

2017

Teaching how to Listen. Blended Learning for the Development and Assessment of Listening Skills in a Second Language

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Recommended Citation

Caruso, M., Gadd Colombi, A., & Tebbit, S. (2017). Teaching how to Listen. Blended Learning for the Development and Assessment of Listening Skills in a Second Language. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.14.1.7>

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This paper discusses the integration and effectiveness of blended learning for the development and assessment of listening skills in a second language. The development of oral abilities (listening and speaking) is one of the most challenging and neglected aspects of second language learning (Vandergrift & Goh 2012, Graham & Santos 2015). Listening comprehension work in particular is crucial in the early stages of second language acquisition, and, therefore, for *ab-initio* language students, for whom processing and decoding auditory input can be very challenging. In 2014 a set of online listening quizzes was created and integrated into two *ab-initio* Italian courses. The aim was to offer engaging, flexible listening comprehension practice and assessment, which would extend the students' learning experience, stimulate their learning motivation and allow for a better use of face-to-face teaching in the classroom environment. Having conceptualised listening as a process rather than a product we designed tasks to teach learners how to listen, rather than merely test their comprehension. The validity of the quizzes as a means for the development of listening skills and as a tool for formative and summative assessment was subjected to systematic analysis via an online student survey. The large amount of data collected reveals that the quizzes were a key element in the development of listening skills and the delivery mode did not only meet the students' learning needs but it was clearly preferred to in-class assessment.

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Introduction

This article brings to the fore the need to reconceptualise the teaching and assessment of listening-comprehension (LC) skills in second-language acquisition, in a context of demand for more-efficient teaching practices and more online engagement. The research undertaken for this project involved the creation and evaluation of online LC quizzes for two different courses of Italian taught at the University of Western Australia. To understand the rationale of this investigation, it is necessary to begin by presenting the institutional context in which it took place.

The University of Western Australia is located in urban Perth and is a research-intensive university. It is part of the Australian “Group of Eight”, Australia’s eight leading research universities. In 2012 the University of Western Australia introduced a restructuring of undergraduate degrees known as New Courses. Under these changes students are required to take at least four subjects providing knowledge beyond their chosen field of specialisation and offered in a different faculty to their own. For example, a student studying a Bachelor of Commerce may take four courses from the Faculty of Arts. This new structure resulted in unprecedented levels of enrolments in language subjects. Unlike previous years, when students studying languages mainly came from the Faculty of Arts, they now come from all faculties across the university, bringing different needs and learning styles.¹

The boosting of blended learning through the integration of online listening quizzes was therefore an important way to help us meet two main challenges. First, we wanted to help maintain the growth in enrolments by offering students engaging, flexible LC practice. Within the field of second-language acquisition (SLA), the development of oral abilities (listening and speaking) is one of the most challenging and neglected aspects (Vandergrift & Goh 2012; Graham & Santos 2015). LC was targeted because of its impact on success in language learning: “In particular, the use of listening strategies can make authentic texts more accessible in the early stages of learning a language, so that the process becomes more relevant and interesting for the learners” (Vandergrift 1999, p. 174). Second, our project was an attempt to increase efficiency in assessment; this would take place outside of the classroom, allowing for a better use of face-to-face teaching in the classroom environment. Since little attention has been devoted to university students’ perception of online listening, particularly in Italian L2, our research also aims to address a gap in the literature.

This article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews some relevant issues in LC research and pedagogy, which provided the theoretical background for our investigation. Section 3 describes the project and exemplifies some of the materials developed. This is followed by the project evaluation (Section 4), and the data discussion (Section 5). Conclusions are drawn in the last section.

2. Listening-comprehension pedagogy

Our research stems from the most recent discoveries in LC, which show that it is “a key component of language acquisition and an important foundation for success in language... programs” (Vandergrift & Baker 2015, p. 391). Particularly, we conceptualised listening as a *process* rather than a product (Graham & Santos 2015), and we attempted to teach learners strategies on how to listen, rather than merely test their comprehension (Thompson & Rubin 1996). Krashen understood

¹ These changes have been documented extensively for Italian in Caruso and Brown (2015), and for all languages in Brown and Caruso (2016).

LC's important role in foreign-language acquisition early on in the history of research on SLA. Following his first claims that "comprehension may be at the heart of the language acquisition process" (Krashen 1981, p. 102), he went on to demonstrate that it is precisely in the moment when we comprehend that we begin to learn. In other words, we learn through comprehending: "we acquire language when we understand messages" (Krashen 2013, p. 3).

Despite Krashen's early discoveries, listening has long been treated as the "Cinderella of communication strategies" (Vandergrift 1997, p. 494) or "of the four macro-skills" (Flowerdew & Miller 2005, p. xi), and there is still little research devoted to the study of LC and the development of the skill of listening in a second language (Field 2012). Absalom and Rizzi (2008, p. 56) note a "lack of research which explores the effects of research online listening may have on L2 proficiency". As a consequence, a gap has developed "between theoretical development in listening research and materials for listening pedagogy" (Graham & Santos 2015, p. 96), with repercussions for the learners, who are not instructed efficiently on how to approach listening.

One of the main problems is that listening comprehension has long been focused solely on testing students' ability to listen to and comprehend audio tracks: "Too often teachers only use listening activities to test the listening abilities of their students, which leads to anxiety and apprehension. This is not a context favourable to the acquisition of useful listening strategies" (Vandergrift 1999, p. 174). Earlier discussions on LC were focused on the classification and grading of listening tasks in terms of difficulty (Fish 1981; Nunan 1989; Richards 1983; Ur 1984). Furthermore, the "perception of difficulty resided in the difficulty of the material used as the content for the comprehension activities, and was borrowed from readability measures for written texts" (Hoven 1999, p. 88). While listening and reading share receptive language processing, listening needs to be studied independently from reading (Vandergrift & Baker 2015, p. 392).

Hoven (1999, p. 3) emphasises how, "as changes in the focus of language teaching and learning have moved from content- or teacher-centred to more learner or learning-centred approaches, the focus in listening comprehension has also shifted". More importance is now given to listening in the learning of a foreign language, as demonstrated by recent studies (e.g. Graham & Santos 2015; Lee & Lee 2012), and to the social and cultural impact listening can have on students.

