

## Adapting Methods of Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language to the Target Group

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### **Abstract:**

The increasing number of foreigners interested in learning Romanian for various reasons (whether they come to study in Romania, they come to work in Romania or they settle permanently in this European country) had required creating and teaching a new domain: “Romanian language as a foreign language”. Thus, Romanian language teachers have found themselves in the position to teach their mother tongue from a completely different perspective, something not easily achieved. And, from this viewpoint, many have rightly asked themselves about the magic formula by which the foreigner, regardless of country of origin, age, sex, occupation, social status or religion, could learn Romanian quickly and easily.

A recipe to guarantee full success, in our view, has not been found yet. Therefore, in this article we have tried to analyze how different methods of teaching Romanian language must suit the different types of course participants and their level of knowledge of Romanian. Thus, we described methods such as exposure, conversation, linguistic analysis, discovery, problem solving, demonstration, working with the textbook, teaching game, teamwork, brainstorming and exercise method.

The conclusion we have reached is that, regardless of how homogeneous a group of course participants may be, the use of a single teaching method, even if it is the most suitable for the target group, will not be able to guarantee full success; therefore, we rely on the premise that only the combination of several methods of teaching Romanian as a foreign language can bring the desired result, namely the acquiring by non-native speakers of a new language that they need to understand and speak.

**Keywords:** method, target group, Romanian as a foreign language, learners

Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL) is an activity not only interesting and challenging but also difficult and exhausting. It has been proven that being a native speaker of Romanian alone does not qualify one to teach this subject, which raises many problems due to the fact that it requires an entirely different approach of the lexical, grammatical and syntactic structures of the language. In order to get the

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expected results, i.e. the acquisition of good Romanian writing, reading and speaking skills by the students, the teacher must often find the most appropriate method in his/her endeavour; he/she must select and adapt different RFL teaching methods to the target group. This group may be highly heterogeneous (different social categories, different ages, different cultures and religions) and may have to cope with different problems (comprehension, adjustment to the new situation); therefore, in order to succeed in his/her attempt to transfer knowledge of Romanian as a Foreign Language to such a group, the teacher will certainly have to go beyond one teaching – learning method, and combine several teaching methods and procedures.

In this paper we will present several RFL teaching methods and determine the appropriate target group for each of them.

1. The first method presented is the *exposure method*, which, in turn, includes: the lecture, the narration and the explanation. The *lecture* is an appropriate method for advanced student groups, from B2 to C1/ C2 level (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages); this method can also be successfully used for teenager and adult student groups who can follow a lecture and focus in order to understand the message conveyed. A large variety of subjects can be taught using the lecture method, ranging from Romanian literature and history to aspects of culture and civilization. The *narration*, as a teaching method, is similar to the lecture; the narration must obviously be adapted to each group level, irrespective of the students' age. Hence, the narration must start from simple topics (for A1 and A2 levels) and advance to complex topics (C1, C2 levels) and take into account the specific characteristics of each student group. The materials recommended for the narration are based on short texts on family, professional activities, time and space directions or living conditions for beginners, and various types of literary or non-literary texts for advanced students. The *explanation* follows the broad lines of the lecture and the narration; it is a method that requires thinking and its aim is to clarify some notions, principles or cases; additionally, the explanation plays an important part in the student's understanding of Romanian language functions and specific properties to be subsequently acquired and used by the non-native speakers. Therefore, the explanation is the first step towards non-native speakers' acquisition of Romanian as a foreign language skills, namely understanding some linguistic properties (for example, when to use the enclitic definite article or not, or the forms of the future tense simple with its different stylistic uses). By the explanation, the teacher aims, as far as possible, to provide an answer to the students' *why* questions in order to help them understand and acquire the novel items.

