is adapted when applied to slow learners in inclusive classes. In fact, experimental studies such as those conducted by Sipayung (2018) regarding the Word Wall strategy, although it shows positive results, it has not specifically engaged slow learners in an inclusive context. As a result, there is still a limited understanding of how vocabulary teaching strategies are adapted, as well as how challenges and solutions arise in real learning practices.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to fill the gaps by answering two research questions: (1) What are the strategies used by English teacher to teach vocabulary to slow learners in inclusive classrooms? (2) What are the challenges faced by the teacher and the solutions they implement? . By examining real practice in the classroom, the study is expected to not only provide an overview, but also recommend a valid strategy framework for similar contexts. Its main contribution is to strengthen the knowledge base of English pedagogy in Indonesia's inclusive education sector-an important but unexplored field, especially with a focus on the unique needs of slow learners.

## **2. Method**

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals within a specific social context (Creswell, 2014). The descriptive design allowed the researcher to describe the phenomenon of

vocabulary teaching strategies as they naturally occurred in the field without manipulating variables. This approach was appropriate for exploring the complexity of implementing teaching strategies in a dynamic inclusive classroom environment.

### *Participants*

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) an English teacher teaching at an elementary school, (2) teaching in a designated inclusive classroom, and (3) having experience teaching students identified by the school as having delayed development within an inclusive education program (Patton, 2002). Based on these criteria, an English teacher was selected from an inclusive elementary school in Medan, North Sumatra. The teacher had been teaching English for 12 years, with three years of experience in an inclusive classroom.

She was selected because she had completed inclusive education training from the local education office and was recommended by the school principal as a teacher capable of handling students with delayed learning development. The status of students with delayed learning development referred to official school documentation consisting of initial assessment results, periodic observations, and recommendations from a special education teacher.

### *Data Collection*

Data collection employed three techniques to ensure triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

#### 1. Observation

Data were first collected through participant observation, this sessions were conducted during three learning sessions, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The observation focused on the types and sequence of vocabulary teaching strategies employed by the teacher; her interactions with students experiencing learning difficulties, and the responses and engagement of these students during the lessons. A structured observation sheet, developed based on sensitizing concepts from the literature on vocabulary teaching and slow learner characteristics, was used to document these aspects systematically. Observations were conducted first to capture natural teaching practices before any interview conversation occurred.

#### 2. Interview

A semi-structured interview is conducted with the teacher and lasts about 60 Minutes. The interview guide was developed inductively based on field notes and analytical memos created after two initial observations. In this way, Interview Questions are structured based on real phenomena that occur in the classroom, not just based on a literature review.

The interviews focused on four main aspects: (a) teachers' understanding of the characteristics of slow learners, (b) planning vocabulary teaching strategies, (c) adjustments made during the learning process, and (d) teachers' evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies. This sequential design-observation followed by Interview-allows researchers to clarify, confirm, and deepen understanding of the observed phenomena (Creswell, 2014).

### 3. Documentation

The third technique involved the analysis of relevant documents to support and triangulate the observational and interview data. The documents analyzed included: (a) the teacher's lesson plans for the observed topics, (b) teaching materials and media used during vocabulary instruction, and (c) visual documentation such as photographs and videos taken during the teaching and learning process. These visual documents were particularly useful in capturing non-verbal interactions, classroom dynamics, and the use of teaching aids that might not have been fully recorded in the observation notes. documentation aimed to confirm and complement the data obtained from observations and interviews, thereby strengthening the overall trustworthiness of the findings (Bowen, 2009).

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by transcribing the interview recordings verbatim and repeatedly reading the observation field notes and lesson plan documents. The second phase involved generating initial codes inductively from the raw data. Examples of initial codes included "pengulangan klasikal," "pengulangan individual untuk SL," "menghitung dengan jari," "tepukan berirama," "ejaan huruf per huruf," and "hanya pilihan ganda untuk SL." In the third phase, similar codes are structured into candidate themes based on shared patterns.