Lieske's (2007) contributions are particularly relevant for selecting audio texts and designing tasks. Lieske identifies five elements of effective listening materials: content validity, purposefulness and transferability, retrieval of information from long-term memory, teaching new listening skills and authenticity. With respect to transferability, she notes that

an activity that asks the listener to count the number of times s/he hears the word *go* lacks transferability and purposefulness because at the content level it does not reflect normal, natural behaviour. In addition, the type of information that the learner must provide (i.e., the outcome of the task) is not necessary to accomplish a listening task in the real world. Finally, while this activity may develop the ability to perform well on classroom tests, it does not help the learner master the listening skills that are required to have real-world conversations (Lieske 2007, p. 41).

Richards (1983, p. 171) cautions against focusing on the "retrieval of information from long-term memory rather than on the processing activities themselves". If the listener is asked to recall information after the listening passage is over, the focus is on memory instead of comprehension. In addition, question-oriented instruction, such as listening activities that use true-false questions and follow-up vocabulary exercises, does not require the learner to use the language functionally

(Morley 1991). Similarly, Lieske emphasises that the LC activity needs to teach students “skills that enable them to listen in real-world contexts” (Lieske 2007, p. 42).

Authenticity is the last element listed by Lieske when designing LC. It is essential for transferability to the real world (Porter & Roberts 1987); unauthentic dialogues do not prepare learners for realistic communicative events. Artificially slow dialogues lack real-world lexis, avoid reduced forms and have no hesitations or rephrasing. As a consequence, they may be too simplified and too easy for a learner to understand. Dialogues also lack authenticity when the speakers exaggerate their intonation, when there is unnatural repetition and when participants say equal amounts (Porter & Roberts 1987). In contrast, dialogues that have conversational overlap, background noise and attention signals (e.g., uh-huh, mmm) reflect real-life conversations, making them more authentic (Lieske 2007). Videos can also provide excellent authentic materials for LC.

Videos have long been used in the teaching of foreign languages, and particularly in the teaching and testing of LC. According to Wagner, this is due to the belief that “including the non-verbal components of a spoken text will be useful for listeners in comprehending the aural input” (Wagner 2010, p. 493). Communication occurs on different levels, through a multitude of codes that imply paralinguistic, extra-linguistic and proxemic elements. Audiovisuals are, thus, a pluridimensional reality that can be exploited on different syntactic levels in the foreign-language classroom (Forgacs et al. 2005, p. 173). Moreover, the use of audiovisual materials in the foreign-language classroom offers students direct contact with the culture represented on screen. Porta (2013, p. 90) emphasises the “inherent cultural value” that videos found online can have for language students, where culture is defined not as the “‘big C’ kinds of culture... complex, institutionalized and historically differentiated”, but rather the “‘little c’ culture, the everyday, tangible, subjective, even routine aspects of L2 culture” (p. 93).

Assessment is now increasingly taking place online rather than in the classroom. Computer technology has provided an alternative learning space, a different delivery mode to that of the classroom. It provides for blended teaching and learning based on alternating online and offline activities and materials (Tomlinson & Whittaker 2013). Lee and Lee (2012) specifically addressed students’ preferences for online versus offline listening activities in English as a second language at university level. They found that “an optimal design and the successful implementation of the blended learning model in listening instruction require the teacher to play a crucial role as a designer, a selector of effective activities, materials and multimedia tools, and a monitor who provides timely scaffolding” (p. 1). Our project also addresses such implications.

3. Project description

Experimentation with listening quizzes in Italian courses started in semester 1 of 2014, when students from the *ab initio* stream were required to take three online quizzes to practise listening skills. These tasks were integrated into their course but did not count towards their final mark. Since the feedback received at the end of that semester was very positive, it was decided to design and critically evaluate a full set of listening quizzes that would serve as a tool for formative and summative assessment.² The criteria that were followed in the selection and integration of the materials to be designed were grounded in the research presented above:

- input quality

² The project was supported by a UWA Improving Students Learning grant obtained in 2014.

- consistency with in-class activities/content
- progression.

The project was targeted to our two largest cohorts: the *ab initio* semester course ITAL1401 (118 students in semester 2 of 2014) and the semester course ITAL1402 (81 students in semester 2 of 2014).³ A total of 33 quizzes were created between July and September 2014 based on audio and video tracks that satisfied the three main criteria above, and were “meant as continuous and repeating cycles of activities” (Green 2013, pp. 25-26) rather than stand-alone products. The quizzes included mainly multiple-choice questions, with the possibility of question preview, to encourage the activation of prior knowledge through key vocabulary. Chung (2002, quoted in Vandergrift 2007, p. 198) found that “multiple choice questions had a greater influence on listening success than open-ended questions”.

Both audio tracks and audio-visuals were implemented in the program. The audio and video files (between two and four minutes long for the audio files, up to five minutes for the video files) were sourced amongst textbook materials or online (Youtube, www.edilingua.it, www.guerraedizioni.com). One of the videos was filmed by one of the authors of this article. Videos were used in the context of our project as an aid to listening comprehension, specifically when moving away from mere word- and sound-discrimination, when introducing more difficult, faster conversations, to ensure progression, and for our students to be exposed to Italian culture as well as the Italian language. The use of authentic, unscripted audio-visuals in our project provided “direct contact not only with the language, but also with the culture represented on the screen” (Forgacs et al. 2005, p. 173), and the learning-management system platform became the environment for a cross-cultural encounter. The pluridimensionality of the audio-visual message emphasised by Forgacs et al. was thus exploited on different didactic levels.

Students accessed the quizzes via their learning-management system page, based on Moodle. The University of Western Australia Multimedia Centre team provided technical advice and support on the interface between sound files and quizzes. It was decided to incorporate 10 assessable quizzes in each of the two courses: one quiz per week from week 3 to week 12 (a one-semester subject consists of 13 weeks). Altogether they counted 6% towards the total assessment for the course. For the first eight quizzes (specifically designed for formative assessment), students could listen to the track and attempt the quiz as many times as they wanted, to encourage the planning and verification stages of Vandergrift’s (1999) pedagogical cycle. Students had total control over the audio tracks, which they could pause and play as necessary. The audio files were made available at the start of the week, with the quiz, but while the audio files were accessible up until the end of the course, the quiz closed at the end of the week. These eight quizzes were weighted 3% in total. For the last two quizzes, students could only listen to the audio track twice, in non-stop listening mode. They only had two attempts at the quiz (with the final mark set as the highest mark), and had a time limit to complete the task.⁴ These two final quizzes were worth the remaining 3%. At the same time, students were also expected to complete one extra listening quiz per week, which did not count towards the assessment but was aimed at offering formative feedback.⁵ Quizzes provided students

³ In these courses successful students achieve, respectively, Level A1 and Level A2 of the European Framework of Reference for Languages.

