School-based Curriculum Action Research Series

The 21st century marks the development of an information or knowledge society with fast-changing needs and environment. In order to prepare our younger generation for their future needs, schools, through constant endeavours in search of excellence, have to provide students with different learning opportunities and experiences. In this respect, the school curriculum should best be aligned with the social development as well as the students’ interest.

Since 1998, the School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section has been collaborating with school teachers in curriculum development in various Key Learning Areas. Building on the strengths and successful experiences accumulated over the years, the Section has initiated action researches jointly with teachers, aiming at empowering teachers to make informed decisions on curriculum research and development.

Why Do We Promote School-based Curriculum Action Research?

Collaborative school-based curriculum action research aims to:

⇒ enable teachers to enhance quality learning and teaching through knowledge generated and constructed in the process of critical and systematic inquiry into different learning and teaching issues;
⇒ develop teachers’ competence in curriculum development and research literacy as well as their sense of curriculum ownership; and
⇒ develop schools into learning organizations through collaborative team work within schools and professional sharing in school networks.

How Do We Conduct Collaborative School-based Curriculum Action Research?

In the course of school-based curriculum development, teachers’ critical reflections will help them identify issues worth addressing in the form of an action research. The following steps illustrate the basic cycle in action research:

1. Examine critically learning- or teaching-related issues worth researching into
2. Define the research focus and review literature for current theories and practice
3. Develop action plans or intervention strategies
4. Implement action plans in contexts
5. Collect evidence and reflect on effectiveness of actions
6. Draw conclusions and use feedback to improve learning and teaching
7. Start a new cycle if necessary
As teachers progress through this spiral cycle, they improve their teaching through continual reflection and move closer to the solution of the identified problems. Taking the role as facilitator, Curriculum Officers from the SBCD(P) Section work as partners with teachers, rendering professional support throughout the research cycle, assisting them in reflecting and conceptualizing tacit knowledge embedded in their practice.

**How Can These Reports Be Used?**

This series of action research reports portrays the participating teachers’ educational beliefs and philosophy, and the developmental pathway undertaken to improve the school curriculum. The curriculum design, intervention strategies, action plans, research tools and instruments, as well as the findings and recommendations may be valuable references for teachers who intend to launch school-based curriculum development and/or collaborative action research in their schools. We sincerely hope that this series can serve as a platform to stimulate professional dialogue in curriculum research and development, and to spark off a research culture in primary schools in Hong Kong.

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IT : Trick or Treat?

Using IT to Enhance Students’ Confidence in Listening andSpeaking

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Why We Started this Research</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. The Research Process</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Methodology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Schedule</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Literature Review on the Use of IT</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. The Development Process</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Findings</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Students’ Confidence in Listening and Speaking</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Students’ Interest in English</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Active Learning with the Use of IT</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. More Effective Learning with the Use of IT</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Difficulties Encountered</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Lack of Technical Support</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Teachers’ Monitoring vs. Students’ Autonomy</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Problem with the Use of Learning Resources</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Problem with the Teaching Strategies</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Discussion and Insights</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Need for Knowledge and Experiences in Using IT</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Need for a Variety of Resources</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Collaboration among Teachers</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Collaboration with the CDO</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Impact on Teachers and the School</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Conclusion</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IT : TRICK OR TREAT?

ABSTRACT

This is a collaborative action research conducted by five Primary 4 English teachers and one Curriculum Development Officer in the academic year 2000-2001. The objectives were to find out how the teachers could use the IT package effectively to provide students with more exposure to authentic communication and more practice in communication so as to enhance their confidence in listening and speaking. It was also hoped that teachers could share understanding and learning in the process of integrating the IT package with the existing English curriculum so that they become a meaningful whole.

This is basically a qualitative research and six students from a class were chosen as the focus group to gather more in-depth information on students’ learning. Interviews, questionnaires and observations were used to examine the impact on learning through the use of IT in the English class. All data showed that students were more eager to learn and they were motivated to communicate in English. The impact of IT on learning and teaching has been very positive and encouraging.

During the research process, the teachers were impressed by the students’ enthusiastic response towards learning on the computer and their development in different skills. The teachers have developed better understanding and strategies in using IT to enhance learning. In this report, teachers’ learning is shared: the need for teachers to have professional knowledge in and clear purposes of using IT, the significance of teachers’ role and change in perception of language learning, interaction between teachers and students, interaction among students, the different stages in using IT and the need for a variety of resources. The report also discusses the difficulties the teachers have encountered in using IT in class.
I. BACKGROUND

A. Why We Started This Research

1. The Situation

In response to the urge from the Education & Manpower Bureau (1998) asking schools to have up to 25% of the curriculum taught with the assistance of Information Technology (IT) in the new millennium, we, a group of Primary 4 teachers, wanted to explore how we could implement IT in our school. In the 2000-2001 school year, the computer laboratory was installed. Since this was our first attempt in using IT in English Language teaching, we had applied for the Quality Education Fund and used the grant to purchase a teaching package ‘Let’s Go Interactive’. So, basic facilities and resources were made available for the use of IT in English lessons. However, the computer room could only provide 38 sets of computers with headsets for students. It was inadequate since we had 40 students in one class on average. Some students had to use notebook computers. Since there was only one part-time technician, technical support was always a problem.

2. Our Problem

Despite some basic training, we were still facing a lot of difficulties in using IT in teaching before we started the research. Although there was some basic training for us on the use of the panel system and the software, we lacked the basic technique and the knowledge of how to use IT effectively in our teaching. Similarly, since this was the first year for our school to introduce computer lessons to students, many students did not have prior knowledge in using the computer. There was a great range in our students’ knowledge and
experience in using IT. How we teachers actually made use of the IT resources available effectively and made full use of them to enhance teaching and learning was still the most critical question worth examining. We hoped that we could use IT to enhance our students’ learning like providing them with choices and exposure to rich language experiences. But there were many questions we had to address. For instance, how could we explore the use of IT in our teaching? How could we incorporate IT into the curriculum to enhance teaching and learning? What were the considerations for us teachers to use the learning package and what might be the problems we would encounter? Were there any alternative resources besides the package? So, we started off this action research to address the above questions. We also wanted to reflect on our own process of growth and difficulties encountered in our attempts.

