



Test-Taking Strategies

A Theoretical Review

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Abstract: The greater emphasis on the learner and learning has grounded a revolution in second language learning and teaching. The strategies test-takers use to perform on tests have been central to scholarly discussions and empirical investigations. The ultimate goal of educational testing is to measure the competency of the learners of certain related traits. Therefore, language testing research has centered on identifying characteristics that cause variations in the test-taker's performance. Such features are called test-taking strategies—techniques, tactics, or moves employed by language learners to perform better on tests and arrive at clues to the correct answers. This paper reviews the research literature on test-taking strategies. It used two research methods—keywords search and citation chains to navigate previously given views on the definition, classification, advantages, drawbacks, and teachability of test-taking strategies. This work ends with some educational implications and guidelines for language learners wishing to perform better to the exam items and attain higher scores in the construct assessed.

KEYWORDS: language learning- Language testing - Strategic Competence – Test-Taking Strategies – Test-wiseness Strategies – Test-unwiseness strategies.

Introduction

During the last two decades, the greater emphasis on the learner and learning has oriented the recent approach toward language acquisition (Nunan, 1988; Al-buainain, 2010), grounding a revolution in the second language learning and teaching domain. Assessment is inevitable in language learning. Furthermore, it is a part of modern life due to its use in evaluating the characteristics of individuals applying for a position in society.

Language teachers around the world are always required to prepare their students to take language tests. Accordingly, the interest in assessment shifted the focus onto the integration of skills by adding more elements to the assessment process, rather than concentrating on lonely skills such as speaking, writing, reading, and listening (Cohen, 2006; Shohamy et al., 2017). In this scenario, the teacher should adopt a multi-function method of learning and assessment. Recently, the major work of language assessment researchers has centered on classifying the characteristics that cause variations in test-takers performance. The processes that test-takers employ—strategies are commonly called strategic competence. Some language-testing research believes that these strategies are behavioral and observable; however, other researchers find them mental and unobservable (Niklov, 2006).

In many situations, sufficient knowledge about the course content is not enough to perform well in the tests (Mohamed, 2021). Other components such as reaction, personality, reducing anxiety, and strategies also contribute to a positive effect on the test performance of the test-taker. BIÇAK (2013) and Dodeen et al. (2014) assert that decreasing anxiety, increasing motivation, and deploying effective test-taking

strategies are pivotal components for successful performance on tests or assessments. In contrast, the lack of test-taking tactics and high level of anxiety affect test performance negatively (BIÇAK, 2013; Chittooran & Miles, 2001; Cohen, 2006; Beidel et al., 1999; Carraway; 1987). Studies have also shown that preparing and training students to practice on tests can improve their performance. (e.g., Barnett, 2000; Kitsantas, 2002; Hong & Sas, 2006; BIÇAK, 2013; Samson, 2001; Smith, 2002).

The present work is in an attempt to review previously given ideas about assessment and test-taking strategies. It, purposefully, will summarize the most relevant and beneficial views on test-taking strategies. This work will be valuable for both the language teacher and student. Language learners will save time and effort in getting experienced and familiar with many types of tests they might encounter in the future. On the other hand, the language teachers will gain an insight into the nature of language assessment and the strategies that language learners usually use to control their tests. Specifically, this work aims at exploring:

- The nature of Test-Taking Strategies.
- The advantages and disadvantages of Test-Taking Strategies.
- The extent to which Test-Taking Strategies affect the language test validity.
- The teachability of Test-Taking Strategies.

Method

This paper review the research literature on test-taking strategies. The researchers employed two research methods—keyword search and citation chain. The keyword search is standard in scholarly research (Phelps, 2012). First, the researchers had identified the relevant keywords that identified documents encompassing relevant content. Then, the computer surfed relevant studies of scholarly resources such as digital libraries, journals, and online bookstores and publications. The other method—citation chain, was used to review the evidence for the relevant studies found insides related studies and to navigate their lists of references. The aim was to get more studies correlated to the present work.

Test-Taking Strategies: Concept and Definition

The term *strategy* has been one of the most referred to terms in Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition studies, and it is known as *technique*, *tactic*, or *move* (Stathopoulou & Nikaki, 2009). It refers to the exertion made by (an) individual(s) for reaching a goal. According to Oxford & Cohen (1992), ‘strategy’ comes from the ancient Greek word *strategia*, which means steps or actions taken to win a war. Strategy is often misused. It is sometimes known as the plan of action designed to achieve high-level objectives (Kingston et al., 2013).