⁴ ITAL1401 two final quizzes had a time limit of eight minutes. ITAL1402 quizzes had time limits of nine and 17 minutes respectively.

⁵ Besides the listening quizzes, weighted 6% of the final mark, the other assessment items for both ITAL1401 and ITAL1402 were: four in-class tests (24%), three online activities (10%), role-play (video-recorded and uploaded to YouTube. 10%), participation (15%) and written examination (35%).

with immediate final scores and included, in different degrees, explicit feedback in the incorrect-answer field, to guide students with the listening process⁶.

The section that follows addresses and illustrates the progression of the quizzes. The first quizzes created for ITAL1401 were aimed at practising mainly bottom-up aspects of listening, such as sound and word discrimination. The audio tracks were based on content that had been covered in class, and were fairly simple, while still displaying the characteristics of real-life conversation. Figure 1 illustrates the type of questions created for these early quizzes.

<p>A: Il suo nome? B: Mariano Lopez. A: Lopez? Come si scrive? B: L O P E Z. A: Bene, Signor Lopez, di dov'è? B: Sono spagnolo, di Barcellona.</p>	<p>Question 1 Not yet answered Marked out of 2.0 Flag question Edit question</p> <p>Di dov'è il signor Lopez? Select one: <input type="radio"/> a. è spagnolo, di Madrid. <input type="radio"/> b. è spagnolo, di Barcellona. <input type="radio"/> c. è spagnolo, di Tarragona.</p>
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Figure 1. Excerpt of transcript and quiz question. Focus on word recognition
A: Your name? B: Mariano Lopez – A: Lopez? How do you spell it? B: L O P E Z – A: Good, where are you from Mr Lopez? B: I'm Spanish, from Barcelona
 Question 1. Where is Mr Lopez from? Select one: a) He's Spanish, from Madrid; b) He's Spanish, from Barcelona; d) He's Spanish, from Tarragona

From tasks based on sound and word discrimination/recognition, students progressed to complete quizzes that used tracks with “extension” content: vocabulary or structures extending topics covered in class, or requiring decoding and/or inferencing. This was aimed at emphasising comprehension. Videos were also used as listening texts, particularly to support authenticity and, following Field (2008), to introduce variety in the range of tasks. The paralinguistic features of videos (kinesics, proxemics, prosody) allowed us to offer students fast-paced conversations that reflected real-life communication. From week 7 (midway through the course), the focus of the tasks was significantly more on comprehension and inference rather than recognition, as shown in Figure 2:

<p>Che gelato vuole? Le faccio subito il caffè.</p>	<p>Question 5 Not yet answered Marked out of 2.00 Flag question Edit question</p> <p>Secondo te, i due personaggi: Select one: <input type="radio"/> a. sono amici <input type="radio"/> b. si conoscono abbastanza bene <input type="radio"/> c. non si conoscono molto bene</p>
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Figure 2. Excerpt of transcript and quiz question 5. Drawing on prior knowledge
What ice-cream would you like, Sir? I will make your coffee immediately, Sir.
Do you think the two characters: a) are friends; b) know each other fairly well; c) do not know each other very well?

This example shows that students had to identify the formal form of address in Italian, which is encoded in the verb ending (*vuole*, “you want”, formal) and the pronoun (*Le*, “to you”, formal), to be able to determine whether the interlocutors were friends or acquaintances. This reflects the idea

⁶ For example, where the correct answer was “è spagnolo, di Barcellona” (he is Spanish, from Barcelona), but the student selected “è spagnolo, di Tarragona”, the feedback for the incorrect answer was, “Listen again – the name of the city ends in *-ona*, but is not Tarragona.”

that “listening involves attending to contextual features such as the setting (where the listening event occurs), the people involved and their relationship, the purpose of the listening event, its degree of formality” (Graham & Santos 2015, p. 13).

Finally, in week 10, we introduced authentic unscripted videos, such as one filmed by one of the authors in Italy, featuring a customer ordering food at a café. Together with the features listed above, these videos represented an extra challenge for our students, as the speakers used their own regional accents and their authentic speaking pace. By watching and listening to these videos, our students were virtually catapulted into contemporary Italy, experiencing a cross-cultural encounter via the unit’s learning-management system.

The last two quizzes provided a further challenge in that students could only listen to the audio track twice and had time limits. The technical interface was simple, with the audio tracks embedded into the quiz.

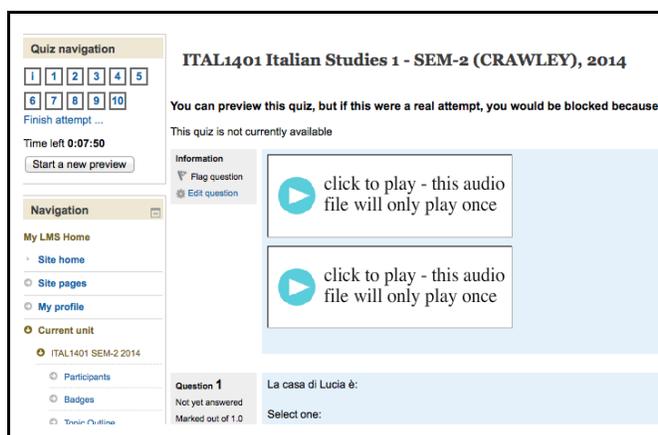


Figure 3. Embedding of the audio track

Students of the ITAL1402 stream, who had studied ITAL1401 in semester 1, were given only a few quizzes featuring sound and word discrimination, with most of them based on comprehension.

4. Project evaluation: Research methodology and procedures

To investigate the effect of online quizzes for the development and assessment of listening skills we adopted a quantitative approach and used an anonymous survey as our research tool. The survey was designed with Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com>) and comprised 23 multiple-choice questions (five with the possibility of leaving comments), as well as the final question “Do you have any comments about the quizzes?”

