Differentiation of Instruction: Engaging, Empowering, and Elevating Learners

By Nicole Bjarnason and Dina Pannone

As teachers, it is of the utmost importance to recognize and value the uniqueness of each individual student. This recognition should be reflected in the class environment, lessons created, and materials used. Additionally, we play an undeniable role in facilitating student language acquisition. By engaging students in meaningful activities, providing the power of choice, empowering the exploration of personal interests, elevating those who may be struggling with additional support, and extending higher achieving students to new frontiers, we enable students to acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language (Harris, 2007).

Equity and Access

We hold many responsibilities as we navigate daily lessons, but one of the greatest responsibilities is the task of documenting knowledge and reflecting upon this knowledge when developing class activities and purposeful instruction (Darling-Hammond, Austin, Lit, & Nasir, 2003). The one-size-fits-all approach to teaching is no longer valid because it neglects the needs of diverse students and creates roadblocks for students and their learning processes (Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017). Additionally, diverse learning environments are now challenging the notion that students spend their class time among peers of equal cognitive and learning abilities, where learners of various

proficiency levels and special needs are likely to be found in the same class (Ramsby, & Spencer-Bunch, 2020).

To address learner needs, we must present activities at students' proficiency and readiness levels (Tomlinson, 2014). Student motivation is higher when they are presented with a variety of approaches to learning and when lessons are developed based on student characteristics (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Some of these characteristics include learner interests, development level, learning speed, abilities, cultural backgrounds, economic backgrounds, language levels, attitudes, and regulation approaches.

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is a teaching approach that tailors instruction to meet the needs of students. DI facilitates learning for all students in a single classroom by meeting students at their individual academic level, adapting curriculum materials, challenging them, and providing them with opportunities to demonstrate what they can do. In addition, this approach helps students feel more connected to the classroom and to one another by validating their experiences and using them as springboards for the curriculum (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2003).

As we create DI lessons, we address the content, process, and product for assignments (Suprayogi et al., 2017). The original content or curriculum of the class does not change, but is used to identify the information students will learn and to define how they will access the content taught. Process is addressed through the creation of activities or tasks students complete as they interpret information, ideas, skills, and acquire knowledge and understanding. Finally, product refers to the means students use to show what they know, understand, and can do through diverse learning experiences (Kara-Soteriou, 2009).

The *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) are used as standardized guidelines to engage students in activities that encompass the 5 C's: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. There are a plethora of ways that DI can be integrated into the curriculum to facilitate students' language acquisition and meet the 5 C's language learning goal areas.

With this approach, there is a shift from whole classroom instruction to flexible classroom instruction, in which every student can find their access point and relationship to the content presented. The ultimate goal is to enhance each student's potential. Through the integration of the 5 C's goal areas and DI activities, students are able to see their cultural backgrounds in the content presented and, as a result, their belief in their own capacity to become an active participant in the world increases (Inglebret, Banks-Joseph, CHiXapkaid, & Pavel, 2016).

As we begin to apply DI strategies it will be necessary to first assess students' previous knowledge and learning preferences using the following process:

Step 1:
Assess student-learning profile and identify points of entry

Learner profiles consist of the variety of ways in which students differ in navigating the content, processes, and products within a particular sequence of learning (Güvenç, 2021). The learner's profile provides you with a complete picture of the student's preferences, challenges, and strengths. Having student profiles means you can learn the personalities and preferences of your students as well as assess any prior knowledge they may have of the L2 based on the *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements Proficiency Benchmarks*.

To determine how a student learns best it is important to enhance each student's profile and environmental preferences by asking questions about their passions, strengths, needs, culture, and community. Students can make "personal best" portfolios in which they highlight their individual traits and preferences, and/or they can write a journal entry about themselves.

Another method of assessing a student is through the Can-Do Statements proficiency benchmarks. Novice, intermediate, and advanced learners and their abilities regarding communication in the interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational modes (ACTFL, 2017) break down these benchmarks. Knowledge of these abilities is important because they can indicate student ability and work ethic and help identify a student's entry point to new material.

Finally, we can use classroom observation to gather additional information about students. Ultimately, it is our responsibility as educators to identify the factors that affect student learning and to determine preferences that will support student success and contribute to student learning.