2. The *conversation method* requires the permanent formative and informative dialogue between the teacher and the student or among two or more students; being an active method, the *conversation* is considered to be one of the most important methods of learning a foreign language and it is greatly appreciated by both teachers and students; it enables the latter to express themselves in a foreign language that they are trying to acquire, for various reasons. The conversation method stimulates and directs the students' activity through dialogue, irrespective of the type of conversation – introductory or final, information provision, repetition and systematization, or testing and evaluation (Eftenie, 2008: 5–6). They will actively participate in the conversations and express their own views on the topics proposed for discussion; in this way, students will develop and train their thinking and gradually learn to think in Romanian. If, for beginner groups, the discussion is on common topics involving a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar activities (daily activities, family, friends, weather), for advanced groups discussions can easily be turned into debates on general not just personal interest topics. As can be noticed, the conversation, be it free, thematic or directed, must always be adapted, not only to the Romanian language level of the non-native speakers but also to their social and professional categories, so as not to create embarrassing or potentially conflict situations among participants. The teaching conversation can take place both vertically, between teacher and student, and horizontally, among two or more students. In our opinion, the catechetical conversation, which generally involves a review of previously acquired knowledge, and the vertical conversation are recommended for younger age groups, since they mainly involve the memory and children generally tend to provide standard answers. The Catechetical conversation is highly recommend at the beginning of the class to activate “anchor-ideas, or at the end of the teaching activity, when *feedback* is provided, or to reinforce knowledge acquired during the studying of a topic” (Parfene, 1999: 26). But, the use of these methods for older age groups is not precluded, when the focus is on the students' acquisition of certain linguistic structures. For advanced groups and older age groups, the heuristic (Socratic) conversation approach is recommended by which the teacher's questions address to students' judgment and they aim to stimulate and develop thinking in the foreign language. Open or close questions, stimulating or exploring questions put the student in different language situations, which he must cope with. Furthermore, in our experience, we can argue that, apart from other benefits, the horizontal dialogue creates cohesion among new groups of students, and, while barely knowing each other at first, after joining in conversations they even form friendships.

Therefore, irrespective of its form, in order to become a successful method, the *conversation* (that some RFL manuals are based on) must meet several general conditions: it should systematically rely on language structures; it should go from particular to general aspects, urging the students on to noticing and comparing certain linguistic properties, testing their thinking by asking for justified answers; it should avoid random questions and instead follow the logic of the cognitive process (Parfene, 1999: 26); it should clarify, summarize and consolidate the knowledge acquired; it should assess and test the use of the acquired knowledge, of the grammar skills and uses (Goia, 2002: 108). Additionally, in order for the conversation method not to be an utter failure, we believe that several recommendations should be taken into account: 1. the conversation must be based on clear and precise questions; for that reason, for beginner groups whose students do not master the sentence syntax very well and have a poor vocabulary allowing them to use only simple forms, the teacher must sometimes repeat the question or reformulate it, utter it more slowly; in the horizontal conversation, students must be helped to address clear questions themselves to their colleagues; in this case, the teacher plays an essential part, as it has seldom happened that some shier participants in the conversation abandon the dialogue; they must be encouraged and motivated to have simple conversations at first on familiar or everyday life topics; 2. students should be given enough time to formulate the answers; this requirement differs from one group to another and must be adapted depending on the language skills of the majority of the students; 3. the teacher should not address a different question until a satisfactory or complete answer has not been provided for the previous question; d. the teacher should avoid ambiguous questions (questions with multiple answers or no suitable answer); 5. under no circumstances, must the teacher provide an answer instead of the students (when they have difficulties in finding the answer, the teacher must only guide students towards finding the desired answer) and, especially, he/she must not pointlessly repeat their answer (if students in the classroom do not understand the answer given by a colleague, the latter must be asked to repeat or reformulate the answer, to give additional explanations, if possible); 6. the teacher must not speak more than the students, thus, the students not participating at all or having limited participation in the conversation, they may get bored, a situation encountered especially for younger target groups or beginner groups, if the level of the conversation is not adapted to the students' level of comprehension. A successful conversation sometimes depends on the manner of asking the questions; but this should be varied in order to avoid a possible

monotony of the action; thus, 1. *group questions* (addressed to the entire class) must alternate with 2. *individual questions* (addressed to a single student; but randomly, not in a given order, as sometimes students can anticipate things or not pay attention except when they know it is their turn), or with 3. *relay and communication questions* (addressed by the student to the teacher and then readdressed by the latter to the entire class) or with 4. *review questions* (the teacher asks for the rest of the class's opinion on an answer provided by one of their colleagues). Thus, "the true dialogue, as argued by modern methodology, is based on *intercommunication*, on a substantial exchange of ideas between teacher and student, and among students themselves" (Goia, 2002: 110).