The fourth stage consists of reviewing the candidate's themes to ensure internal coherence and clear differences between themes. The fifth phase involves defining and naming themes, resulting in six main strategies for teaching vocabulary to slow learners and an additional set of challenges and solutions. In the sixth stage, the findings are written down into a narrative report, supported by direct excerpts from interviews and observation notes to ensure trustworthiness.

### **3. Results**

This section presents research findings based on thematic analysis of data obtained from participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. From the analysis process, the findings of this study were prepared to answer two main problems, namely what strategies teachers use in teaching English vocabulary to slow learner students in inclusion classes, as well as the challenges faced by teachers and solutions applied in the learning process.

### 1. Teacher strategies in teaching English vocabulary to slow learners

#### *Strategy 1: Repetition*

After doing observations, the most consistent and most frequent strategy in all three learning sessions was systematic of repetition. When the teacher introduces a new vocabulary, each target word is repeated between three and six times before asking students to imitate, either classically or individually by calling the slow learner one by one. When studying verbs, the intensity of repetition is even higher - the whole word is pronounced five to six times, interspersed with spelling, and then repeated again.

In the interview, the teacher confirmed the reasons behind this practice: "*Yang ketiganya itu kalau untuk bahasa inggris saya paling sering buat itu pengulangan. Pengulangan maksudnya, pengulangan itu saya mengucapkannya dulu atau speaker yang mengucapkan dulu, baru anak-anak mengucapkan. Karena kalau hanya otodidak saja itu bisa-bisa jadi nanti tulisannya jadi B O O K jadi bacaannya bok.*" The analyzed lesson plan also recorded instructions for teachers to repeat the pronunciation of vocabulary and asked students to imitate. This strategy ensures that the slow learner is not carried away by the voices of his classmates passively, but rather gets the opportunity for oral production and immediate feedback.

#### *Strategy 2: Total Physical Response (TPR)*

The results showed that teachers integrate physical movements systematically. When teaching numbers, fingers are used for numbers 1-10, and rhythmic table Pats for numbers on them. In learning verbs, the teacher demonstrates direct movements such as jumping, running, walking, sitting, standing, and clapping, then invites all students to do it together. All slow learners were observed to follow the movement even though one of them appeared to be less agile. The teacher believes "*Kalau langsung dipraktikkan sudah pasti itu akan melekat, paling tidak lebih cepat melekat daripada kita memberikan teori bicara*" The lesson plan does not explicitly mention TPR, indicating that this strategy is a spontaneous adaptation of the teacher based on his experience.

#### *Strategy 3: Explicit Phonics-Based Pronunciation Instruction*

The observation data recorded the teacher consistently writing letter-by-letter spelling on the whiteboard, accompanied by phonetic cues using Indonesian alphabet sounds, for example, "J-U-M-P" and "jai-yu-em-pi." In the interview, the teacher explained that this strategy was a response to slow learners' difficulties in pronouncing consonant clusters such as spoon: "*Kalau dia dalam bahasa inggris kan ketika dia itu huruf konsonan jumpa sama huruf konsonan, nah itu susah untuk mengucapkannya. Contohnya... spoon... untuk mengucapkan spoon saja yang ada huruf E nya masih kesusahan, apalagi ini istilahnya jumpa dua huruf konsonan*". By breaking words into familiar letter units, students' cognitive load was reduced. The

lesson plan did not include this strategy in writing, indicating that it was part of the teacher's practical knowledge that emerged when confronting students' difficulties in class.

#### *Strategy 4: Pictures or Flashcards*

Observations show teachers use clear printed images for each action verb, such as someone jumping or running. These photos are placed at the front of the classroom, making them easily visible to slow learners sitting in the front row. The interview emphasized the importance of visual media for teachers: "*Book itu kan ada gambarnya nanti di situ, di bawahnya itu ada juga kita buat tulisannya book itu hurufnya apa-apa saja*" Unlike other strategies, the lesson plan explicitly states that posters must remain on display so that slow learners who need concrete visual support can see them easily, indicating that this strategy has been planned in advance.