B. Purpose of the Study

This was a collaborative action research conducted with a Curriculum Development Officer (CDO) from Curriculum Development Institute. We were P. 4 English Language teachers and we planned to use IT in our English curriculum in the school year of 2000-2001. One of us has been working on curriculum adaptation in English Language with the School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section for two years. Based on the experience we have gained and the support we have developed for each other during the past year, we want to further explore how we can empower ourselves in new initiatives. We therefore embarked on this action research on using IT, which was a real new challenge for all the teachers involved.
This research aimed at exploring how IT, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) software in particular in this context, could be used effectively in language teaching in our school. After some preliminary study of the needs of both our students and teachers, the problems we identified and wanted to address were as follows:

- Students did not have adequate exposure to authentic English and practice in communication in a conventional English class. They did not have enough confidence in listening and speaking.
- Teachers did not have adequate knowledge and skills in using IT and how to use the IT package effectively in their teaching.

We started by examining the package ‘Let’s Go Interactive’. We found that besides reinforcing the learning of language items, it would provide more opportunities for students to listen to more authentic English and speak freely with its skills-based programs and interactive games. So, it was hoped that students’ listening and speaking skills could be enhanced with the use of the package at the first stage. This available resource could also provide teachers with a platform to integrate IT elements with the English curriculum and explore how it could be used in the real situation to enhance teaching and learning. To address the problems identified above, we planned to make the following attempts in the process:

- Teachers used the IT package selectively to provide students with more exposure to authentic communication and more practice in communication so as to enhance their confidence in listening and speaking; and
• Teachers shared understanding and learning in the process of exploring how IT could be applied effectively in English language teaching and attempted to integrate the IT package with the normal English curriculum so that they became a meaningful whole.

We hoped that with such attempts, we could increase experience and competence in integrating IT with the curriculum and making all elements of learning and teaching a meaningful whole. And our students could increase their confidence in listening and speaking and communicating with others in English.
II. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

A. Methodology

Since this was a collaborative action research, reflections from both teachers and CDO were very important. During the whole process, we had discussions and sharing from time to time. Important findings and development were noted down for analysis. All of us kept journals and reflected on the teaching process. Our meetings were crucial occasions for reflection and evaluation. Sharing related to the teaching process and the problems encountered were also recorded whenever necessary.

This was basically a qualitative research since we tried to explore and interpret the learning process in the actual context of our school and classroom. To collect data on students’ learning on the computer and assess their development of listening and speaking skills, we made use of classroom observations mainly. Checklists were set and we also noted down important findings.

To collect more details concerning students’ learning, we selected six students from a class (P.4D) as the focus group. We held interviews with them on their attitude towards learning English, their effort made and their confidence in learning. These students responded to a questionnaire on their attitude towards computers as well. The teacher observed the focus group more closely in class to obtain details. Observation checklist was used for recording.

Besides classroom observations by the teachers concerned, two extracurricular activities ‘Teatime Gathering’ were held in January and July 2001 respectively. During the first gathering, a native speaker held conversations and played games
with the students to see how far they had improved in their confidence in listening and speaking. In the second gathering, students were given opportunities to present their projects and play some more games. Observations of students’ confidence and improvement were recorded as further evidence.

A questionnaire on students’ response and attitude towards learning English on the computer was sent to all students towards the end of the second term. This provided more data on their learning and whether using IT in the English lessons had enhanced their confidence, particularly in listening and speaking. To seek parents’ views on the use of IT, we also sent a questionnaire to them at the end of the year.
## B. Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 2000</td>
<td>- do literature review, explore materials and discuss focuses;</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 2000</td>
<td>- set learning targets and focuses of teaching, decide on the aims of research;</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2000</td>
<td>- plan teaching schedule and discuss the use of the package;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- decide on the research methodology and focus group, design the research instruments;</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2000</td>
<td>- discuss and try out teaching with the use of the package in the English lessons;</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2000 –</td>
<td>- planning-acting-reflecting cycle: first stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2001</td>
<td>- teachers conduct <strong>observations</strong> during the course of teaching;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2000</td>
<td>- teachers reflect through the <strong>journals</strong> and share from time to time;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- the teacher <strong>observes the focus group</strong> and makes records;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <strong>focus group</strong> respond to a <strong>questionnaire</strong> on attitude towards computers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2000</td>
<td>- conduct <strong>interviews</strong> with focus group;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- lesson observation by CDO;</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 2001</td>
<td>- First <strong>Teatime Gathering</strong>;</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2001</td>
<td>- students respond to a <strong>questionnaire</strong> on learning English on the computer;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- first stage analysis;</td>
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<tr>
<td>February – June 2001</td>
<td>- planning-acting-reflecting cycle: second stage;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- discuss and try out different IT resources in class;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- teachers carry on with observations and encourage students to use IT in assignments;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- students did a project on ‘toys’;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2001</td>
<td>- Second <strong>Teatime gathering</strong>;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July – September 2001</td>
<td>- parents respond to a questionnaire;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- drafting of report</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C. Literature Review on the Use of IT (From July – September, 2000)

We started by reading up materials on using IT in ELT from July 2000. Based on the knowledge from the literature review, we had lengthy discussions on the objectives of using IT in our curriculum, things we wanted to find out from this research and how to go about it.