Step 2:
Identify student needs and conduct formative assessment of prior knowledge

When designing a unit, utilize backward design: determine the central unit task, unit goals, assessments, and instructional task designs while taking into consideration learner differences and proficiency levels. To do this you must first conduct an external evaluation to determine learner proficiency levels across the modes of communication.

An example of this evaluation is ACTFL's *Assessment of Performance Toward Proficiency in Languages* (AAPPL). It is important to note that a student's proficiency level will not necessarily be the same in each mode of communication; use the data collected to develop each individual learner's profile. The student learning profile should then be compared to student performance and the Can- Do Statements (ACTFL, 2018).

Before starting a new unit, prior knowledge can be assessed by having learners complete a word association activity as the central task and/or participate in the production of words and phrases that can be associated with the central task. You can also use KWL charts (charts that ask students to identify what they already Know, what they Want to know, and then circle back at the end of the unit with what they have Learned about a topic). It is important to note that each class period may have a different focus or area that needs to be addressed. The information gathered during this step is crucial because it provides data on students' prior knowledge.

Content

Content in differentiated instruction involves the "input" of the unit, or the central ideas, concepts, information, and facts (Tomlinson, 2014). When designing content, focus on the most relevant and essential components of each unit and meet learners' varied needs through choice and by providing a variety of materials.

Adjust what is presented to learners or how they access the input based on their interests, learner profile, and prior knowledge. Utilizing various modalities while addressing the various points of entry will tap into students' strengths and prior knowledge, allowing them to boost memory and understanding (Terada, 2018). Differentiation of content can differ at each level of proficiency. For example, to reach the needs of novice students, provide them with a vocabulary list of defined words, provide modified text, or offer choice in the input material.

Cooperative learning station activities are an example of how to vary content. Targeted use of stations makes both teaching and learning more efficient than whole class instruction (Tomlinson, 2014). Stations can be teacher-led, independently led, or group-led. You decide which method will work best for the desired achievement outcomes for your students.

When planning stations and varying the content, use Backward Design to determine what you want your students to know and do, which skills you want them to apply, the tools that are readily available, the number of stations to develop, and the methods of assessment

Caption to come.

(Wiggins, & McTighe, 2011). To make sure that the stations are easily accessible to all students, create a guide that outlines the routines, procedures, grouping, and schedule that students must follow as they move through the station rotation.

Content can also be differentiated by providing an array of authentic texts with varying difficulty levels assigned to students after gauging their proficiency, or by providing the same authentic text, but with various degrees of supplementary resources. For example, a novice student may receive the text with a list of definitions and key terms highlighted, while advanced students would receive the original text without alterations.

Another way to differentiate content is to *tier* it. Tiering is a readiness-based strategy and an effective way to support students who struggle with reading, abstract thinking, and/or pivotal concepts. By tiering the content, you can ensure that all students work on the same key knowledge skills at varying degrees of difficulty that match their learning proficiency (Tomlinson, 2014). Tiered activities allow all students to focus on essential knowledge and skills by varying the difficulty levels, open-endedness, and independence (Tomlinson, 2014).

To develop a tiered activity, first select the concept and/or skill that will be the focus of the activity. Then use formative assessment to gain a better understanding of the students' readiness level for the topic by creating an activity that is interesting and requires a high-level of thought. Next chart the complexity of the activity, making certain to first design for the "on level" students. Finally, clone the activity to provide different versions at various degrees of difficulty.

When creating tiered activities, we recommend that you start by designing middle level ability activities, then design activities for struggling students, and finally design activities for advanced students. All designed activities should be challenging while still being achievable by meeting students at their readiness levels.

For example, at the Spanish 2, checkpoint B level, students read the book *Fiesta Fatal* by Mira Canion, which encompasses multiple tiered activities. During this task-based unit, students were given the opportunity to discuss descriptive personality traits and the process one might go through as they prepare for a special event. They were introduced to this topic by completing an interpretive communication profile chart for each character.

In alignment with the ACTFL Core Practices for World Language Learning, guide your students through this novice-mid language learning resource by providing three versions of the charter profile chart. The first version will be an "on-level" version. This version will include the chart, labeled categories, learning objectives, and Can-Do Statements. Instruct students to fill in the categories based on what they read and the information they gathered about each character.