#### *Strategy 5: Game-Based Vocabulary Practice*

Based on observational results, the teacher employed games as a medium for vocabulary drilling. The observation notes describe the game procedure as follows: "*Guru membuat permainan 'Simon Says' dalam bahasa Inggris. Guru berkata 'Simon says jump', maka semua siswa harus melompat. Jika guru hanya bilang 'jump' tanpa 'Simon says', siswa tidak boleh gerak. Guru melakukan ini untuk semua kata kerja. Slow learner ikut, kadang keliru tetapi guru tersenyum dan mengulang.*"

This game reveals several important pedagogical aspects. First, students must listen carefully and comprehend the target vocabulary. Second, the activity also involves physical movement, thereby reinforcing the TPR elements previously employed. Third, the teacher's response to student errors is gentle and supportive rather than punitive. The teacher smiles and repeats the instruction, thus creating a safe, low-anxiety learning environment for slow learners.

In addition to Simon Says, the teacher also utilized a question-and-answer game in which the teacher performed an action and then asked, "What am I doing?" Students were required to name the corresponding verb. Observational notes indicate that the teacher deliberately called upon slow learners to participate in this activity, thereby ensuring their active engagement in the learning process.

#### *Strategy 6: Differentiation in Task Assignment*

The latter strategy includes a series of adjustments captured in observational and interview data. Observations noted teachers break tasks down into small steps, give extra time, simplify instruction, check individual comprehension, and place slow learners in front near the teacher's desk. In the interview, the teacher confirms the difference in the format of the assessment: "*Ada. Kalau dia di slow learner ini kita tidak membuatnya berupa isian atau essay. Yang saya buat di kelas ini itu hanya untuk orang itu hanya untuk pilihan berganda. Jadi*

ketika pun saya membacakan nanti dia hanya membuat jawabannya itu hanya choice saja, apakah dia jawabannya A, B atau C, tidak berupa essay atau isian." The lesson plan also notes Special Assistance for students facing difficulties, confirming that this strategy has been partially planned. All of these adjustments indicate that teachers are not lowering standards but rather modifying the path of achievement according to the ability of slow learners.

## *2. Challenges Encountered by the Teacher and Implemented Solutions*

In teaching strategies, the findings of this study also reveal the various challenges faced by teachers when teaching English vocabulary to slow learner students. These challenges do not stand alone; rather, they are accompanied by the teacher's efforts to develop solutions that are appropriate to the classroom context.

One of the main challenges teachers faces is the lack of parental support. Teachers state that without parental involvement, slow learner progress is limited, especially in reinforcement learning at home. In an interview, the teacher revealed, *"Yang pertama itu kalau dari eksternalnya sudah pasti itu dukungan dari orang tua, karena kan kalau tidak ada dukungan dari orang tua, tidak ada paguyubannya memang susah betul itu"* To overcome this, teachers and colleagues initiated the Family Literacy Movement (GLK) program that encourages parents to accompany children to read and write every day at home. The teacher explained, *"Makanya di kelas khusus kelas saya kami ada yang disebut GLK, Gerakan Literasi Keluarga. Karena apa itu maksudnya Gerakan Literasi Keluarga tadi, lima baris satu hari itu dibaca, lima baris satu hari ditulis."* In English learning, the program is adapted by giving the task of writing and reading the vocabulary being studied, such as numbers in English, the results of which are reported every morning.

In addition, teachers also face obstacles related to unpreparedness of student learning equipment. Some students come to school without books or stationery, thus hindering learning activities. The teacher said, *"Hambatan yang keduanya itu persiapan anak-anak tadi. Kenapa saya bilang persiapan anak-anak tadi, itu bisa saja di dalam kelas itu dia tidak ada bukunya. Jadi ketika kita belajar ini untuk nulis-nulis ini ya pulpen saja tidak ada."* In response, teachers occasionally provide or buy stationery for students in need. The teacher revealed, *"Makanya sering kalau saya itu buat di sini itu pak ada pulpen, beli pulpen, pak ada buku, belikan buku. Tetapi kan itu hanya sekali-sekali, tidak tiap hari."* This shows the efforts of teachers to ensure that students can still follow the learning despite the limitations.