1. Advantages of the Use of IT

Concerning the advantages of using IT, many research findings confirm that computer in language learning offers choices for students and a tool to students which allows them to assume mastery of their own learning experience (Philips, 1986). Students can develop autonomy over the pace and content of their learning (Davis & Desforges et al., 1997). One strength of CD-ROM materials is their ability to provide a situation in which students can interact with the learning materials and exert control over the use of them. Learning in this way is not passive, for students need to think about the language, engage with it and respond to it (Dangerfield, 2000). With the use of IT in education, it is hoped that students should take a more active role in learning and acquiring new ideas. Computer-assisted learning and teaching can make young learners more lively and active in the classroom (EMB, 1998). This in turn will enhance students’ motivation to learn.

Besides, Dangerfield (2000) pointed out that work completed in the computer environment is quite a private affair and there is no public loss of face. Errors are usually known only to the student. So, it provides a non-threatening, non-judgmental learning environment for the students. The use of the IT resources as a flexible self-study learning tool can also cater for
individual learner differences. For instance, students can focus on areas that they are interested in or need help in. They can take as much time as they like and choose what they want to learn. They can work at whatever pace they prefer and work according to their own learning styles.

From many research findings, students do like working on the computer with multimedia materials. They are more attractive than the traditional books, tapes or videos. This may be because of the novelty factor or the appealing features of multimedia. The attraction of moving, interactive, full colour and musical input adds interest to learning and provide motivational goals for attention. Students may attend more to the input and understand better. The features of the multimedia resources like offering instant feedback also encourage students to monitor themselves and be able to evaluate their own performance. If learning can become more self-directed and autonomous, the students will be more motivated to learn and work on their own.

2. Purposes of Using IT in Language Teaching

The computer can serve a variety of uses for language teaching. It can be a tutor offering language drills or skill practice; a stimulus for discussion and interaction; or a tool for writing and research. With the advent of the Internet, it can also be a medium of global communication and a source of limitless authentic materials (Warschauer, 1996). According to the CDC English Language Syllabus, ‘it is very effective in arousing interests in learners through the use of text, graphics, sound and animation integratively… There is educational software that helps them develop listening, reading and writing skills. It can also be used as a source of information to support speaking
activities among learners’. Multimedia provides students with the opportunities to experience language in a variety of media, each of which can serve to reinforce the other (Brett, 2000). For instance, sound, the moving pictures and the written words to the language on the multimedia resources can provide a fuller type of language input. Students can see, hear, say, do and get feedback while working on the computer.

We realized the various functions of the IT resources in enhancing language learning. Rather than being too ambitious, we focused more on using a software to develop our students’ listening and speaking skills in this research. With this consideration in mind, the package ‘Let’s Go Interactive’ was chosen. This package attempts to make use of multimedia by presenting listening, speaking, and reading activities within a lively animated world. The programmes provide songs, conversations, word and phonic study, sentence-making, question-and-answer practice and games. It states that it can give ‘students with the intensive listening and speaking practice not possible in the classroom. It also allows the less confident student to practice in a private, stress-free environment ..’. (Let’s Go Interactive Instructor’s Manual)

3. **Role of Teacher**

‘Technology, by itself, cannot fulfill instructional purposes in the classroom, but by teachers’ adoption and exploration in the instructional technology integrated curriculum, technology can be of great use’ (Chin, 1994). So, the use of the computer or any software does not itself constitute a method. Rather, it is a medium in which a variety of methods, approaches, and pedagogical philosophies may be implemented. The computer can be a more
effective curriculum resource (Davis, 1997). And the effectiveness of CALL cannot reside in the medium itself but only in how it is put to use.

The use of IT tools to enable quality learning experiences depends upon the teacher. It is most important for teachers to interact creatively with this resource and design its use. Teachers’ role is changing and Scrimshaw (1997) pointed out that teachers need to teach the processes of learning explicitly rather than its products. Facing these challenges, ‘teachers themselves need more opportunities and support in using the new technologies in collaborative contexts, so that they can both identify the problems and possibilities for themselves and find ways to model these activities in their own practice with learners’. ‘Teachers need time to reflect upon and research what is happening’. According to Somekh (1997), to explore how the use of IT leads to innovative learning experiences, teachers have to provide the context which makes this possible. Teachers need to develop competence and confidence in making IT resources a necessary and integral part of learning rather than an add-on technical aid. Whether the use of IT can result in any changes in the teaching practice and learning experience is the most important issue.

In order to help students learn effectively through the use of IT, the teacher has to provide the necessary guidelines. The use of the internet can be a big problem for many students. Students are faced with hundreds of internet sources and they may not be able to handle such a big amount of information. One important task for teachers is to assist the students so that they can discover what they enjoy and find meaningful according to their level of competence. Teachers should also help them evaluate the websites and the use
of them. In these occasions, the teacher is not the single omniscient source of knowledge, but a facilitator helping students build their own learning strategies (Kokkas, 2000).

So, this action research arises from such understanding and we all engage ourselves in a continual process of rethinking the meaning and use of IT in language teaching.

D. The Development Process

1. Planning-acting-reflecting Cycle (First stage)

In this research, we used the package ‘Let’s Go’ as a start in our attempt to use IT in English language teaching. There was only one experienced computer teacher but there were four experienced English teachers in our group, we could exchange ideas and view things from different perspectives, incorporating both the needs of IT and language teaching. We intended to teach students the basic skills in operating the package during the computer lessons so that they could use the package in the English lessons. Starting from summer 2000, we spent a lot of time examining how we could use this package to suit our purposes and help us achieve our targets. We thought that the package with its theme-based activities could be integrated with the normal teaching. We planned to use the package integratively with the textbooks so that students’ language and ideas could be further enriched and reinforced with the use of IT. We also hoped that with exposure to spoken English used in authentic situations by native speakers, our students could have more confidence in listening and speaking. The fun elements like songs and games in the package should appeal to the students so that their interest in learning English could be
enhanced. This was also the focus of our research.