3. Another method of teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language, on which we focus is the following paragraph, is the *linguistic analysis*, classified into the phonetic, morphological, syntactic, lexical, orthographical and spelling analysis. Depending on the overall goal and aims, this method can be used in almost all types of lesson. The linguistic analysis method, without focusing on theoretical aspects, as the ultimate goal is that non-native speakers acquire Romanian comprehension, reading, speaking and writing skills, is important by allowing students to familiarize themselves with the structure of Romanian, its internal structure and development rules; this method helps students gain, in time, their own ability to express, generalize and think in Romanian.

In our opinion, the most important linguistic analysis methods are the lexical, syntactic and spelling analysis methods. It should be noticed that, by the lexical analysis method, foreigners develop the ability to work with Romanian vocabulary, they learn to use synonyms, antonyms, lexical fields, that allow them to express themselves accurately and in various structures in the foreign language that they wish to acquire. "The lexical analysis technique consists of using conversation based on linguistic material given, aiming for the *identification, meaning, expressive function* of different categories of words, in the linguistic context they belong to" (Parfene, 1999: 30). The spelling analysis aims at aspects of correct spelling in Romanian and it represents a complex phenomenon since it includes all the other analyses: phonetic, morphological, spelling. The spelling analysis method relies on acquisition of the Romanian spelling rules, as well as punctuation rules. Dictation, free writing or writing on a given topic for beginner groups, essays or literary analyses for advanced groups help the teacher assess the manner and level of acquisition of Romanian in terms of correct spelling of sounds and sound groups (*ce, ci, ge, gi, che, chi, ghe, ghi* that raise special problems especially for students who speak languages that do not have these sounds), of grammar forms and structures (verbs with

personal pronoun or reflexive pronoun in the Accusative or Dative case) or orthograms (*s-au / sau, v-ar / var, ne-a / nea, c-ar / car* etc.). The syntactical analysis method is also important, whose aim is the ability to build correct and coherent Romanian clauses and sentences, both written and oral. This method particularly helps speakers of agglutinative languages, for whom, at first, building sentences in an analytic language, such as Romanian is, seems extremely hard. Gradually, however, by noticing the word order and relations among words that form sentences, at first simple, then more complex clauses and later sentences, this target group will certainly acquire the ability to speak and write correctly in Romanian.

4. Learning by **discovery** is considered by some research works as a modern teaching method, even though it combines elements of traditional teaching such as identification or the heuristic conversation. In our opinion, this method, based on the individual's own learning ability, is the most appropriate method for the student to acquire information and new skills, to notice by himself/herself how the rules governing the phonetic, morphological and syntactic system of the foreign language to be acquired for a longer or shorter study period, work and interact. Learning by discovery is, definitely, a method that will never bore the student and will invite the student to constantly draw parallels with his/her native language. Scientifically, there are more types of discovery: 1. *Inductive discovery*, that goes from the objective reality of the linguistic study material to categories and rules (discovering in a selected text the verb forms and the event time, that then lead to the structure rule, for example the perfect compus for beginner groups). 2. *Deductive discovery* that goes from categories and rules to exemplifying them by concrete aspects, using syllogistic reasoning (for example, also for A1 groups, to discover nouns starting from the definition and finding examples in the text); 3. *Analogical or transductive discovery* that operates with analogical reasoning (from the resemblance of certain aspects of two things one can deduce the probability of the resemblance of the two things (Parfene, 1999: 54). For noticeable results of the RFL teaching – learning activity it is recommended to use all three types of learning through discovery; additionally, this method must be combined with other methods, depending on the aspects of the item to be acquired and on the operational objectives set by the teacher during the process of teaching the lesson and learning of the concerned aspects by the students.