The second version of the chart is the "scaffolded version." This is for lower-level students and will include the chart, learning objectives, Can-Do Statements, and questions in the target language with sentence starter scaffolds, fill in the blank text, or defined word banks to help guide them through the text and complete the character profiles.

The final version is "open-ended" for Advance level students. This version will only contain the learning objectives and Can-Do Statements. Require advanced students to develop and create the chart on their

own. The goal is for the assignment to be challenging, but attainable, for all students in the class.

You can also differentiate content by providing choice. Offering learners choices and giving them authentic ways to interact encourages 21st century skills by allowing them to interact with the content in collaborative, supportive ways and thus feel successful (Güvenç, 2021). The integration of choice boards is an engaging way to provide students with content choice.

Choice boards are organizers that contain a variety of activities; students can choose one or several activities to complete as they learn a skill or develop a product as a cumulative assessment. Students' inherent motivation is increased as they choose an option that speaks to their readiness level and allows them to demonstrate their mastery of the topic in a way that best suits their interests and access points (Tomlinson, 2014).

When designing a choice board, be sure to create clear and easy-to-follow instructions. The choices on the board should relate specifically to the concept or learning objective of the unit, and each option should stimulate the acquisition, practice, or mastery of the learning objective. The choice board activities should also provide options that target students' interests and strengths as determined by the assessment of learner profiles.

In addition to the length of each task, it is also important to consider the content-based, communicative goals of the unit when designing material and to think about whether the activity will be done individually or as a group. For example, when teaching a unit with task goals of discussing ways in which one can help the environment, the interpretive mode of communication can be developed by designing tasks in varied modalities.

One way we assessed interpretive listening was to use the song, *¿Dónde jugarán los niños?* by Maná. Students applied the knowledge gained through the song to complete a cloze activity in which they identified words related to the environment and wrote inferences of the lyrics based on targeted vocabulary. Reinforcement of this vocabulary using audio boosted receptive listening skills (Brandl, 2020).

Another way we differentiated choice board content was to engage learners in interpretative reading activities sourced from **holaquepasa.com**, where articles on the environment are sorted by learner proficiency levels. As students read the articles, they completed graphic organizers with information pertaining to the questions who, what, where, when, and why.

An additional way to differentiate content using choice boards is to create interpretive communicative tasks. For example, a task we used consisted of learners watching an informative environmental TikTok produced by a Costa Rican environmental officer while answering open-ended questions using vocabulary relevant to the task.

It is important to note that all interpretive choice board tasks can be re-utilized to develop learners' cultural proficiency goal areas by affording them the opportunity to evaluate the diverse perspectives presented in the authentic materials and to reflect on connections and comparisons between their culture and the target cultures. For example, our students compared and contrasted Costa Rican environmental factors with environmental factors in their home region.

Finally, for all choice board activities, scaffolds can be provided in the form of defined vocabulary words and sentence starters where appropriate, in addition to being based on students' individual needs and proficiency levels. Be sure to provide students with a rubric when using choice boards so they are aware of the criteria for success and understand the grading scale.

Process

Differentiation of process is when the same concept or skill is taught to each student, but the manner in which each student makes sense of the topic or skill varies (Taylor, 2015). You can use a variety of grouping strategies, modify outcomes and product expectations, tailor delivery, and provide tiered instruction to meet your learners' varied needs. One easy way to differentiate instruction for students with varied proficiency levels is to vary the length of time students have to complete a task, allowing novice students more time to engage with the material.

Another useful tool to differentiate student process are graphic organizers. Graphic organizers allow students to gather useful information and sort the information while seeing relationships between ideas and themes discussed in class. When differentiating with graphic organizers, the graphics and language remain the same, but the method for recording the information differs. This is a great option for visual learners because it assists them in organizing notes in a way that allows them to see the big picture and make meaningful connections.

Students can choose from a variety of graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, word webs, concept webs, main idea webs, and more. You can also provide choice in how students complete the organizer, with images or text, for example. Another way to meet student proficiency levels is by scaffolding for lower level students, providing them with direct access to the information needed to complete the organizer instead of requiring them to research the information independently. For example, you can provide students with a graphic organizer with sample information completed.