After studying the package, we identified the relevant units which could be matched with those in the textbooks. We decided to cover six units of the package since they were related to the themes like ‘My neighbourhood’ and ‘Relationships’ of the textbooks. Some units in the textbooks were deleted to leave room for IT and the research.

Students learnt to use the package from October 2000 onwards. Students’ response was very enthusiastic and even the less motivated ones demonstrated a drastic change in their attitude towards the English lesson. We further explored how to make the learning of the package meaningful for our students. We decided that students should have some purposes in using the package. So, we gave our students tasks to complete in the IT lessons. When designing the tasks for the module ‘My family’, we also integrated the package into the learning-teaching process and provided students with the opportunities to use IT in their work like making name cards and envelopes. We encouraged students to make use of what they had learnt from the package, including the language patterns and vocabulary, in other classroom activities and assignments.

After using the package for a term, we learnt that there were both advantages and limitations in using one package to achieve our targets. The following were some of the advantages:
• It offered very good visual impact and used authentic English in different situations.

• It allowed and encouraged interactive learning between the students and the computer.

• It allowed students to make choices and progress at their own speed.

• The design of the activities and the songs enhanced students’ motivation and provided more stimulation for learning. It also helped to enhance students’ language skills and enriched their vocabulary.

• Students could work under a pressure-free atmosphere when working on the computer. There was no public embarrassment even when they gave a wrong answer.

• All topics were designed in the same manner. It was easy to use.

However, there were lots of limitations when we used the package in class, for instance:

• It was very difficult to integrate this package into our current curriculum. We had to consider the themes, the language and the level of difficulty and how this package fitted in with the rest of the students’ learning in order to make things more meaningful.

• Some contents and focuses of the programmes might not be suitable for our students.

• There was great problem in monitoring the students. If we allowed students complete free choice, we did not know how they were progressing and how sharing could be done.

• It was difficult to monitor students’ learning, particularly their speaking and recording. The package has its own purposes and if we
wanted to use it to provide students with the opportunity in learning intonation and stress, we would find the package inadequate. Besides, the package is designed like a textbook package aiming at training students’ different skills and we might need to consider the language part and the teaching / assessment of it. This caused pressure on the teacher’s part.

In our evaluation, we realized that we were too ambitious, hoping to achieve too many targets at one time with one package. Considering the advantages and limitations of the package itself, we learnt to be more realistic. We had to consider how to strike a balance between using the package for enjoyment and integrating it with the curriculum to help students learn meaningfully.

In our first stage analysis, we clarified further our purposes of using IT in English Language teaching. We agreed that the first stage objective of providing enrichment to students through IT was achieved. The most important function of using the package observed so far was the students’ enjoyment in using the computer in the English lessons. The package was the starting point for students to be exposed to IT and enjoy learning through this medium. The students were obviously more motivated to learn through this medium. We were all impressed by their enthusiasm in the computer room. Students’ performance in the tasks of the module ‘My family’ was better than before. We also observed that with more chances to speak and listen to English through the package, students in general had more confidence in their listening and speaking.
As for the other objectives, we had to adopt a flexible and more relaxing way in handling the package. We did not worry so much over integrating IT into the curriculum as we gathered more experience. Since we did not include the language items from the package in the examination, this released much pressure from both teachers and students. At the initial stage, providing enrichment and motivating students was the most important function of the package. We felt that if students could learn anything from IT, it would be a bonus for them. For higher ability students, it was hoped that they could apply what they had learnt and transfer the skills and knowledge in their classroom activities.

2. **Planning-acting-reflecting Cycle (Second stage)**

In the second stage, considering the limitations of the package (or any other package) and the need to extend students’ learning, we tried different strategies and turned to other IT resources like powerpoint, websites and VCDs besides using the package. For instance, for the module ‘Festivals’, we tried to use powerpoint to present the special features of different festivals to the students in the brainstorming session. The students were really attracted by the presentation and they had a sense of excitement. Following this, the students were asked to search the information related to festivals from the website [www.nuttinbutkids.com](http://www.nuttinbutkids.com) as well as other relevant websites. Like what we had done, the students could present their information through powerpoint if they wanted to. We also used some interesting VCDs for enjoyment. We found that the VCDs could arouse the students’ interest in learning English. All students had great fun and they liked to sing along with the songs from the VCDs. They also demonstrated more confidence in answering the questions after the songs.
Towards the end of the term, a project on ‘Toys’ was conducted. This project was a melting pot for students to apply the language and skills they had learnt including IT in a meaningful manner. In order to produce this project as the end product, the students were given different inputs and chances of seeking information through IT. IT was one of the sources of information and students could also learn how to present their information with the help of it. A list of useful websites related to the topic of toys was given to students as reference. There were guidelines for the students to seek and use information from the websites. We guided our students through the whole process starting from setting their focus, using different sources of information and then organizing as well as presenting the information with the use of IT or other means. From our observations, the students were excited in using IT in their project work. They could find different websites related to their projects and they were eager to share these websites with other classmates. Some students used powerpoint with clipart to present their projects and they felt proud of them. Peer support was evident in these projects since some students had to work with those with computers at home to finish the work. Students enjoyed producing the powerpoint presentation together and they began to divide work among themselves more sensibly. They learnt that they had to consider the practical problems and solve them together in order to accomplish the task.