In language learning, strategies refer to the conscious or unconscious processes that language learners use in learning and using a language. O’Malley & Chamot (1990) claim that language-learning strategies are distinctive thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information. Richards and Schmidt (2002) define them as the ways, including cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, social strategies, and resource management strategies that the learner uses to facilitate learning. According to Anderson (2005), they are intentionally used to improve the performance in the language.

Language tests have been used to serve a variety of purposes. Bachman (1991) grouped them into two categories: language ability inference and on-test-taker judgment. Psychologists hypothesize that testing and assessment affect educational achievement by other intervening factors such as motivation and feedback (Phelps, 2012). Nevertheless, most successful learners hinge on their mental capacities to control exams by using deliberately selected techniques. These processes are commonly named test-taking strategies. Test-taking strategies have been explained differently in the last few decades. They consist of information, tactics, and methods used by the student to answer test items to achieve exam success or to gain a higher test score (Tunç & Şenel, 2021). Such strategies are known as test-taking strategies or test-wisness strategies (AL-Fraidan, 2014). Definitions suggested by scholars to test-taking strategies in the 1980s and 1990s are regularly modernized and used. Cohen (2006:308) defines these strategies as “the consciously selected processes that the respondents use to deal with the language issues and responses demanded in tasks at hand” They are the methods that test-takers employ as a medium to attain correct answers on specific language assessments (Singh et al., 2021). Additionally, Brush (1981) maintains that test-taking strategies refer to any procedure, tactics, actions, or rules that intensify the prospect of successful answers to certain test questions. The propensity underlying the enlistment of such strategies— strategic

competence has been a crucial component in several theoretical frameworks communicative competence and second/ foreign language ability (Hung; 2016).

Test-Taking Strategies Taxonomies

The use of test-taking strategies does not necessarily indicate the linguistic deficiency of the learner; instead, they are chances to get the correct answers for certain sorts of questions in which guessing is possible. For decades, second language research has focused on assessment validation such as the test difficulty and discrimination, test reliability, intercorrelation of subtests, test methods (Cohen, 2006). The strategies that test-takers draw on to complete language tests received little attention. Later, the Language assessment framework has focused on language learner practice. Regarding the development of language assessment territory, Cohen (2006) indicated that “the focus was on language learner strategies (i.e., the ways that respondents operationalized their skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as the related skills of vocabulary learning, grammar, and translation), the separate set of test management strategies (i.e., strategies for responding meaningfully to the test items and tasks), and a likewise set of test wiseness strategies (i.e., strategies for using knowledge of test formats and other peripheral information to answer test items without going through the expected linguistic and cognitive processes)” (p.308).

In this perspective, test-taking strategies fall into two types—test management and test wiseness. Test management strategies refer to the behaviors reflecting competence (Singh et al., 2012). Test wiseness strategies imply using the textual procedural aspects of the test to get the correct answers (Singh et al., 2021:219). They refer to the ability to note and exploit weaknesses in language test items to arrive at clues to the correct answers without the skills or knowledge that the items were designed to elicit or measure (Al-Naddabi, 2013:47). According to Bachman & Palmer (1996), these strategies are under the umbrella of strategic competence. And, strategic competence includes cognitive strategies such as translation, inference, guessing, etc., and metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning, evaluating, excluding, etc.) In his lectures on language testing, Al-Fraidan (2015) has distinguished between cognitive and metacognitive strategies. He said, as a part of his communicative competence, the learner has the so-called strategic competence. This kind of competence is manifested consciously in many situations, especially taking tests. Sometimes, for instance, a test-taker prefers using translation to deal with the test items. In doing so, she is using a cognitive strategy. But, when she is planning to use translation or not, she is using a metacognitive strategy. The metacognitive strategies control decisions. Briefly speaking, test performance reflects two underlying interrelated processes, viz. cognitive and metacognitive strategies. While metacognition has significant, direct effects on cognitive processes, cognitive processes have a direct effect on test performance. Therefore, the effect of cognitive strategies on performance is interwoven with, and facilitated by metacognitive strategies.’ (Al-Fraidan & Al-Khalaf, 2012:81)