5. **Problematization** represents a more complex manner of applying the theory of learning by discovery (Parfene, 1999: 55) and it is used in situations that cannot be solved except by reasoning. As a method of learning Romanian as a Foreign Language, it can be used for all levels

in all the stages of the teaching process, for all ages and socio – professional target groups. In using this method, the teacher has the difficult job of creating problem situations, conflict situations requiring knowledge and awareness on the part of the students, which can create, in their mind, contradictions between what they know and what they do not know, urging them to find solutions by repeated tests, by demonstrations and logical argumentations. The importance of learning by problematization stems from the fact that it involves the students' reasoning, it stimulates their observation spirit, the power of analysis and of finding solutions based on deductive reasoning, of generalizing and making transfer of knowledge (Parfene, 1999: 56). Thus, finding solutions to problem situations requires several steps: 1. defining the starting point and the goal, 2. presenting the problem, 3. organizing the information, 4. processing the information inductively or deductively, 4. making a decision, 5. testing the results (Gouelin, 1972: 165). The teacher's role is to present the problem situation and to discreetly guide the students towards finding solutions. An example of a problem situation is solving the conflict situations generated by omissions which are liable to be filled in different ways, depending on possible message options (Beldescu: 125–126); for example, the teacher writes on the board messages such as: *Ei sunt bolnav* (*They be.IND.3PL. sick-.MASC.SG/root*) – or *Ion culege din grădină castraveț- copți* (*John picks ripe.MASC.PL. cucumber- from the garden*) and asks students to fill in the morphological markers so that they can obtain two different messages, if possible. After finding both solutions, the students are asked to explain the meaning the sentences acquire in the first communication situation (with plural markers) and in the second communication situation (with the definite article), then they are asked to create other similar problem-situations.

6. The **demonstration** is a traditional teaching method , which consists of using a series of logical judgments, along with the simultaneous use of intuitive means (sketches, drawings), so the foreigner can visualize the abstract relations of the new language which he must learn (Cerghit, 1976: 124). Undergoing a continuous process of modernization and procedural renovation, the demonstration is a method which benefits nowadays from the advantages of modern technology and equipment (video projector, retro projector), its use is highly appreciated by the students. The method of demonstration helps students (through the guided and correct performance of some analyses, comparisons, syntheses and generalizations) to understand the meaning of the basic structure of some linguistic phenomena; but, in order to avoid an emphasis on descriptive activities to eliminate the passive

attitude of students during the learning process, the demonstration has to make the course participants shift the focus from the perceptive to the rational moment. For example, the demonstration, combined with the conversation and the syntactic analysis methods, is very appropriate for teaching the grammatical category of voice in Romanian, at intermediate level; thus, the teacher writes on the board (possibly after watching some short videos or after showing some sketches highlighting verb action for the three voice distinctions in Romanian) sentences such as: *Mama spală copilul. / Copilul se spală. / Copilul este spălat de mama lui. (Mother is washing the baby. / The baby is washing (himself). / The baby is being washed by his mother).* And then, by means of guided and vertical conversation, it urges the students to rationally find the syntactic and logical connections in each text. After have understood these relations, the teacher demonstrates on the board, by graphically indicating the relations between subjects and their predicates, ending up with a representation such as: 1. Subject → Predicate → Direct Object, 2. Subject ↔ Predicate, Subject ← Predicate ← Agent (logical subject). In our own experience, we can argue that the demonstration is highly appreciated by students, since it involves them actively in the RFL teaching-learning process and it urges them to process the information so that, by mental operations, they eventually build the theoretical notions discussed.

7. The **textbook work** is a complex teaching-learning method, because it “selects, combines and distributes various other methods, depending on the topics approached and the instructive-educational-formative goals (the conversation, the linguistic analysis, the demonstration, learning through discovery, problematization, various types of exercises)” (Parfene, 1999: 66). This method is used for all levels and ages, but the teacher must pay careful attention to selecting the Romanian as a Foreign Language textbooks from the wide variety on the Romanian market, especially since these works are not always adapted to the level indicated in the title. Moreover, the teacher has the role to guide students and familiarize them with the particularities and the tasks of the textbook, in order for them to be able to discover, understand and internalize the explanations in the textbook. As a RFL learning method, the textbook work can be practiced both in the classroom, by individual assignments, and at home by the homework that the student must do or by going over the texts again, learning the new words and reinforcing the theoretical notions taught in class. The textbook work also gets the student accustomed to working with a different kind of supporting materials: exercise books, dictionaries, and specialized journals.