So, in the second stage, we turned to expand our IT resources rather than being limited by one package. We did not just focus on enhancing students’ confidence in listening and speaking. We also developed other purposes of using IT like information seeking and presentation. Instead of just using one package or one resource in a disconnected manner, we at last attempted to put
everything together in a project. Students were encouraged to use IT as a source of information when they started the project and then use IT to present their work like using powerpoint or clipart. Different IT, information and language skills were developed in the process. We also provided the students with more opportunities to apply their IT skills for different purposes. From the students’ work, it was reflected that students could make progress in different areas when they were given the opportunity.
III. FINDINGS

A. Students’ Confidence in Listening and Speaking (Reflected from Observations, Teatime Gathering, Students’ Questionnaires, Parents’ Questionnaires and the Focus Group)

After the introduction of the package, we had a lot of observations (Appendix I) of our students’ response in the computer room. We saw that students had more confidence in using the computer. They began to develop self-learning habits and they were more willing to try on their own and take risks. Students got more encouragement from the computer. We saw that students had learnt more like vocabulary and their language learning ability was enhanced. They tried to convey meaning clearly, give appropriate responses and were more willing to express themselves. However, it was difficult to assess students’ performance and language ability. Owing to time constraint, we still adopted our conventional assessment paper. So, we failed to adjust our assessment to match with learning and teaching and the examination results could not reflect our students’ progress. Besides, students’ performance in class was affected by the teacher’s input and it was difficult for us to make accurate observations. But through the two teatime gathering activities in which students were required to communicate in English through a lot of games, we observed that students did have more confidence in listening and speaking. In the second teatime gathering during which some representatives from each class had to present their project, students also demonstrated more confidence in presenting in English. Students were able to use English to communicate and most of them were willing to try. They showed improvement in their ability to speak more in English.
Students reflected from the questionnaires (Appendix II) that they thought using IT in teaching had increased their confidence, particularly in understanding (44.4%) and communicating (35.9%) (Fig.1).

![Fig. 1. Students' response towards how the use of IT has increased their confidence](image1)

![Fig. 2. Students' response towards whether the use of IT has enhanced their ability](image2)

They felt that their ability and confidence in listening (32.3%) as well as speaking (22.2%) were enhanced (Fig.2). Although the percentages were not too high, listening and speaking were among the highest when compared with
the others. Even one student stated that he was not so frightened when he encountered English on the computer. So, the initial objectives of the research on using IT to enhance learning interest and listening and speaking ability were achieved. Our observations in class on students’ attitude and performance also reflected the same findings.

Parents responded to a questionnaire (Appendix III) towards the end of the term but their views were quite diverse. Most of them had no opinion towards whether the use of IT could enhance learning effectiveness. It was found to be a difficult question for parents to answer. Parents from two classes were more positive whereas those of the other three classes were quite negative. We did not have time to explore the reasons behind and we could only guess that their background or teachers’ attitude might be some of the possible factors.

**Data from the Focus Group:**

As reflected from the interviews (Appendix IV), the focus group did not have much confidence in learning English at the beginning. Five of them thought they were not good at English because they got low marks in their dictation, and they could not spell the words correctly. Most of them thought that their English could be improved if they could listen/speak and revise more. Only one student mentioned that she could improve her English by using the Internet.

Through observations, the focus group was found to be improving in their listening and speaking skills throughout the year. Like the other classmates, the
group had made some improvement in their listening and speaking skills. When they learned English on the computer, they showed greater interest and longer attention span.

In the questionnaire, the focus group responded very positively towards learning English with the use of IT. Five of them indicated that learning with the IT resources had enhanced their confidence in using English, particularly comprehension and communicating. One of them said she had learnt to use English to communicate. The focus group also agreed that their learning ability had been enhanced through the use of IT.

B. Students’ Interest in English (Reflected from Observations, Teatime Gathering, Students’ Questionnaires and the Focus Group)

During the lessons, we observed that students enjoyed having lessons with the computer tremendously. Even the less motivated ones demonstrated great enthusiasm towards the English lesson. Students looked forward to the English lessons in the computer room. They showed obvious interest in singing songs and playing games when working on the package.

‘We were really excited to see students’ enthusiasm in learning English with the use of IT. They participated actively in their tasks and were more willing to respond to the teachers’ questions. The class atmosphere was much more lively. Most students particularly enjoyed the part on singing.’

-- from the teachers’ journals
Better students seemed to benefit more from using the computer. A few showed a very serious attitude towards their work in the English assignments when they used the computer. As for the poorer students, they also showed willingness to work and they enjoyed playing on the computer. In general, students enjoyed the English lessons more with the use of IT. The multimedia means with its visual and sound impacts definitely attracted the students.

During the two teatime gathering activities, students demonstrated great interest in English and they were actively involved in the games. Most of them were willing to participate and speak English during the activities. Their response was much better than before.

The data from the students’ questionnaires showed that the great majority of the students (76.3%) enjoyed using the package in the lessons.
(Fig.3). They gave different reasons including the fact that they could learn English and acquire more knowledge (other than those from the textbook) through games in a more interesting way. Learning through IT was more fun. So, most students agreed that it had increased their interest in learning English (75.8%) (Fig.4). The majority expressed desire for longer periods on using IT to learn English and they were more willing to try other IT resources teaching methods in class (91.4%) (Fig.5). Their response was really positive and the demand for learning English with the use of IT was very high.
As reflected from the questionnaires, the great majority of the parents (80.5%) also strongly agreed that the use of IT could enhance students’ learning interest. While parents were not sure about the learning effectiveness brought about by IT, they definitely felt more strongly about its impact on their
children’s learning interest. Parents in general recognized the importance of IT skills. Most of them were very concerned with their children’s learning and they did discuss the use of IT together. They hoped that the school could carry on promoting the use of IT in teaching.

**Data from the Focus Group:**

Out of the six students interviewed, five liked English because they thought English was useful and very interesting. One of them mentioned that English could be used to communicate with people. However, one student did not like English because he thought it was very difficult. All liked English lessons because there were lots of games, activities, stories and they could play on the computer.