The final question allowed us to collect a useful amount of qualitative data and gain further insights into the relevance of the quizzes. Bourque (2003, pp. 111-112) refers to such open-ended questions as “ventilation questions”, as they “allow respondents to ventilate their feelings about the topic or the questionnaire”. The multiple-choice questions were formulated mainly around the following topics: a) completion of quizzes; b) perception of online assessment; and c) impact on learning.

Although research on the use of quizzes and other e-tivities in SLA indicate that quizzes typically have a good rate of completion (Baccari 2015; Edirisingha et al. 2007; Moyer 2006), we chose to investigate whether and how often students would access our materials, to be able to create cross-tabulations with other variables. Most importantly, we wanted to verify how students found the listening texts and the quizzes in terms of content and progression, and whether they believed that the quizzes helped them with their listening skills and the general learning of Italian.

The survey was distributed at the end of the subject, in October 2014, via an email sent to all students from ITAL1401 and ITAL1402. The survey could only be taken once. Ninety surveys were submitted, corresponding to 45% of the total students. In addition, a total of 37 comments were elicited through the final survey question. A further 38 comments were added in some of the multiple-choice questions. Some of these comments are quoted in our discussion.

In the next section we consider the validity of the materials as perceived by the students. For each of the points below, no significant difference was identified between the groups from ITAL1401 and ITAL1402.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 Completion of quizzes

Quizzes for assessment

Seventy percent of students who participated in this survey stated that they had completed all 10 quizzes, and 26% stated they had completed most of the quizzes. Only 4% of the sample completed half or fewer than half of the quizzes. When asked to choose the principal factor for *not* attempting at least one of the quizzes (Figure 4), the overwhelming majority of students (78%) put it down to forgetting.⁷

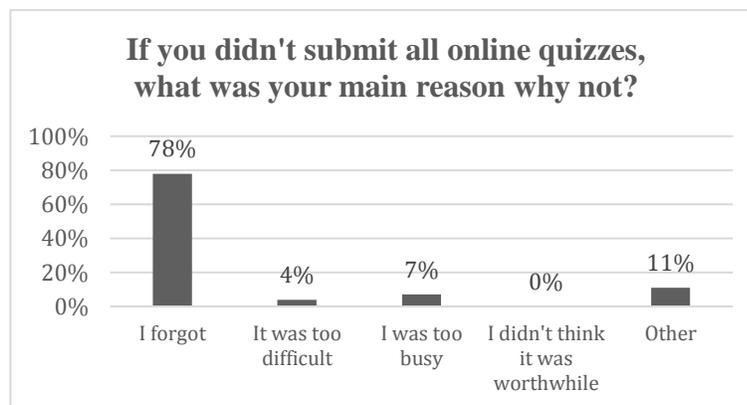


Figure 4. Reasons for not completing the quizzes

⁷ One student suggested that students be given “more freedom in completing them; e.g. make five available at beginning of semester and then the rest after mid semester break, this would eliminate the problem of forgetting to submit each week”. While this may be a valid solution for the issue of forgetting to submit quizzes, it does compromise the progressive nature of the quizzes, and therefore, their formative value.

Busyness (8%), the difficulty of the quizzes (4%) or some unspecified reason (11%) were among the other factors indicated by students. No student selected “it wasn’t worthwhile”.

A further positive statistic emerged from the number of times students attempted the quizzes and listened to the audio/visual materials. While 27% attempted the quizzes once, 67% took advantage of the possibility of attempting the quizzes two or more times, and 6% selected ‘more than three times’. Furthermore, when asked to indicate whether they had listened to the audio-visual material more than once, an overwhelming 93% answered “yes”. Although students were not asked *why* they had listened to the audio/visual material more than once, this datum seems to affirm the formative value of the quizzes and students’ willingness to spend more time to improve their listening skills and, of course, to better their marks. Additionally, students were asked whether they had used the audio-visual materials for any private study activities (e.g. dictation, further comprehension, vocabulary building). Forty-four percent selected “yes” (with the remaining selecting “no”), further supporting the formative value of these tasks.

Quizzes not for assessment

In keeping with a formative approach, students were also offered non-assessed quizzes that did not count towards their final mark. Almost 60% of the students had attempted one or more of these quizzes (Figure 5).

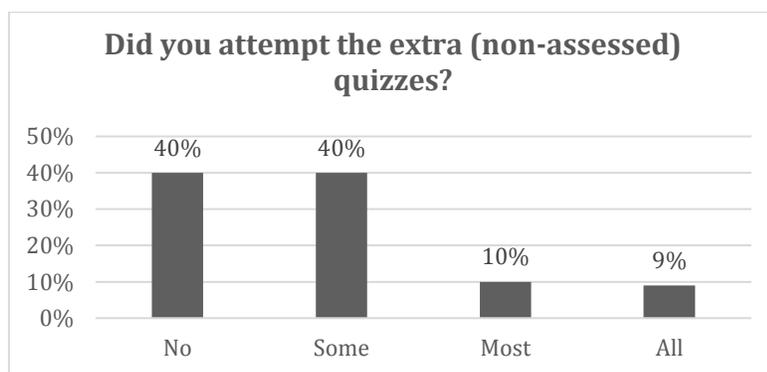


Figure 5. Completion of quizzes not for assessment

Students who attempted these non-assessed quizzes indicated via a different survey question that the principal reason for doing so was “to develop their listening skills” (66%). Students were also aware of the broader benefits for their Italian (20%), and a small percentage attempted these quizzes primarily for their enjoyment, selecting “because they are fun” (10%); 4% (two students) chose “other” and left comments. One student commented that they would use them in preparation for the final two quizzes, and the other that they would use them for general vocabulary learning in preparation for the written exam. It can be concluded that more than a few students availed themselves of these non-assessed quizzes and found them to be a useful tool for improving their listening competence. Overall, these findings confirm that our aim of offering students extensive L2 input to facilitate effective learning (Ellis 2005) was met.

5.2 Student perception of the materials

Student satisfaction

In order to evaluate student satisfaction, students were asked to respond to the question: “Did you enjoy doing the quizzes?” Sixty-six percent of students replied “yes”, and only 6% replied “no”. Given that this was an assessment (and not a movie for personal enjoyment), this is a very positive outcome, particularly in light of the association between student enjoyment/motivation and learning success (Field 2012; Grabe 2009; Vandergrift 2005). We believe that the fact that the quizzes contributed only slightly (6%) to the student's final mark helped them cope with the anxiety often associated with listening, and to develop confidence and a positive attitude about listening (cf. Vandergrift 2007).