Strategies have been classified for years into two types: test-taking strategies and test-wisness strategies. Recently, Al -Fraidan (2014) has proposed a third category—Test-unwisness Strategies. Test-taking strategies imply the test-taker’s ability to control test items to arrive at correct answers. They are often used to minimize the level of anxiety and attain higher scores. These strategies are unconscious and a part of the language test performance that partially relies on language knowledge and language use and skills (Cohen, 1993; Al Naddabi, 2013). In contrast, the test-wisness strategies refer to the conscious processes that test-takers use to compensate for their language knowledge deficiency. Despite their usefulness for the test-taker, using them reflects the invalidity of the test (Cohen, 1993; Al Naddabi, 2013; Al –Fraidan, 2014; Bachman & Palmer, Singh et al., 2012; Hung, 2016). The test-unwisness strategies irritate the test validity and are effect-sided. They refer to any other strategies applied to language tests causing distort to the test-takers to manifest their actual language ability or knowledge (Al –Fraidan, 2014).

Some Related Studies

Students’ Test-taking strategies have been investigated for decades (Tunç & Şenel, 2021). These strategies have been central to the scholarly discussions and empirical investigations within the language-testing research territory (Bumbáľková, 2021). Such controversial issues have foregrounded the integral role these strategies played in test completion; demonstrated the vigorous interfaces they shared with proficiency levels; and shed light on the significant relationship to test performance (Huang, 2016). Cohen (2006) grouped emphases of the areas concerning test-taking strategies into three main functions: the validation of language testing; exploring the relationship between respondents’ language proficiencies and test-taking strategies, and evaluation of the effectiveness of strategy instructions.

There have been many attempts to describe the nature of test-taking strategies and categorize them. [Nikolov \(2006\)](#), who used the verbal report protocol to identify the strategies that students used when performing on the test, clearly stated that arriving at an agreed classification of test strategies is complicated due to their overlap and the possibility of subdividing. However, one of the early studies on test-taking strategies was done by [Cohen \(1984\)](#), who tried to figure out strategies that EFL students deploy on multiple-choice reading comprehension tests. Through verbal reports, he observed that the learners read the question first, then examine the passages partially, seeking to find answers to the corresponding questions.

Training students to test-taking strategies and preparing for assessment contribute to better performance on examinations. Both language students and teachers should develop these skills to guarantee the success of control to tests. [Kitsantas \(2002\)](#) investigated the relationship between test preparation and test-taking strategies and test performance. Sixty-two college students participated in her study. Through a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire, Kitsantas found that learners who are planning, goal setting, selecting task-specific strategies affect test performance positively. Similarly, [Bicak \(2013\)](#) has tried to develop a test preparation and test-taking strategies scale. A group of 212 high school students (116=female; 96=male) participated in the study voluntarily. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire of two dimensions (test preparation strategies and test-taking strategies) was administered to the participants. The results showed that the respondents preferred the use of both test-taking strategies the test preparation strategies. [Dolly and Williams \(1986\)](#) trained a group of learners on guessing the correct answers. The performance of the trained and untrained students was remarkable. The result showed a significant difference between the scores of the two groups. The trained students performed better on the test and got higher scores than those who were not trained. The same findings were reported by [Lee \(2019\)](#), who found a difference in the performance of the experimental group (students who were trained on using test-taking strategies) and the control group (the ones who did not receive any session of training).

Confidence and anxiety play roles in test performance. In an attempt to investigate the relationship between self-confidence and test performance, [Smith \(2012\)](#) found a significant correlation between the learners' performance on the test items and their confidence. In addition, [Beidel et al. \(1999\)](#) suggested that the development of test-taking strategies decreased general levels of test anxiety and self-ratings of distress. Another evidence found by [Carraway \(1987\)](#), who tried to reduce the nervousness of some college nursing students through a test-taking strategy seminar. Carraway found that student nurses who participated in the Test-Taking Strategy Seminar had significantly lower test anxiety levels and significantly higher nursing test scores than those who did not appear in the seminar.