As reflected in this interview, the focus group did not spend much time on learning English and they did not show great interest in English itself. Four students watched the English TV programmes, mainly cartoons and they thought that the programmes were interesting and useful. Other students did not watch the English programmes because they did not understand them. Only two students borrowed English books, mainly the storybooks. The students did not borrow books because they did not understand; they had no time and access to them. Three students had computers at home and would use them for 30-120 minutes per week. They used the English dictionary and played games on the computer. So, there was not adequate support for the students and they did not make a lot of effort in learning English on their own.
As revealed from the teacher’s observations, the focus group demonstrated greater interest in learning English after the introduction of IT. They were enthusiastic towards the lessons and they did work actively on the computer. Their attention span was longer and even the weaker ones were willing to try. For instance, all the students were afraid to speak in English in the first teatime gathering. None of them gave any response in the games. However, in the second teatime gathering, they made great improvement and they were willing to speak in the activities. They were also willing to present their projects to other classmates. During the second stage, these students loved to watch VCDs, use different websites and do their projects in the computer room. They were motivated in working on the projects and some of them voluntarily used IT to complete their work. They showed enthusiasm in seeking information from the websites, downloading pictures, typing and designing their projects. They were willing to learn and write about their feelings.

When the focus group responded to the questionnaire, most of them were very positive. Five enjoyed learning with the package and agreed that learning with the computer software had enhanced their interest in learning English. They also hoped that the teachers could provide other IT alternatives for learning English other than the package. So, the data of the focus group were comparable to those of the whole level.

C. Active Learning with the Use of IT

During the lessons with the package, we observed that the great majority of the students really worked on the computer and enjoyed themselves. They could work independently on the computer. The great
majority of the students could get the task done and learn from the computer. For instance, most students could get the right answers with some minor grammatical mistakes on their worksheets. In general, students’ response in the computer room was quite different from that in the classroom. They made their own choices in using the package and had more control over their work. They demonstrated more active learning in the computer room.

D. More Effective Learning with the Use of IT

Students’ learning can be enhanced through the use of IT. Besides increasing confidence in listening and speaking, students also learned more vocabulary. There were some examples of students’ learning from the package: they learned words other than those in the textbooks e.g. ‘florist’, ‘businessman’; they could differentiate ‘17’ and ‘70’ in their listening.

We turned to other resources including the websites and powerpoint after the use of the package and encouraged students to use IT in their work as far as possible. From the students’ work
on themes like ‘seasons’ and ‘festivals’, some students demonstrated high motivation and the initiative to use IT in their work, including seeking information and presentation. So, there was application of IT skills in the English assignments (Appendix V).

Towards the end of the term, students did a project on ‘toys’. During the process, they sought information through various means including the textbooks, the visit to the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and different websites. The guidelines on the use of websites (Appendix VI) and a list of relevant websites were provided to students as reference. So, students learned the basic skills in searching and using information from IT resources through our guidelines and sharing. Many students presented their projects with the help of computer (Some students failed to use IT mainly because of practical constraints as not many of them had access to the computer outside class time). So, students began to learn basic IT skills and they could use IT to seek information and present their ideas (Appendix VII).
IV. DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED

A. Lack of Technical Support

We teachers experienced a lot of technical problems in using the computer room. Technical onsite support was very inadequate. Very often, some computers and headsets were not working and students had to share the computers. The technician was too occupied with other work and they could not give any support to us when the computers went wrong. Both our confidence and students’ learning was adversely affected.

‘I did feel very frustrated with the operation of the computers at the beginning. I was worried that there would be technical problems that I could not handle. The technician was not always around in the computer room. So, when there were problems either with the computers or the headsets, my mood and the teaching pace would be greatly affected.’

--from the teachers’ journals

B. Teachers’ Monitoring vs. Students’ Autonomy

We had great difficulty in monitoring the students since students were working on their own interacting with the computer most of the time. This increased our anxiety as we did not know how much learning was going on, whether students were all working properly or not. Some of us tended to limit the students’ choice by locking up some programmes or using the teacher control system. It was found that students’ response to IT was affected by the teachers’ attitude towards and their ways in handling the use of IT. We saw that the degree of autonomy and choices
teachers could allow for their students was an important factor in affecting students’ learning and interest. How to monitor and encourage students but not to limit their choice and autonomy was our problem. The fact that one teacher had to take care of 40 students in the computer room further aggravated the case and we simply could not handle all problems at one time. We learnt to encourage brighter students to help their classmates whenever possible to ease the situation.

C. Problem with the Use of Learning Resources

We still experienced problems in using the package effectively and seemed to be limited by it. For the first term, the use of the package was integrated with the textbook and normal teaching as far as possible. We felt that it was a natural flow. However, more preparation was involved. We had more difficulties in shifting between textbook and the package. There was a problem concerning the role of the package in the whole curriculum. It was felt that things students learnt from the package were for enrichment and so their contents were not assessed in the examinations. How to use it effectively was a big problem. In the second stage, we needed to explore other resources and see how well we could use them to achieve the learning targets. It was again a very difficult task.

D. Problem with the Teaching Strategies

We had to restructure the teaching modules and develop different strategies in order to achieve our aims. For instance, some units (four in total) in the textbooks had to be deleted to leave room for IT and research. Students had to be given tasks to complete in the lessons with the package and applied what they had learnt there to the classroom activities. More global and all-embracing tasks needed to be designed to allow inputs from all resources working together and preparing students for the
output. Although some units were deleted, we found that students were learning more with the package and the tasks we had designed. The package actually could offer different students a lot of room for development. More capable students could have the opportunities to enhance their learning and apply what they had learnt from the package in more challenging tasks. For lower ability group, the package might serve more as motivation and reinforcement so as to help them catch up. However, we needed to think of different assignments and strategies to cater for different students and we lacked time to design the appropriate materials.

‘I feel that my skills in using IT in language teaching are still very inadequate. I really look forward to more sharing and training opportunities for teachers.’