Linguistically, the interview identified slow learner difficulties in pronouncing consonant clusters such as spoon. The solution is a phased phonics approach, teaching letter-by-letter pronunciation first without demanding immediate perfection, as confirmed by observational data when teachers write letter-by-letter spellings on the board. Observations also noted noise interference from outside the classroom and low responsiveness of learners to peer assistance, which teachers addressed by adjusting sound volume, providing individual support,

and arranging strategic seating to encourage interaction.

#### **4. Discussion**

This study aims to identify the strategies of teachers in teaching English vocabulary to slow learner students in inclusive classes, as well as uncover the challenges faced and solutions implemented. The findings obtained are discussed in relation to previous theories and research, with emphasis on the cognitive mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of strategies as well as the contribution of such studies to inclusive pedagogy.

The first most dominant strategy is verbal repetition. Teachers not only rely on classical repetition, but also ask slow learners to repeat them one at a time. This practice is in line with Nation (2001) which places repetition as the main cognitive need in vocabulary retention. Cognitively, frequent repetition helps compensate for working memory limitations that are characteristic of slow learners (Lichtenstein et al., 2024). Each repetition reinforces the memory trace through repeated activation of the same neural pathway, increasing the likelihood that the word will be picked up when needed. What sets this finding apart from general practice is the presence of individual repetitions specifically aimed at slow learners. This ensures they get immediate oral production and corrective feedback opportunities, rather than just getting carried away by the faster voices of classmates.

The second strategy is the integration of Total Physical Response (TPR) through finger movements, table Pats, and whole-body movements. Asher (in Richards & Rodgers, 2014) developed TPR based on the belief that language learning is reinforced by the incorporation of physical movement and verbal input. These findings support the theory of Embodied Cognition, which states that bodily experiences form cognitive representations. For slow learners who often have difficulty processing abstract explanations, TPR creates direct sensory-motor associations between words and their meanings, reducing the burden of verbal processing. The fact that slow learners participate in the entire movement albeit with little motor rigidity confirms that this strategy is cognitively inclusive and effective.

The third strategy is explicit phonics teaching. By writing down the spelling per letter and using the sound of the Indonesian Alphabet as a phonetic bridge, teachers apply the principle of scaffolding (Vygotsky in Tomlinson, 2014). This approach reduces the phonological complexity of English words to those units that the student already knows, so the cognitive load is reduced. More importantly, the teacher accepts gradual pronunciation and does not demand perfection from the very beginning. It provides a safe space for slow learners to build phonological awareness gradually, according to their slower learning tempo. This local adaptation extends previous studies that emphasized the effectiveness of teaching

phonics to EFL learners, but have not linked it to the specific needs of slow learners in the Indonesian context.

The fourth strategy is the use of visual media. Printed images placed in front of the classroom provide an alternative path to understanding and storing vocabulary meaning (manurung et al., 2025) . Theoretically, this supports the principle of dual coding (Paivio, 1986) which states that verbally and visually encoded information is easier to remember. For slow learners who often have auditory processing difficulties, visualization helps reduce cognitive load and provides many memory retrieval clues. The finding that lesson plans that explicitly mention posters should be easily seen by slow learners confirms that this strategy is not improvisation, but rather part of conscious planning for inclusive student needs.

The fifth strategy is a language game like Simon Says. In addition to blending listening comprehension with movement, the game creates a low-anxiety learning environment. This is especially important because slow learners are prone to academic anxiety and low self-efficacy (Borah, 2013). The teacher's supportive responses to mistakes-smiles and repetitions, not outright corrections-build the psychological sense of security that is a prerequisite for the courage to speak out. Thus, play is not just a distraction, but a pedagogical means to build the affective foundation of language learning, in line with the findings of Azisa et al. (2025) on the role of games in vocabulary learning motivation.