Furthermore, the survey revealed that most students (66%) favourably received the online platform for these quizzes, with only 18% preferring in-class assessment (Figure 6).

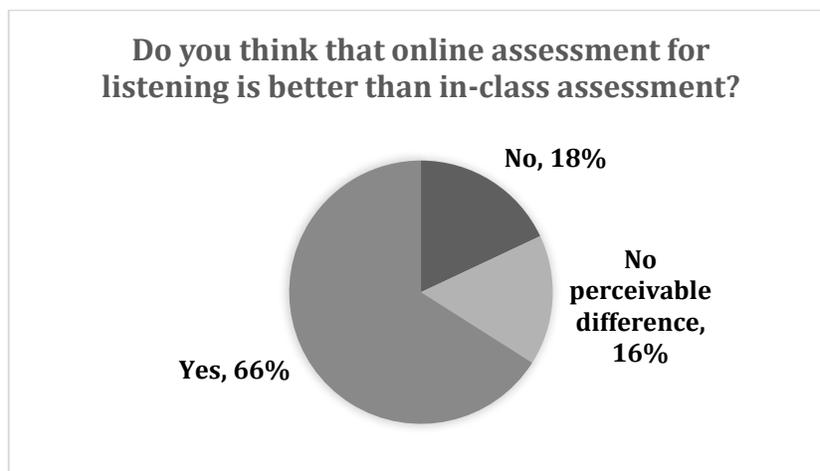


Figure 6. Online vs. in-class assessment

Students' perceptions about assessment have a significant influence on how students approach learning (Struyven et al. 2005), and these results confirm previous studies on the important place that computer-aided/online tasks have in the language class (Lee & Lee 2012; Van Patten et al. 2015). Those students who preferred the online platform were asked what they believed were the best aspects of online quizzes; the majority indicated that the possibility of listening to the quizzes when, where and as many times as they liked was the principal reason they preferred online quizzes, expressing an appreciation for autonomous learning.

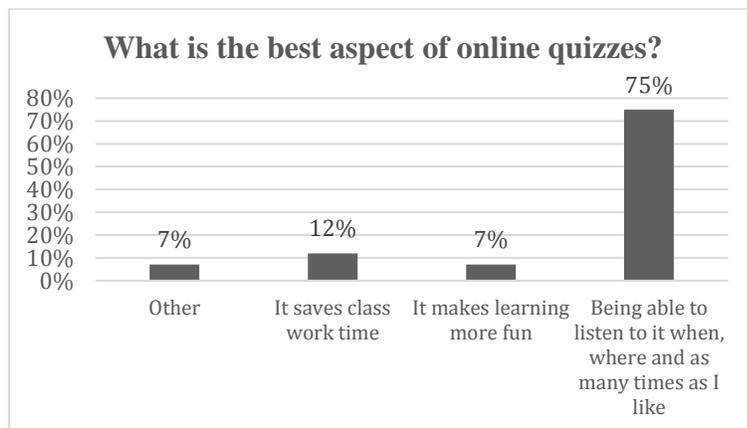


Figure 7. Students’ perception of online quizzes

One student commented, “I like the fact that I was in control of playing the audio – in class there is always a chance of extraneous noise.” This is a positive result if it is considered that “listening is perceived by many listeners in different contexts as the skills in which they have the least control” (Graham & Santos 2015, p. 17). Several students who selected “other” listed factors such as instant feedback, and decreased pressure, including the impression that these quizzes felt less “like a test but that you are just doing an activity” (student’s comment). The latter point suggests that online listening can be effective in preventing the impact of anxiety on listening proficiency (Mills et al. 2006). This positive response to the online mode of delivery is certainly an important result supporting the efficacy and relevance of blended learning in the context of language learning and assessment.

Those students who replied negatively to the question “Do you think that online assessment for listening is better than in-class assessment?” were also asked to justify their choice (Figure 8).

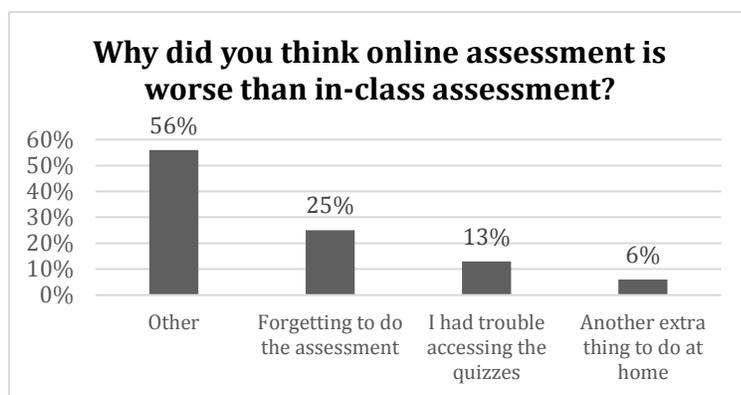


Figure 8. Justifying preference for in-class assessment

Seven students selected forgetting to do the assessment, having trouble accessing the quizzes and the addition of another thing to do outside of class; however, it should be noted that nine chose “other”, of whom seven elected to leave comments in response to this question. Of the relevant comments, three students mentioned that the quizzes were not as challenging given the number of

attempts that were permitted; however, two of these went on to say that they were grateful they could get good marks for the quizzes as a consequence (cf. student perceptions on the level of difficulty below). One student simply stated that they were “not as effective” without further explanation. Cross-tabulations reveal that five of the seven students who did not enjoy the quizzes also did not believe that the quizzes improved their listening skills, which further supports the correlation between motivation and proficiency (Vandergrift 2007; Graham & Santos 2015).

The impact of technology

Question 12 of the survey asked students if they had encountered technical difficulty with carrying out the quizzes. The largest majority (75%) answered negatively, with the remaining 22 students (25%) admitting to have had some issues (Figure 9).