The appropriateness of teaching test-taking is also controversial. Although instructions on how to control tests and obtain higher scores are beneficial to the test-takers, making test very easy violate its validity ([Allan, 1992](#); [Niklov \(2006\)](#); [Cohen, 1993](#); [Barta, 2010](#); [Mohammadi, 2014](#); [Al-Fraidan, 2014](#); [Al-Fraidan & Al-Khalaf; 2012](#)). The validity of the test must totally block the use of test-wisness ([Bumbálková, 2021](#)). However, equipping test-takers with low knowledge of using test-taking strategies enhances their performance of the exam ([Pourdana et al. \(2012\)](#)). Unfortunately, some learners misleadingly use some strategies, which never manifest their actual knowledge competence. The instruction of avoidance and correctly using alternative test-taking strategies are important. In his investigation of the test-taking strategies that a group of Saudi learners uses for the comprehension reading test, [Al-Fraidan \(2014\)](#) found that low achievers mislead use test-unwisness strategies—ones that negatively affect test performance. He summarizes these sided-affect strategies as follows.

- Changing a correct answer into the wrong
- Choosing unknown answers.
- Not reading the test instructions carefully
- Not reading the whole question. Reading after the gap.
- Bad time management

Test-Taking Strategies: The Ultimate Goals

Learners take many tests and exams during their educational journey. The general goal of educational testing is to measure the learners' competency related to predestined traits ([Tunç & Şenel, 2021](#)). However, testing and assessment have many other purposes besides transferring students from one level of education onto the other.

First, language testing and assessment are precious sources of information about the effectiveness and efficiency of learning and the teaching as language teachers deploy them to diagnose student strengths

weaknesses. Tests are also used to assess the student's language development and evaluate their achievement. Thus, they provide feedback on the process of language learning and teaching. (Bachman, 1990). Second, testing and assessment feedback serves the government to evaluate the quality of school systems (Flucher & Davidson, 2007). This evaluation perhaps contributes to the development in education either through improving the curricula and the teacher's skills and approaches or through the adaptation of modern facilities that may aid the process of learning and teaching. Third, tests play a central role in accessing the opportunities provided in our world. They are used to distinguish the fittingness of individuals who apply for jobs. Torgesen (2006) states four main goals for assessment: 1) identifying students who have difficulties in reading; 2) monitoring student during the year to ensure their adequate progress; 3) collecting information that perhaps add to the student's profile of strength and weakness; and 4) assessing successfulness of the instructions which generally serves to meet the student's grade-level expectations. In short, testing and assessment are a significant part of the world's educational systems. They serve as an individual evaluation system and as a means to compare performances across a variety and populations (Lynch, 2018). Al-Fraidan & Al-Khalaf (2012) find two main advantages of test-taking strategies: improving test scores and reducing exam-related anxiety.

Test-taking strategies: Teachability and Student' Preparation

In language learning, testing is not a medium for knowledge assessment but also an effective tool for learning. Even most successful language learners do not perform well in the tests because of many affecting factors such as anxiety and unfamiliarity with test types. The teacher's efforts in preparing his students for test sessions contribute to better performance in examinations. The preparation to test can include encouragement, motivation, and decreasing the test-taker's level of anxiety. However, training students in some test-taking strategies might lead to successful test performance. Many researchers have found that some effective test-taking strategies benefit learning progress and retrieving information, while negative strategies lead to poor performance in tests (e.g., Hong et al., 2006; Biçak, 2013; Kitsantas, 2004). Biçak (2013) suggests that students who use test preparation and test-taking strategies will increase their academic success (p.2). Students who neither practice on tests during learning nor develop strategies when taking the test will, unfortunately, be lower achievers and less successful academically. Dolly and Williams (1986) found that students who took training on using test-taking strategies performed better on the test and got higher scores than those who did not attend the training seminar. Anxiety also plays a role in the test-taker's performance and scores. Carraway (1987), who tried to reduce the anxiety level in some college nursing students, found that anxiety negatively affects test performance.