The sixth strategy is task differentiation and assessment accommodation, which is a clear manifestation of product and process differentiation as conceptualized by Tomlinson (2014). Provide multiple choice questions to learners who are slow to realize their limitations in written expression (Cahyono et al., 2024) without lowering achievement standards. Task completion, additional time, simplified instructions and strategic seating placement are forms of accommodation that support executive functions, which are often its weak points. This shows that teachers do not lower expectations, but adjust the path of learning achievement.

The six strategies above do not operate in isolation, but form a complementary multisensory learning framework. Verbal repetition reinforces auditory memory traces, TPR activates kinesthetic memory, explicit phonics teaching builds phonological awareness, visual media provide concrete anchors, play lowers affective filters, and differentiation guarantees fair access. It is this synergy that is the key finding of this study: the effectiveness of vocabulary learning for slow learners does not lie in a single strategy, but rather in the integration of different strategies that reach the student's diverse cognitive and affective pathways.

Most of the previous studies (Azisa et al., 2025; Fauziningrum et al., 2023; Gultom et al., 2022) only identified strategies separately in the general population, whereas this study shows how adaptation and integration of strategies occur within complex inclusive classrooms.

In terms of challenges, lack of parental support is the most significant obstacle, in line with the findings of Cahyono et al. (2024) on the main inhibiting factors for slow learner vocabulary mastery in Indonesian inclusive schools. The solution in the form of the Family Literacy Movement (GLK) shows the initiative of teachers in building a bridge between school and home, an important step given that vocabulary learning requires repetition outside of school hours. The teacher does not wait for structural changes, but acts as an agent of change at the level of society. This underscores that the success of inclusive education requires cross-context collaboration driven by teacher awareness and commitment.

Theoretically, this study expands the understanding of the application of the principles of differentiated learning and vocabulary acquisition in a less touched context: inclusive classes with slow learners in Indonesia. If previous studies have only identified strategies for general students, this study shows how they are adapted and integrated to meet the cognitive and affective needs of slow-learning students. Its main contribution is to offer a multisensory strategy integration model that can be used as a reference by EFL teachers in similar contexts. The limitation of this study lies in the design of a single case so that the findings can't be widely generalized. Further research is suggested to involve more teachers and schools, as well as explore the slow learner's perspective directly through participatory methods.

## **5. Conclusion**

The study reveals that teachers employ six integrated strategies in teaching English vocabulary to slow learner students in inclusive classrooms, namely oral repetition, Total Physical Response (TPR), explicit phonics instruction, the use of visual media, language games, and task differentiation. Oral repetition serves as a key foundation for strengthening vocabulary retention, while TPR and visual media help connect abstract meanings to more concrete learning experiences. Explicit phonics instruction plays a crucial role in addressing students' difficulties in pronouncing consonant clusters, which represent a significant linguistic barrier for slow learners. In addition, language games contribute to creating a low-anxiety learning environment, and task differentiation ensures that students' limitations in writing do not hinder their ability to demonstrate vocabulary comprehension.

Beyond the implementation of these strategies, teachers encounter several challenges, including limited parental support, inadequate learning materials, and persistent difficulties in pronouncing consonant clusters. In response, teachers adopt active and adaptive measures by developing contextual solutions. These include initiating the Family Literacy Movement (GLK) to encourage parental

involvement in home-based learning, providing limited material support, and applying a gradual and error-tolerant phonics approach. These findings suggest that effective learning in inclusive classrooms is not solely determined by instructional strategies, but also by teachers' capacity to establish collaboration with families and to respond flexibly to learning barriers.

From a practical perspective, the six identified strategies offer applicable guidance for English teachers in inclusive primary school settings, as they are feasible and do not require extensive additional resources. Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of differentiated instruction and vocabulary acquisition within the context of slow learner students in Indonesia. However, this study is limited to a single case, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a broader range of teachers and schools, as well as to explore the direct experiences of slow learner students to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of these strategies.

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