8. Another RFL teaching method is the **teaching game method** (see Dafinoiu, 2012: 165–171). It is well known that the game is a childhood

activity and, for the young groups of students, the efficiency of using the game in the process of teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language is easy to understand. But this teaching method can just as well be applied to older, even adult students, because adults haven't forgotten how to play. The game elements included in the lesson will certainly get the students' attention throughout the entire teaching activity and eliminate boredom, considered to be "*the deadly sin of teaching*" (Herbart). Using the teaching game in the RFL teaching process makes the student learn the language with pleasure, get more involved in the on-going classroom activity, it makes shy students be more open, more courageous, build their trust in their ability to answer the various questions/ tasks addressed in a language that they do not master yet. The game can eliminate the monotony produced by drills (the same types of exercises solved mechanically create boredom among students), to relieve the tiredness at the end of the classes (the level of concentration goes down as the level of tiredness rises), stimulate competition among participants, acquire new information, and, last but not least, the teaching game method is a good opportunity for the teacher to consolidate and verify the knowledge previously acquired by the students.

Games develop the concentration ability, the observance of certain rules, the ability to take quick decisions, to solve problem situations, they stimulate the students' creativity and involves all course participants in the teaching-testing process.

The teaching game is a guided activity, therefore it must be announced and prepared; its success depends on the teacher's ability to efficiently combine the structural elements specific to the game: the content of the game (the topic, announced from the start), the goal, the assignment, the game activity (or game operations), the rules of the game; the game is a teaching method by which the instructive – educational element combines with the entertaining one. The teacher organizes the class and introduces the students to the rules of the game, which all participants must understand, internalize and apply; these rules must not be changed during the game. The rules may have different functions: either clarify the content of the game to the participants, or is designed to ensure the completion of the assignments. The teacher leads the game and ensures that all participants observe the rules of the game. By using of the teaching game as a RFL learning method, any teacher may easily notice that, similarly to the conversation method, the game also has the role to bring the group together, as the game stimulates and motivates students, it brings joy and satisfaction to the winners, it teaches the losers to accept defeat without holding grudge against their colleagues.

9. *The exercises method* is also a teaching approach, considered to be successful in the process of learning a foreign language, in this case, of learning Romanian.

Under one interpretation, the exercises mean a repeated action to acquire skills and abilities, more specifically, the increasingly proficient use of Romanian by non-native speakers, by learning its grammatical rules and their correct use in practice; essentially, learning by exercises consists in the students' repeated actions designed to apply their theoretical knowledge of Romanian in actual speech. The exercises learning method is recommended for all levels, and any target groups, both during the teaching classes aimed at reinforcing the newly acquired knowledge, and during the classes designed to review some older knowledge (see Dafinoiu, 2008: 549–601). This method is obviously combined with other methods, especially the conversation. The exercises have a multiple aim: firstly, to reinforce theoretical knowledge; to develop the skill and ability to apply the theoretical knowledge; to adapt and transfer the theory to different practical situations; to acquaint the student with the use of the dictionary; to develop independent work as well as group work skills; to make the teacher aware of possible gaps and wrong interpretation of the theory. The range of exercises which can be used for teaching Romanian as a foreign language is extremely wide, starting from A1/A2 level writing and reading exercises, to writing and analysis of texts for the C1/C2 levels. Thus, “according to their functions, exercises can be classified into: introductory, basic, creation, reproduction, operationalization, development, extensive, parallel, structural, testing exercises, individual or team exercises, collective, or oral, written, practical and mixed exercises” (Parfene, 1999: 59). In order for the exercises learning method to be successful, it requires some criteria, requirements and basic demands, including: exercises should be adapted to the theoretical knowledge acquired; the student should be aware of the exercises to be solved; the students should have learned the underlying theory necessary to solve the exercise; the exercises should be scientific and practice-oriented designed to raise the students' interest; the exercises should require the students to make a mental effort to find the correct solutions, not just solve the exercises mechanically; the assignment should be clearly formulated; they should be adapted to a certain level of difficulty and length according to the students' level and age; exercises should be varied and alternated to eliminate boredom and monotony; the teacher should timely check and correct the exercises and explain to the students where the mistake lies, etc. Among the many types of exercises which can be solved in the classroom depending on their target group, we

mention: spelling and orthoepy exercises (dictation, multiple choice or error correction), rewriting, fill in the blanks, multiple choice, exercises requiring students to recognise structures and give reasons for their choice, narrative writing exercises, exemplifying, substitution exercises etc.