Although new trends to language learning support the learner's autonomy (Wang, 1983; Taylor, 1986, Nunan, 1988; Boud, 1988), that does not necessarily mean that students should be autonomous in their learning in all situations and at all times (Benson, 2012:39). Many learners are deficient in study skills and use ineffective test-taking strategies. They do not use effective test-taking strategies because of lack of time and motivation, lack of prior knowledge, or lack of occasions (Hong et al. (2006). Thus, teachers should have a role to compensate for all these gaps. Continuous testing and training on different test types and anxiety treatment are remedial and should be included in the planning-test strategy instruction. Such actions motivate the students and encourage them to take a risk and perform better in exams regardless of their language competencies.

It is noteworthy that neither all test-taking strategies are beneficial nor useless. From this perspective, developing skills to use the most beneficial strategies and avoid distracting ones is necessary to ensure better performance on exams. Beidel et al. (1999) found that the development of test-taking strategies decreased general levels of test anxiety and self-ratings of distress. The process of development of these skills would not be achieved by having students lonely practice on tasks. During daily classes, the teacher should intervene and introduce whatever valuable strategies he thinks are new to the student. In other words, the teacher should teach these test-taking strategies. Some tips to control the tests during classes are sufficient, but without neglecting the content. Language testing research has not said much about the possibility of teaching particular strategies to students as a part of their lessons. Yet some researchers suggest teaching some tips, and they list some characteristics of the most useful test-taking strategies.

In some cases, the test provides the grounds for test-takers to deploy some strategies. These strategies are necessarily subject-independent and helpful for gaining higher scores (Mohammadi, 2014). From a psychological perspective, tests should include some items, which are not more challenging to the test-takers. Simple test items do not always affect the test validity- the appropriateness and usefulness of a test for a particular purpose. So, teaching some tips for taking tests allow students to perform better on tests and

recognize correct answers. In this regard, Cohen (1998) has listed some teachable strategies in terms of guidelines or tips. These tips for teaching are found in Al-Naddabi's(2013) work on test-taking strategies.

To account for all possible strategies that a test-taker can employ before and during the examination, Kesselman-Turkel & Peterson (1981) wrote a book describing how language students can increase their test-taking ability—test-wiseness. They started with reviewing some principles of pretest studying. They formulated these principles as a set of strategies, including some tactics. The book has been a reference to many researchers and students because it comprises a variety of test-taking strategies that test-wise students might employ. Kesselman-Turkel & Peterson's (1981) strategies are summed up as follows.

A) Before tests strategies

1. Test Identification

- Find out in advance the type of test you are going to take
- For short-answer, fill-in-the-blank, matching, and some true-false tests, emphasis on facts and details.
- For an essay or oral test, you should prepare to argue persuasively about several general topics and to back up each argument with enough specific details.
- For multiple-choice tests, you don't actually have to recall anything: you just have to recognize related information when you see it
- In case you have questions about the test:
 - Ask the instructor
 - Look at past exams
 - Predict on past experience

2. Intensive Cramming

- Single out the course's purpose
- Focus on the major topics
- Make memory joggers:
 - Write clear definition
 - Highlight significant facts
 - List the words that you are not able to define

3. Prepared cramming

- Study wisely during the entire semester
- Condense all notes to a couple of pages
- For foreign language, have words and phrases cards and list of verbs and charts of irregular verbs
- For technical courses, have cards with formulas and their derivations
- Remember, the goals of this strategy are:
 - Overviewing the coursework
 - Fitting the facts and ideas into perspective
 - Refreshing your memory of facts and associations
 - Convincing yourself that you completely prepared for the exam
 - Getting the time to sleep well the night before the exam (at least 3 hours)

4. Pretest

- Practice with the past test if available
- Otherwise, otherwise, make an exam from the homework assignments and practice on them
- Mimic the actual test situation: set time limits

5. Prepare extra for problem-solving

- Copy advanced problems from past homework assignments
- Mix the problem and test whether or not you recognize them
- Solve each problem and check them against the correct answer
- Correct your misconceptions

6. **Prepare extra for unfamiliar, quick-scoring exams**

- Try to find samples of the unfamiliar tests
- Practice on the tests until you understand that types of tests

7. **Prepare extra for essay exams**

- Select a number from the main topics based on the units in the course
- Make one or two essay questions
- Jot down an outline to follow to writing each essay
- Do not write the actual essay but after practicing in writing.