--from the teachers’ journals

This list of problems was not exhaustive. There were many more others like teachers’ increased workload and difficulty in providing appropriate guidance to cater for the students’ needs and interests. For the students, since the whole school had to share one computer room, they did not have enough time and adequate resources available to finish their projects on the computer. Students also lacked the skills in selecting and using information from the websites. However, with more experience and collaboration among colleagues, we saw that these problems could be resolved to some extent.
V. DISCUSSION AND INSIGHTS

We were impressed by our students’ responses and development. Their work has demonstrated how well they could progress when they were given the opportunities. The use of IT has helped students to widen their horizon. Besides the textbooks, they could get in touch with a much larger pool of resources and information. Students’ knowledge, skills and attitude were all enhanced, though to different extents.

Same as our students, we teachers have also entered a new world of learning/teaching with the use of IT. Besides mastering the basic IT skills ourselves and trying to teach our students, we have developed tremendously in our understanding of the use of IT. Here are some of our new understandings:

A. Need for Knowledge and Experiences in Using IT

It is the first time for us to use IT in our English class, and there is so much to learn. Besides struggling with the technical problems in the computer room, there is a much greater challenge for us: to get to know what IT is all about and its relationship with the curriculum; and to try out different strategies in using IT so as to make learning meaningful for our students.

Reflecting on our experience, we want to share the following since they are what teachers need to know in order to use IT effectively:
1. Purposes of Using IT

This year’s experience tells us that there are different purposes for using IT in class and they will determine what we plan to do. We should set out clear objectives for the use of IT in our English class first, taking into consideration our students’ needs and interests and teachers’ expectations. It is important to explore the particular advantages of IT. If other more convenient means can replace IT, it is not worth spending time on using it. For instance, our powerpoint presentation might be replaced by other multimedia resources like VCDs or even transparencies since they serve similar purposes. IT should be used to supplement what is lacking or cannot be done effectively in normal teaching and learning. It is more important to use IT to let students make their interactive choices and monitor their own learning. Although IT can be used for pure enjoyment and enrichment, there should be better integration between IT and the normal curriculum as far as possible if we aim at more effective learning. Actually, IT is part of the curriculum. And to make the use of IT meaningful and effective, the curriculum has to be well planned first.

2. Teachers’ Role & Perception of Language Learning

Students’ learning with the use of IT is more accidental and teachers play the role of a facilitator more. It is difficult to have full control over students’ learning in the computer room and students’ self-learning ability has to be developed. In the computer room, students are interacting with the computer more. Interaction between the teacher and the students and interaction among the students was less in comparison. Students take more responsibility for their own learning and they have greater choice. This in turn will encourage students’ independent learning and risk-taking. How we teachers perceive the
nature of language learning and our role in facilitating students’ learning especially their autonomy as active learners is an important issue to consider. Teachers’ autonomy, flexibility and professional judgment during the course of using IT are more significant as IT is a very fluid and rich medium. We share the idea that computers should provide students with more opportunities of self-access learning and free choice so that they would take more risks and responsibility in language learning. How to prepare students for this with the use of IT is our major concern.

3. Interaction between Teachers and Students

With the use of IT in the computer room, students interacted more with the computer and we found it more difficult to monitor the interaction between us and the students. We lost track of what our students were doing sometimes. Besides, although the package was designed to give students opportunities to listen and speak up, students could choose not to speak and record; they could get answers by using the pictures without listening. So, it is more important for the teachers to use the package wisely and design some follow-up activities to engage students in listening and speaking. For example, students asking each other what they like to do before checking the answers; students presenting what their classmates like to do after the survey. It depends on how we use the package to facilitate students’ learning.

We were impressed by the students’ exciting response but we worried over the problem of sustaining it. We also felt the pressure on making all lessons more interesting after this experience. It was important to communicate with the students to work out what was most important to their learning.
4. **Interaction among Students**

Peer support is particularly important for students to use IT in the learning of English and project work. We observed that students with no computers at home did not have pressure in finishing the IT assignments since their partners were willing to help. They could share their work in a more practical manner and those with no computers could help more in collecting information or presenting the work. Besides, we saw that the students taught each other various IT skills like typing reports on the computer, using powerpoint and seeking information from different websites. The students really learnt a lot from their peers. They explored things together in the process and their IT skills were enhanced.

5. **Different Stages in Using IT**

Professionally, we ourselves have grown throughout the process and we have undergone different stages of using IT: 1) developing basic skills and confidence in using IT in English class; 2) developing awareness and knowledge of what objectives can be achieved by IT and how it can help learning (attitude as well as knowledge or skills); 3) developing critical judgment of merits and demerits of a particular software; 4) exploring different alternatives and resources, expanding knowledge of the IT world and developing deeper understanding of its functions. So, we have developed greater competence, confidence and flexibility in using IT. We started off with a package, were dependent on it and limited by it at the beginning. Then, we became more critical in using it considering its pros and cons. Finally, we were free from the package and ready to explore other possibilities or alternatives.
B. Need for a Variety of Resources

Through the development of the two stages, we came to understand that the package was only one of the many elements in teaching and learning. One package was not enough. We started with the need to use IT in our school, attempted to use a package to solve the problem and then realized how inadequate it was to rely on just one package. We therefore had tried to use various resources other than the package to serve different purposes. We intended to sustain interest and ensure variety as well as effective learning with the use of IT. This was quite a long process. We started off with an easy way by adopting a package, thinking that this would free us from extra workload like designing materials. However, our experience reflected that one package really could not serve many functions and it had its pros and cons. If we did not want our students to just enjoy but also learn meaningfully and effectively with the use of IT, there was a need to consider and explore other alternative resources like different software, websites etc. And that was why we moved onto the second stage of our attempts towards the end of the year. We had tried to explore ways in extending learning from the normal curriculum with the use of IT.