Providing information about travel recommendations is an example of how to differentiate process. We presented information to students about traveling to Spain, targeting the grammar usage of *por* vs. *para*

inductively in the context of duration and destination. The goal was to have students notice the organized language input underlying patterns to recognize when to use *por* and *para* in particular contexts. Using a T-chart graphic organizer with one column labeled "*Por*" and the second column labeled "*Para*," students organized statements about traveling to Spain in each context. For example, "*Yo viajo por siete horas en avión a España*," and "*Yo viajo en avión para España*" can be organized based on duration and location.

To scaffold this assignment, we provided novice learners with a mixed list of statements with duration and location in the target language. We gave intermediate learners a list of places and times to be utilized when completing the writing task. Advanced learners researched various places of interest in Spain and researched how long it would take them to arrive at these destinations. Students can complete the task by using the information obtained to write sentences using por and para in context and sort them in the corresponding columns of the table.

Another way to differentiate the process for students is the use of graphic organizers in the interpersonal mode of communication. Through this activity, students will reinforce the concept by recognizing the patterns of *por* for duration and *para* for destination and have the ability to apply it in conversation through an information gap activity. For this activity, pair students and provide them with the same map, but with missing opposite items. Pairs engage in conversational exchange of information while filling in the chart with the missing information in the columns "duration" and "destination."

To further differentiate graphic organizers, the content can be organized by color-coding the grammar, (*por* vs. *para*) and indicators for usage. Scaffolds can be provided to novice learners in the form of color-coded notes for *por* and *para* and usage indicators. Students can then use this information to engage in tiered presentational writing to produce an itinerary for traveling to various destinations for varying durations.

Another method of differentiation is with student-centered instruction and cooperative learning activities in which students work in small groups to accomplish a common learning goal with the guidance of the teacher (Montgomery, 2001). First determine if the students will benefit from homogeneous grouping or heterogeneous grouping. Homogeneous grouping involves students of the same readiness level working together, while heterogeneous grouping involves students of varying readiness working together.

When designing collaborative activities, it is important to determine the purpose of the groups prior to creating them. For example, when working on a unit task related to students describing the weather, designed multilevel center stations where students engaged with the interpretive mode of communication by analyzing the weather in Buenos Aires. One multilevel station for this activity provided all students with a seasonal weather report to analyze. Novice learners were expected to identify similarities and differences between the weather in Buenos Aires and their home country using a variety of practiced or memorized words, phrases, or simple sentences. Intermediate learners wrote a series of simple sentences. Advanced learners wrote an email to a friend using a variety of developed, connected sentences discussing

why they would or would not like to travel to Buenos Aires based on conclusions they gathered from the weather report.

Jigsaws are another form of cooperative learning where students are divided into small heterogeneous groups of varied proficiency levels, which serve as the students' "home base." Each member of this group is assigned to an "expert group" to learn a portion of the material presented via differentiated texts. Expert groups consist of learners of the same level of proficiency (Boştină-Bratu, & Negoescu, 2016). Differentiate by providing comprehensible texts according to students' interpretive reading abilities. After meeting with expert group members, students return to their home-base groups to share the content they learned.

A working example of a jigsaw we used described the features of various festivals held in Spain. Students engaged in an interpretive reading activity to further their acquisition of vocabulary as well as their cultural competency and relationship to cultural practices and perspectives. To start the jigsaw activity we grouped students of varied proficiency levels to form a home base. Then we grouped learners according to their level of proficiency to analyze the assigned text. For example, novice learners were assigned a short, scaffolded reading with many cognates on *La Tomatina*. To demonstrate comprehension, novice students worked together to fill in guided notes and identify key words related to this celebration. Intermediate learners completed a short reading on *Las Fallas* and filled in a graphic organizer with main ideas from the text. Advanced learners interpreted a multi-paragraph text on Semana Santa using contextual clues to create a mind map showing the various ways in which this holiday is celebrated. Once the students completed the activity with their proficiency level group, they returned to their home base group and shared the information gathered from their expert groups.