8. **Form a study group for essays and orals**

- Collect a study group from other students
- Uncover some misunderstood facts and ideas that wisest students don't have correct information about
- Discuss with the group the misunderstood ideas

B) **Prepare emotionally for the rest**

1. **Bolster your confidence**

- Have the tendency to do well
- Study the coursework so that you are 125 percent sure of it
- Get a tutor to quiz you if need judgment
- Do not think of the brightest students
- Keep your mind in showing how much you know
- Do not panic little worry. It is good for you

2. **Minimize discomfort**

- Try to visit the test room before the big exam
- Select a seat and do homework there
- Check the temperature of the test room
- Eliminate the distractions in the test room
- Try to behave well with the proctors

3. **Get happy**

- Avoid depressing situations a few days before the test
- Seek out enjoyable situations
- Get happy

4. **Shake your anger**

- Shake your anger before you go into the test room

5. **Worry only about what is real**

- Try to read all about the course
- Don't worry about the marks you will lose for the unread parts in your course

6. **Know when to postpone**

- Postpone the test if you feel physically ill
- Don't postpone the test due to fear or anxiety

7. **Get help for terror**

- When you have nightmares about the tests or fear them, get help from a school psychologist.
- If you are among those who are emotionally incapable of handling large-group test situations, try to compensate by doing a take-home exam or writing extra reports and homework assignments
- Dispel irrational fears

C) **Inside the test room**

1. **Get into the method**

- The best ways to get yourself into the best test-taking method are:

- Deliberately focus on something that makes you perform well during the test
- Get the test room early enough to relax
- Concentrate during the test:
 - Take a seat away from the door
 - Stay away from distracting friends
 - Sit right under a light fixture
 - If there is noise outside the test room, ask the proctor to close the door
 - Bring enough pens and pencils
 - Bring a sweater so you think about being chilly
 - Bring a watch and do not keep looking at the clock inside the test room

2. *Do not let test-taking anxiety get you down*

- Ignore any kind of distractions
- Be relaxed and avoid any before-test stresses

3. *Think before you pop a pill*

- Avoid using pills that you think would make you awake for a long time
- Remember: pills might keep you awake but will not help you concentrate

4. *Dump your worries onto paper*

- Don't hesitate
- As soon as the test is handed out, jot down everything you think is important on one corner of the test paper

5. *Push on*

- Perform as fast as you can while still being careful and thorough

Kesselman-Turkel & Peterson (1981) have also suggested some techniques that test-wise students should use for any type of test. These strategies are:

Making the best use of your time:

- Decide whether to speed or not to speed during the test.
- Divide your time according to how many points each item is worth.
- Take the easy questions first.
- Read all the essay questions in advance.
- Leave the time-wasters for last.
- Check your watch.
- Use all the time.

Understanding what the directions and questions really ask for:

- Read critically
- Flag (be careful of) tricky directions
- Flag complicated questions
- Focus on the sample questions and answers
- Use all the help you can get such as a calculator, scrap paper, textbooks if is allowed.

Watching out for careless errors:

- Double-check when pressure is off
- Fill in the right blanks
- On essays, don't waste space

Reasoning out answers to tough questions:

- Look for clues in the questions
- Look for clues in the answer choices
- Keep your eyes open for memory joggers
- Save tough questions for last
- If all the above techniques fail, guess

Getting special clues from standardized tests:

- Remember that questions are usually proceed from the easiest to the most difficult.
- Fill in all the blanks
- Remember the odd answers of the multiple-choice test

Getting special clues from instructor-prepared tests:

- Don't look too hard for hidden meaning in the questions
- Look for clues within the questions

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper has introduced some research findings on language testing. The focus has been on test-taking strategies. Recent work in the framework of language assessment revealed no consensus on the nature of test-taking strategies. They have been seen as behavioral/observable and mental/unobservable reactions that test-takers employ to control tests. These strategies have many purposes, including the improvement of test scores and reducing the level of anxiety. Literature has proved that test-taking strategies are beneficial as they improve test performance. However, some of these strategies are found harmless and prevent test-takers from expressing their actual language abilities. Additionally, they hurt the test validity. Regarding the scope of test-taking strategies, they have been classified into: cognitive, metacognitive, test-wisness, and test-unwisness strategies. The pedagogical implication of these strategies is to identify, specify, and introduce useful strategies to students during classes and eliminate those useless and harmful ones.

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