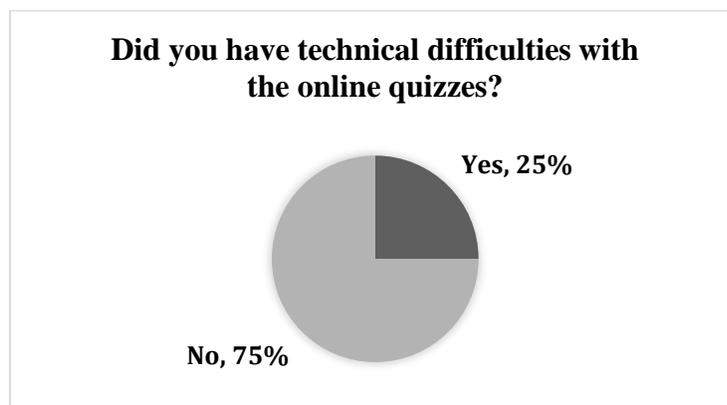


Figure 9. Technical difficulties

All 22 students who did encounter technical problems elected to leave some comments. Several mentioned their trouble with buffering/loading issues whilst attempting the final two quizzes. This problem may be a result of the embedded audio player that was chosen for the final two quizzes. An alternative audio player for these final two quizzes may need to be considered to potentially avoid these buffering issues in the future. Educating students about the importance of a strong internet connection prior to starting accessing the online materials would also lower the number of technical problems.

To further investigate the effect of technology on the students' perceptions of the online activities, a correlation was drawn between the figures on technical issues and the perceived usefulness of the activities. This data (Figure 10) suggests that students' perceptions of the activities' usefulness was unrelated to whether the students had encountered technical problems. Given the small sample of answers, however (only 22 students encountered technical issues), final conclusions must be made with caution.

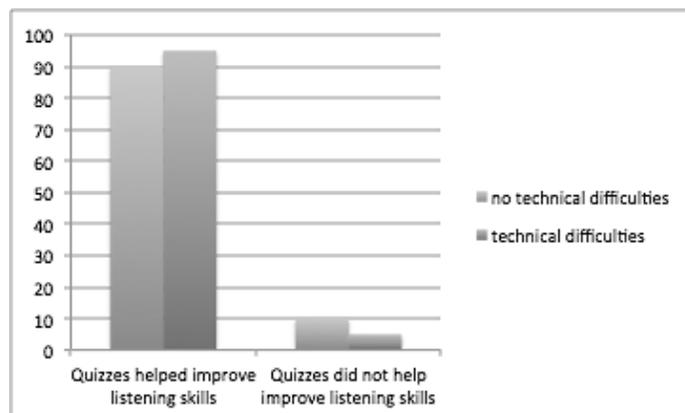


Figure 10. Technical difficulties and perceived usefulness of quizzes

Student perceptions of the level of difficulty

Contrary to those few comments left by students who indicated that the quizzes were not as challenging, when all students were asked to respond to the question, “How did you find the language used in the dialogues/videos?”, most indicated it was challenging (47%) or right for the competence expected (44%). Only 6% of students stated that the quizzes were too easy, and on the other end of the spectrum only 4% stated that they were beyond their ability. These responses confirm that the level of difficulty of the carefully selected tracks was appropriate for the quizzes. Furthermore, the large number of responses indicating that these quizzes were challenging suggests that students were provided with a tool that could help them to improve their listening skills. One student commented, “The quizzes were challenging.... I really enjoyed the level of the listening comprehensions because I felt like they pushed me a lot.” This is in line with Absalom and Rizzi’s (2008, p. 62) findings: “The continuous engagement with the listening tasks as opposed to the text-based task confirms our hypothesis that the former are psychologically taxing on students which leads to higher level of motivation.” Several students who commented on the easiness of the quizzes referred not so much to the audio tracks as they did to the number of attempts they had been given. Although this was certainly not the view of the majority, a reduction in the number of attempts can be considered for future implementation, although care would have to be taken not to affect the formative value of the quizzes. Alternatively, other ways of grading the quizzes could be considered, such as basing the final mark on the averages of their attempts.

Most students were aware that the level of difficulty increased throughout the semester: 80% agreed that the quizzes were progressively more challenging, 16% did not notice any change in difficulty and only 4% thought they did not become more difficult. These data largely confirm the formative value of the quizzes. It is possible that some students may have considered that their ability to achieve similar marks remained the same throughout the semester, and perhaps on this basis they did not believe the quizzes were progressively more challenging.

As stated earlier, in preparing the quizzes, audiovisual materials were chosen and questions were formulated to reflect and reinforce topics covered in class, and the survey conducted for this study reveals that most students were aware of this: 71% stated that the quizzes were generally in line with the content covered in class, while 22% did not notice, and only 7% thought they were not.

Implications for further integration of blended learning

As stated above, students indicated that by and large they preferred an online, rather than in-class, platform for assessment. Student responses were also largely positive to the question “Would you have liked to see other skills (reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar) assessed online?” Sixty-two percent of students answered positively, 26% were neutral and only 12% answered negatively, with one student commenting, “For something like listening, which I find challenging, I would rather do that in class with the assistance of a teacher.” Furthermore, in response to another question asking whether the students would have liked to have additional non-assessed activities online, students generally showed interest: 22% selected “yes”, and 44% indicated that they “would probably use them”. Whilst 34% selected “no”, this feedback does support a general interest in blended learning. The responses to both of these questions suggest, therefore, that students would welcome additional online activities. On this matter one student commented, “I think a wider range of quizzes would be better for overall learning of the language. Instead of just restricting online assessments to listening, should [sic] incorporate a wider range such as grammar, translation and reading comprehensions.” This comment goes to the heart of the important question of how much work can be offered online versus what should be delivered in the classroom. Responses from this survey certainly suggest there is scope for a greater integration of online activities and assessment within these courses to meet students’ preferences.

5.3 Impact on learning*Listening skills*

The efficacy of these quizzes to develop listening was evaluated holistically by the question “Do you think that the activities helped you improve your listening skills?”, to which 92% of students responded positively and 8% negatively.