10. In the RFL teaching activity, the *teamwork method* should not be ignored, as the most important benefit of this method is that of uniting the group; this method “creates and maintains cooperation and competition relationships among members of a group or various student groups, in order to solve the learning tasks.” (Eftenie, 2008: 120) Even if, initially, it appears to be a simple method, its content may raise problems, because the teacher must be able to select the team members appropriately, meaning that he must balance the teams from the point of view of their ability, he must designate a group leader, to assign tasks with a similar level of difficulty, to correct the written or oral texts produced by the students and, last but not least, to determine a final ranking based on the results of the teams. The method can be successfully applied to all target groups, regardless of the participants’ age, sex, level or intellectual capacity, on condition that the assignments be adapted to each group based on its particular characteristics. Teamwork is a method recommended in reinforcement and systematization of previous knowledge, review and testing classes. The advantages of this method are clear considering that it has a positive influence on the development of attention and interest at group level, it stimulates individual activities to the extent that the success of the entire group depends on the individual work of each member, it develops creative thinking through the fact that every member of the group must complete his/her assignment by finding diverse and original solutions. By involving all participants in solving the assignments given by the teacher, teamwork turns the class from an unorganized group, unresponsive to the activity, into a dynamic, homogeneous and coherent, ambitious group aiming for the win. The teamwork method is often combined with other methods such as the conversation, the explanation and the demonstration, this time used by the students in motivating their answers to the given assignment.

11. A final RFL learning method which we will discuss is *brainstorming*, also known as “the assault of ideas” or “storm in the brain”. Considered by some specialists as an alternative of the problematization method and taking into consideration the specific nature of this teaching strategy, we consider that brainstorming is a modern method that can be applied for C1/C2 level students who are already acquired RFL structures, since this method is designed for “successive questions meant to facilitate the students’ creative thinking

and spontaneous answers” (Goia, 2002: 126). This aspect requires problematization of discussions based on Romanian literature, science and technology, history and cultural life topics, and less or not at all on aspects of Romanian grammar. To trigger the so-called “storm” in the students’ brain, they must be confronted with a problem-question which should urge them to combine surprising and spontaneous ideas, departing from the teaching approach used up to that moment (Goia, 2002: 126).

As can be noticed, there are numerous and various RFL teaching-learning methods, all sharing the same goal: to enable non-native speakers to quickly, efficiently and correctly learn Romanian; thus, whether we consider traditional or modern methods, active-participatory or not-participatory methods, whether they are designed for teaching and communicating information, or reinforcement and consolidating of the knowledge acquired by students, or testing and grading the results of the class participants’ work, the teaching methods can be easily adapted according to the specific characteristics of each target group, and, for maximum efficiency of the instructive-educational process, they must always alternate, be combined and complete each other; combining several methods will certainly guarantee the full success of the teacher’s activity, both regarding the introduction of new knowledge and the testing of the knowledge acquired by the student. Some of the methods indicated above can be used both in teaching and in testing, for example the conversation method (both heuristic and catechetical) or the linguistic analysis method; other methods can be used for reinforcing knowledge or for the acquisition of speaking and writing skills, for example the exercises method. The success of these teaching methods and procedures depends to a great extent on the teacher’s ability to select, apply, and take into account some basic principles such as: the principle of systematizing and structuring the information given to the students, the principle of continuity and enrichment of (grammatical and lexical) knowledge from one lesson to another, the principle of accessibility and gradual rise of the level of difficulty of the items taught, the principle of adaptation to students’ age and intellectual capacity.

In conclusion, we can argue that no teacher can provide a full success recipe for the teaching-learning-testing of RFL knowledge, irrespective of his/her teaching experience. This assumption starts from the idea that, in his/her attempt to transfer information to a target group willing to learn Romanian as a foreign language, the teacher runs into a series of variables related to age, socio-professional category, sex, individual intellectual and educational characteristics, which are part of the course participant’s internal structure. Nevertheless, if, in the end, after some hard, long and sustained effort, the teacher realizes that

his/her students can understand a written text or an oral speech, they can write and speak Romanian correctly, it means that his/her work was not in vain and that, regardless of the teaching methods used, they were successful.

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