Another way to differentiate process is by designing tiered instructional lessons. This includes instructional tasks designed with varied levels of difficulty based on proficiency and incorporating cooperative learning. Tiered tasks can be created using Bloom's Taxonomy as a guide to help students work on varied task levels (Geddes, 2010). Group students according to proficiency level. Novice students who require reinforcement of more content or practice can work on a task activity that helps them build understanding of the material with consistent support from the teacher. Intermediate level learners can be expected to infer and draw conclusions with less teacher support. Advanced learners can work on a task that extends what they already know.

Assignments can be tiered by complexity and/or by outcome. When tiering for complexity, focus the assignments created on students' proficiency levels since varied students' needs are met using the same material. For example, when working on an interpretive reading task on preparing to travel to a different country, all learners can analyze an infographic on travel tips in the target language. Novice learners can write a list of items needed for travel; intermediate learners can write short sentences about travel necessities; and advanced learners can write an article on preparing for international travel. Each task in this assignment provides students with an appropriate challenge and attends to their varied learning needs.
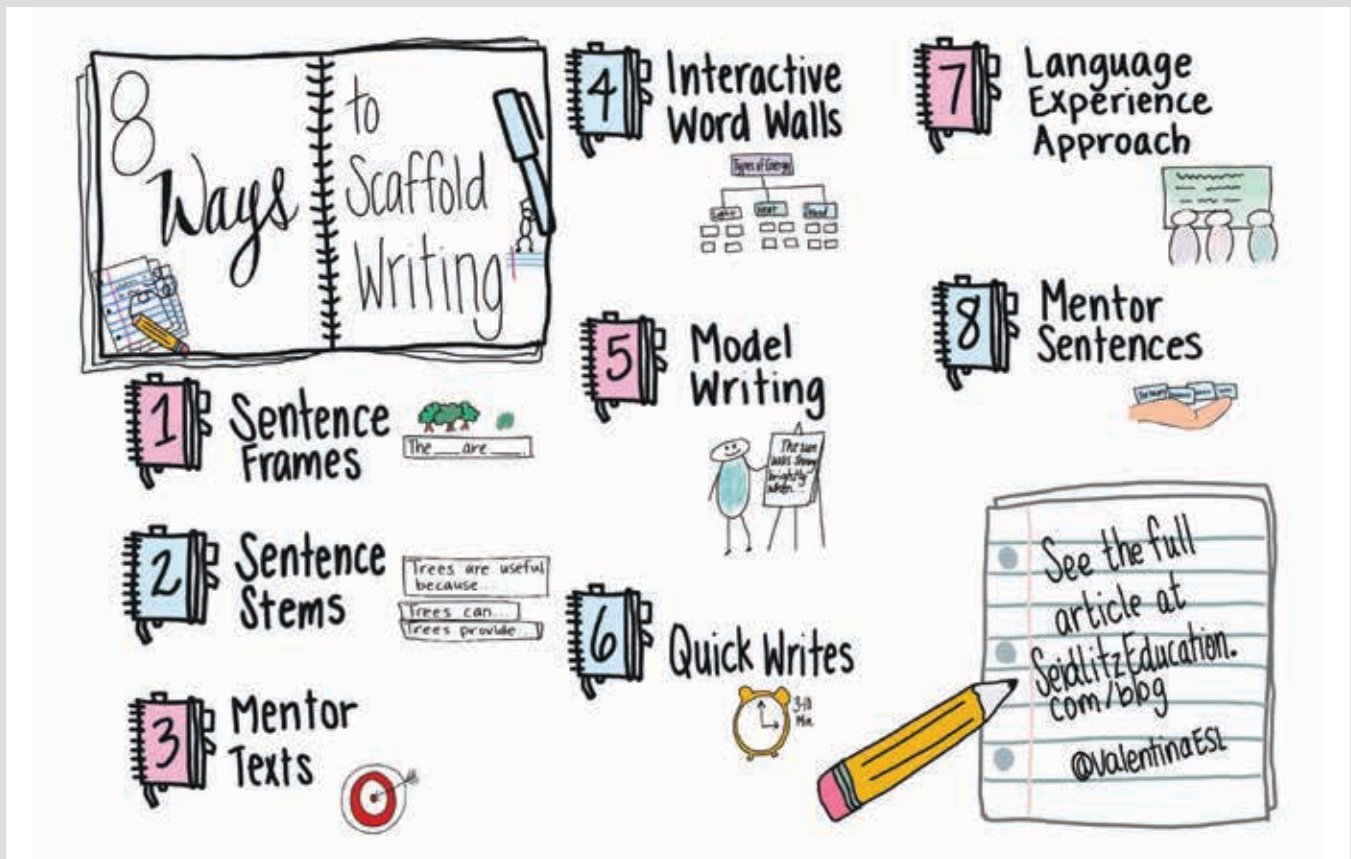
Scaffolds are temporary supports meant to be released when no longer needed to facilitate learning and students output of the target language.