We can conclude that the IT package is to support learning and should be an integral meaningful part of the curriculum. It is important to add in other elements like creative / free writing and project work to offer students meaningful activities to apply what they have learnt. If the use of IT is treated in an integrated manner with all skills involved, students will feel that they learn different things and develop different skills at the same time.
C. Collaboration among Teachers

Different teachers have different perceptions of using IT and where to place it in the curriculum. There should be more sharing and consensus among teachers regarding the use and importance of IT. How to reach some consensus and set a common direction is a problem.

We realize that teachers’ confidence, understanding and how they perceive the practical constraints are of utmost importance. Throughout the process, we feel that IT is really very demanding as far as preparation and effort is concerned. If it is for enrichment and is considered a bonus for students, it may not be an indispensable part of the curriculum. It may be more effective to treat it as an extra-curricular activity and let students enjoy it in their free time (provided that available resources are given). What teachers expect students to learn from IT, how much improvement they wish to see in their students after the use of IT and the role of IT in the curriculum will affect the way they develop IT related to the English curriculum.

‘It has been a very precious learning process for all teachers and students. Our attempt to use IT has made learning more meaningful. The students could realize and develop their potentials. With the use of IT, students were more willing to write and express themselves. Their confidence in writing has been boosted in the end.’

-- from the teachers’ journals
D. Collaboration with the Curriculum Development Officer (CDO)

Considering that the use of IT and action research are new challenges for us, external support is really essential. Through our collaboration with the CDO from Curriculum Development Institute (CDI), we feel that expertise in curriculum development and the use of IT is the first thing we need most before we start. The CDO has helped us set a clear direction for our curriculum and research. As a resource person, a facilitator and a close partner, she has been working with us throughout the process. Besides bringing us a lot of different resources and reference materials which enrich our teaching and stimulate our thoughts, she encourages us to play an active role in the research. She lets us see that we teachers can make the research meaningful to ourselves and the students. During the meetings and discussion, we are free to express our views and responses. It is important that our different views could be accommodated and developed in an interactive manner. Both teachers and the CDO take students’ learning and teacher development as the heart of the research and we are ready to change based on our evaluations. With the stimulation from the CDO, we are free from restrictions of the existing resources and we became masters in our own teaching. We have all tried to see things from a new perspective and make new attempts whenever necessary.

Since this is an exploratory research, it has been a very precious learning and growing experience for all who are involved, including the CDO herself. We as a group have generated a lot of useful knowledge and developed valuable experience in action research. While we have been learning a lot and getting a lot of support from the CDO, we are sure that the CDO has been learning from us and the students as well. It is this kind of collaboration and
mutual support that makes the research much more meaningful and enjoyable.

‘It is a fruitful experience for me. At the beginning, I don’t know what an action research is. With the help from CDI, I learn how to integrate IT with the curriculum and conduct a research to study the problems and examine the effectiveness of our teaching. During the process, I am excited to see students’ enthusiastic response and improvement of our teaching. I do think that this has been a precious learning process for both teachers and students. We have made learning more meaningful and students can develop their potentials through project learning. With the use of IT, students are more willing to write in English and their presentation skills are better.’

-- from the teachers’ journals

E. Impact on Teachers and the School

‘It is very challenging to teach English with the use of IT. I’ve tried different things such as the use of a package, powerpoint, websites and encouraged students to apply IT in their assignments. I have made a great step in my teaching. I’m proud of myself but there is still much room for improvement in using IT.’

-- from the teachers’ journals
Through this process of collaboration, we have experience in sharing our work, preparing powerpoint, reviewing software, selecting suitable CALL materials and using appropriate teaching strategies. We also share our worries and gains all the time and gradually build up confidence in using IT. We believe that it is important for different departments in the school (other than English) to work together. Based on our experience, we have tried to make recommendations to the school IT and Staff Development Departments concerning the need for staff training and technical support in the computer laboratory. We teachers have tried to play a more active role in promoting the use of IT in school. We understand that it is important for the school to consider different ways of providing students with facilities and opportunities to use the computer for self-access learning and we are more ready to make suggestions for improvement.

Since we are the first group of teachers trying to use IT in teaching purposefully and systematically, there is some impact on the use of IT in our school. Our colleagues, like the Mathematics and General Studies teachers, are more willing to learn from us and use IT. Different subject teachers have planned for IT development in the coming school year following our attempts. On the whole, the school is more ready in promoting the use of IT. For instance, there is more experience sharing among teachers, the IT Department is going to introduce more useful software and courseware to teachers, the Staff Development Department has encouraged colleagues to attend IT training courses, the Curriculum Development Department is going to recommend teachers to use IT in their subjects and we will try to learn from other schools
through visits. Our action research this year has increased the school’s awareness of the need to promote the use of IT as far as possible for effective learning and teaching.
VI. CONCLUSION

So, we have been undergoing a process of learning throughout the year. We set out to find out how to use IT to enhance students’ listing and speaking skills as a start. Then through the process, we have learnt that IT is just part of the curriculum and many other important issues have cropped up. Based on the research findings, we kept changing our strategies and readjusting the focuses. For instance, in addition to the package, other possibilities of integrating IT into the unit ‘Festivals’ like powerpoint and websites have been considered. We have used some of the suitable websites to expose students to more songs, add enjoyment and help students seek more information related to the topic. If students were ready and had the available resources, they could use the computer when drafting and presenting their work, including the projects. We are very clear that the focus of using IT is to enrich students’ knowledge and learning but not just on improving the presentation. They should not be encouraged to waste time on using IT to decorate their work only. Content/substance is more important than form/design. It depends on how teachers make use of the resources available and explore possibilities. Such understanding keeps our knowledge of IT growing and the whole research process has been a very valuable experience.

‘All in all, I believe the most useful software is the teacher. If a teacher plans the lesson well and pays full attention to the students’ needs, he/she will be the most powerful software in the market.’

-- from the teachers’ journals
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