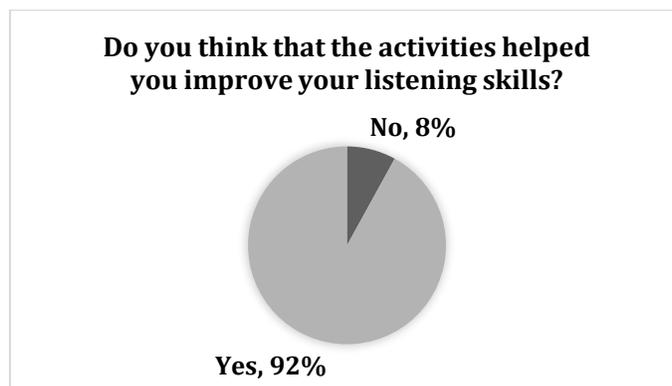


Figure 11. The impact of quizzes on listening skills

While it is not possible to draw conclusions about the nature of the quizzes validity on the basis of this dichotomous survey item, these raw percentages reveal that students did find them useful. The students’ comments are also mostly positive, with some displaying emotive language features (“definitely helpful”, “I can understand my Nonna now”, “incredibly useful”, “very helpful”). The negative comments point mainly to the students’ difficulty in engaging with the use of bottom-up strategies. The following three comments illustrate this point: “I found some quite challenging and fast paced which made it difficult to distinguish between words”; “I found them a bit too hard to be

able to learn anything from them. I think it was difficult to gain much from them due to this”; “One’s [sic] with lengthy dialogues that you lose your spot in are kind of pointless because all you do is replay it again. I like to try and understand on the first listen.”

Students were then asked to specify the areas in which they felt they had most improved as a result of attempting these quizzes. Table 2 reveals that students considered the quizzes to be most useful for learning to follow a conversation in Italian and the least useful for improving their accent.

	Answer	1	2	3	4	5
1	Learning to distinguish words	38.9%	40.0%	10.6%	4.7%	5.9%
2	Learning to focus on the sounds	10.6%	25.9%	27.1%	27.1%	9.4%
3	Learning new words	4.7%	7.1%	36.5%	30.6%	21.2%
4	Improving my accent	3.5%	7.1%	4.7%	30.6%	54.1%
5	Being able to follow a conversation in Italian	42.4%	20.0%	21.2%	7.1%	9.4%

Table 2. Impact of quizzes on specific listening skills

They indicated that the listening quizzes did help their sound and word discrimination (“learning to distinguish words” was selected as the second-most improved skill); one comment highlighted the usefulness of the quizzes in bottom-up aspects: “...it certainly helped to tune my ear in”. However, from these findings it can be concluded that students could see that listening comprehension implies being able to do more than distinguish words and recognise sounds, and far from being a mere tool for assessing listening skills, the quizzes helped them to improve their listening skills, as well as to progress in other areas of learning.

Listening quizzes as opposed to other input sources

Students were asked to select, from a list of items, which one they thought was the most helpful for improving their listening skills (Table 3).

	Answer	1	2	3	4
1	Exposure to your language tutors	57.6%	20%	11.8%	10.6%
2	Online listening quizzes	27.1%	38.8%	25.9%	8.2%
3	My own personal listening to Italian/exposure to Italians outside of class	8.2%	14.1%	23.5%	54.1%
4	Indirectly through understanding the grammar/vocabulary better	10.6%	25.9%	38.8%	24.8%

Table 3. Relevance of factors/tools for improving listening skills

The responses to this question indicate that exposure to language tutors and the online listening quizzes proved to be the most effective tools for teaching to listen. One student commented that the listening quizzes were useful in that they provided “an opportunity to listen to different native speakers aside from our own tutors”. Unsurprisingly, more than half of the students indicated that their own personal exposure was the least effective source for learning to listen. We cannot ascertain whether this was due to the lack of exposure or the inability to learn from other sources.

Impact of listening quizzes on students' overall learning

In addition to evaluating the efficacy of the language quizzes for teaching how to listen, students were asked to indicate whether the listening quizzes had helped them improve their overall learning of Italian. Thirty-three percent responded, “yes, considerably”, 61% “yes, somewhat” and 6% “no”. Upon further investigation it was revealed that most of those who selected “no” also indicated that the quizzes did not help them improve their listening skills and that they did not enjoy the quizzes (indicating either “no” or “neutral” in all cases). Overall, these results therefore suggest that not only do students perceive these quizzes as effective in teaching to listen, but they also perceive them as helpful for their overall learning of Italian. Absalom and Rizzi (2008, p. 60), in their study on the comparison between the effects of online listening and online text-based tasks, concluded that “online listening tasks strongly promote an integrative and deep approach to learning”. Our study shows that students recognised the value of the quizzes in facilitating second-language learning as a whole, making students’ learning, in the words of Vandergrift and Goh (2012, p. 89), “more transferable to new situations”.

Due to the anonymous nature of the responses elicited via the survey, it was not possible to correlate the students’ perceptions of the usefulness of the quizzes with a measure of success based on their course results. However, to verify if LC practice would lead to successful overall performance, we conducted some complementary analysis and matched the students’ results in the 10 listening quizzes against their results in the final written exam. We tested this hypothesis with the ITAL1401 cohort (116 students; two students did not sit their final exam and were excluded from the count). The two-hour written exam included a variety of tasks such as cloze-tests, reading comprehension and semi-guided writing.

Figure 12 shows the distribution of the students who achieved a high distinction (HD) average in the 10 LC tasks matched against their mark in the final exam.