credit: Valentina Gonzalez

Product

To authentically assess learners while also meeting their individual needs, you must differentiate products (Miller, 2013). Through this differentiation, it is possible to individualize learning and enable students to demonstrate their academic knowledge in ways that will allow them to shine. To differentiate the product, focus on the result of the learning and how students demonstrate what they have learned. The product may be any formal assessment, project, or assignment that demonstrates the presentational mode of communication while providing the student with challenge, variety, and choice.

There are various ways to differentiate products for formal assessment. For example, limit answer choices, increase font size, decrease the number of questions per page, or allow students to answer essay questions in short answer, long answer, and/or fill-in-the-blank formats. You can also allow students to use notes when completing an assessment or to take a home test instead of completing the work in class. You can also provide students with alternative testing locations, visual and auditory aids, or you can allow them to collaborate with peers.

As discussed previously, activities can be tiered to differentiate the learning process. Additionally, products can also be tiered to differentiate how students express what they have learned in a unit. Engage students in a range of assessment activities that are designed at varied levels of readiness to meet their proficiency levels using Bloom's Taxonomy.

For example, when ending the travel unit using recommendations, we assessed the ability to utilize travel vocabulary and related recommendations by designing tiered tasks to be completed in the presentational mode of communication. Students of all proficiency levels were given the same authentic material to interpret and gather information on for the creation of their product. Novice students classified travel recommendations using the realia that we provided and created an infographic based on their understanding of that authentic material. Intermediate students analyzed travel recommendations and justified their preferred recommendations as a travel ad, while advanced learners designed a travel website by utilizing information from the authentic resource and also investigating best places to visit, the place of study, etc.

Another way to differentiate products is to provide students with choice in task assessment and product performance. Let students decide how they feel most comfortable completing the presentational mode by choosing a written, visual, or speaking task, although this will not necessarily work if you are assessing a specific mode of communication.

For example, when teaching the food unit with task goals for providing information about healthy diets, students varied their product by choosing to create an infographic about the various food options,

writing a newspaper article about a specific healthy food and its benefits, or writing a research report. Some chose to demonstrate their knowledge through a visual presentation, creating a digital poster with information about the importance of a healthy diet, a labeled artistic representation, or a Google Slides presentation. Finally, some students chose to demonstrate presentational speaking proficiency by giving a presentation on healthy foods, recording an informative podcast, or conducting an interview with a local doctor in the target language.

Planning for an Inclusive Future

As teachers we must foster a trusting relationship with our students. Students will begin to trust us when they believe that we have their best interests in mind and when they feel that their identity and self-esteem will not be harmed. Creating culturally responsive instruction that acknowledges and accommodates students' cultures is a way to demonstrate to students that inclusivity is imperative, and that their cultures are respected. It is necessary to find ways to help our students see that they can be successful in school, while also maintaining their identity (Ogbu, & Simons, 1998). Additionally, we must also continue to maintain high standards for all students and clearly post student expectations and standards during class.

The interconnection of DI and teaching to reach the needs of all students lies in our ability to allow students to become the primary workers and thinkers in the target language. To facilitate this, we must recognize our students' different points of readiness and that they process information differently and at a different pace in each of the three modes of communication. We must take the time to learn more about our students through conversations and through the collection and analysis of student data. The goal is to teach students to be independent learners by giving them more responsibilities and flexibility in their learning methods.

We must learn to match the DI strategy to the communicative language task and the needs of the learner, and to effectively differentiate content, process, product—ideally all three (Tomlinson, 2014). Over time, we must develop our tool kits to include flexible instructional strategies that will facilitate teaching and reach the needs of all learners across the various levels of proficiency. Finally, as always, we must continue to build trust and long-lasting relationships with parents and the community.

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