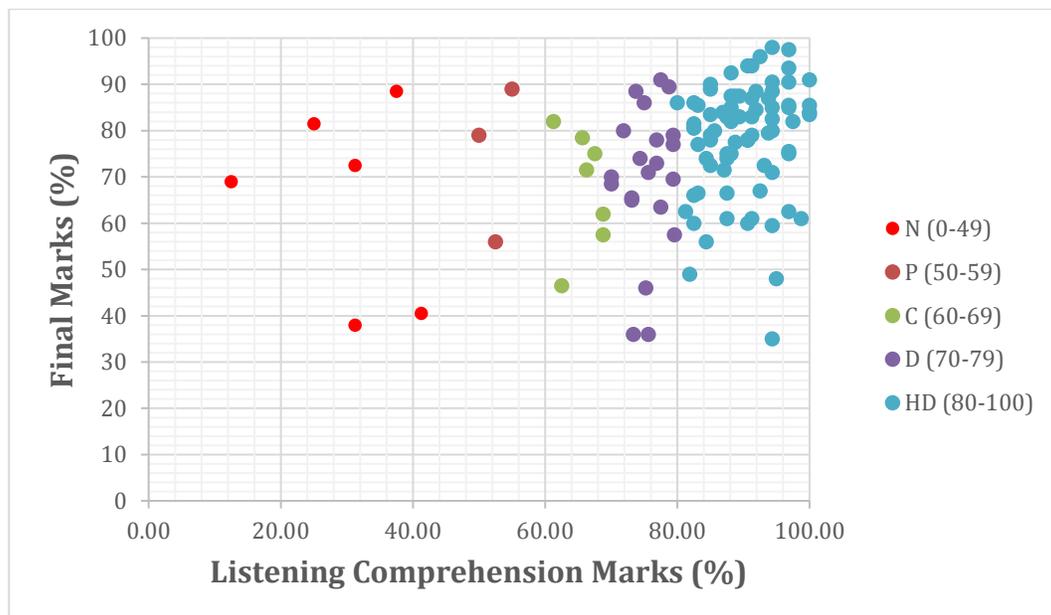


Figure 12. Exam results and listening comprehension marks

Students with an HD in the listening tasks are concentrated in the band of those who achieved an HD for the exam. In fact, the analysis indicates that most of these students also achieved an HD in the final exam. Out of the 78 students who have achieved an HD in the listening comprehension, 55%, or 43 students, scored an HD in their final exam.⁸

To further analyse the correlation between the data, the differences between the two assessment tasks were taken, and a histogram was plotted (Figure 13). The histogram shows that almost 50% of the students in the cohort display a small difference between their LC mark and their final exam mark. In other words, students generally maintained their grades between the two assessments. For example, if a student achieved a D score in their LC, the chances of them maintaining the same grade for their final exam was about 50%. Hence, from the two analyses presented here based on marks, there is a certain correlation between the students' LC skills and their overall language proficiency, as assessed in the final exam.

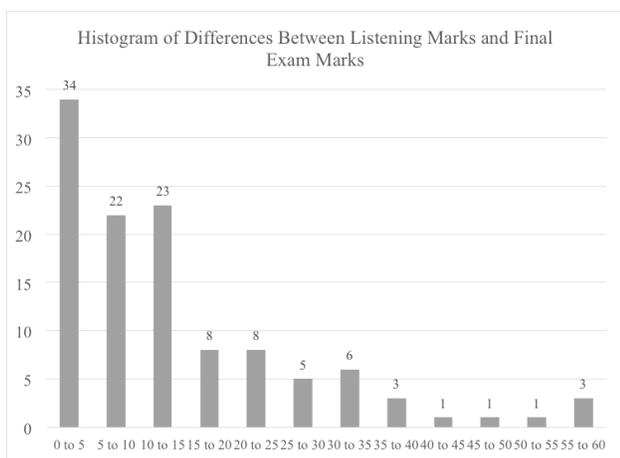


Figure 13. Differences between students' final exam mark and their average mark for the quizzes

It must be considered, however, that other factors would have contributed to the students' exam mark (e.g. general motivation, aptitude, regular grammar and vocabulary practice, study, use of learning strategies, etc.). In addition, it is unclear whether those students who displayed positive attitudes towards the online listening and declared that the listening materials were useful are the same students who achieved the highest marks in the exam. However, this complementary analysis provides another perspective on the understanding that systematic listening practice and progress are linked.

6. Conclusions

The outcome of this empirical study pertaining to students' perceptions of the online assessment materials is overall very positive, and this is further supported by the students' comments. Although our findings are based on self-report data rather than measures of successful performance, they

⁸ While it is true that students had unlimited attempts for the quizzes, with the risk that they would not necessarily listen to the audio text every time they attempted the quiz, 93% of the students declared in the survey that they listened to the audio files more than once (cf. 5.1 above).

contribute to our understanding of effective listening pedagogy, and support the systematic incorporation of online listening tasks in the curriculum. From the teachers' perspective, the listening quizzes improved the courses significantly and will be implemented in the future. They freed up valuable time for in-class work, provided effective tools for the assessment of listening skills and promoted learning motivation. Students seem to have appreciated the flexibility offered by the online environment and the effectiveness of the quizzes in developing their listening skills as well as their overall language proficiency.

The integration of the quizzes was successful in terms of completion and engagement with the task, with 97% of the students completing between half to all of the quizzes. Ninety-three percent declared that they listened to the audio tracks more than once, and the majority also took the quizzes that did not count towards their final mark. The task was enjoyed by the majority (67%) of the students, and 66% expressed a preference for online assessment versus in-class assessment, in spite of the technical difficulties that some encountered. Most importantly, the vast majority (92%) answered that the quizzes helped them improve their listening skills, and 94% said the quizzes helped them with their overall learning of Italian.

The blended learning experience offered to the students was successful due to a combination of factors. The delivery mode of the materials meant that students had access to the listening tasks in a flexible way, which maximised their opportunity for learning, as they could listen and listen again as often as they liked. Effective listening requires much listening practice and students were provided with a considerable amount of systematic work both online and in class. This gave them plenty of opportunity to put into practice bottom-up and top-down listening strategies, such as selective attention, activating prior knowledge to predict what they might hear and verifying. In addition, the online tasks proved to be enjoyable, which increased their motivation to learn and gave them higher confidence in persisting with the progressively more challenging tasks. We believe the online delivery instructed our students in self-efficacy and in having a sense of control over the listening process, which is fundamental for effective listening. The implications of this investigation are clear: listening practice and assessment can effectively be moved out of the classroom and into the digital space, provided it is grounded in sound pedagogical choices. In this sense, our work validates blended learning, and supports it not only as a mode of presenting the materials, but also as an effective way of assessing the students, within a holistic design of the learning experience that is aimed at progress and is student-centred.

Further research on blended LC learning should consider how the use of authentic audio and video materials linked to online listening quizzes can also instil social and intercultural understanding in the learners; this area has not yet been fully explored.

Suggestions for future improvements in the implementation of blended learning for listening via quizzes include: 1) gradually reduce the number of quiz attempts from unlimited to a set number, to discourage students from reattempting the quiz without listening to the audio track; 2) provide students with a transcript of the audio text, after a given number of quizzes have been submitted, for further verification and study of the input; this emerged from a student's comment and from in-class discussion, which reflects their need to develop word-recognition skills and awareness of the relationship between word and meaning; and 3) further expand the component of explicit instruction on LC strategies in the classroom context to further support blended learning.

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