



Unveiling Plagiarism Practices in Iranian English Language Students' Theses

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ABSTRACT

The present study sought to investigate the prevalence of plagiarism in graduate theses submitted by Iranian students. To this end, a corpus comprising 43 Master's theses in Translation Studies and 46 Master's theses in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) was analyzed utilizing the iThenticate plagiarism detection software. The content of the theses was scrutinized to identify instances of plagiarism, defined as the verbatim reproduction or paraphrasing of passages from published sources without proper citation. The findings revealed several cases where students had paraphrased entire excerpts from books or journal articles without providing adequate citations. Furthermore, the data showed a higher incidence of plagiarism in Translation Studies theses relative to TEFL theses, with Chapter 2 exhibiting the most pronounced discrepancies. Although the degree of overlap between source texts and student work was substantially greater in TEFL theses, the extent of plagiarism, as defined by the verbatim reproduction of copyrighted material, was more prevalent in Translation Studies theses. A chi-square test corroborated the presence of a statistically significant difference between the frequencies of plagiarism in the two disciplines under examination.

KEYWORDS: Plagiarism; Graduate theses; iThenticate; English language students

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1. Introduction

Academic dishonesty is characterized as conduct that violates the rules and policies of an institution, resulting in a lack of honesty and integrity to gain an unfair advantage on assessments (Hasri et al., 2022). This encompasses a range of unethical behaviour, including plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, breaching examination protocols, cheating during tests, and impersonating another individual to take an exam (Hasri et al., 2022). Expanding the scope, the Anadolu University Scientific Ethics Committee (2003) regards any intentional act or negligence that compromises the replicability, validity, and reliability of research as falling under the umbrella of academic dishonesty (as cited in Akbulut et al., 2008).

Maintaining academic integrity is a fundamental pillar of the educational process that must be upheld by all members of the scholastic community to cultivate an environment conducive to meaningful learning, growth, and achievement (Hasri et al., 2022). Miller et al. (2011), too, posit that the responsibility for upholding academic integrity extends beyond just faculty

members, defining it as collective ownership through the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of individual students, cohorts, and instructors alike, all working in concert to promote a climate of integrity across the entire academic sphere.

As the most vivid example of academic dishonesty, plagiarism is an ongoing issue in academic settings which poses a severe threat, since mounting evidence suggests a worrisome rise in such an unethical practice (e.g. Fatemi & Saito, 2020). Plagiarism is conceived of as an “intellectual theft, no less a moral offense than the theft of a car, money, or jewels would be. While intellectual theft is less tangible than other theft forms and other species of academic dishonesty, it is nonetheless genuine” (Peters, 2003, p.624). In academic settings, plagiarism not only erodes the integrity and prestige associated with the degrees awarded to students but also impedes the development of critical thinking and research skills among students.

According to Childers and Bruton (2015), most research on plagiarism has been confined to cases involving large strips of texts directly copied and pasted from sources without proper attribution. This narrow focus on the most obvious form of plagiarism, which both students and faculty can easily identify, is understandable. Unreferenced copying and pasting represent the most quantifiable, controllable, and attributable type of plagiaristic behaviour. However, Childers and Bruton (2015) assert that many other forms of plagiarism exist that are far more nuanced and complex. They conclude that research relying on ambiguous definitions fails to capture glaring cases and assumes students have a sufficient grasp of the term's scope.

In addition, while plagiarism among higher education students has become a widespread and significant concern for academics globally (Amiri & Razmjoo, 2016), the bulk of existing research relies heavily on self-reported data from students, primarily examining their perceptions of plagiarism (e.g., Anaman & Agyei, 2021; Farooq & Sulotana, 2022; Gullifer & Tyson, 2010; Power, 2009). For example, previous studies showed that the transition to remote education necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis has weakened the traditional stigmas surrounding cheating in educational settings (Navidinia et al., 2024; Navidinia & Zarei, 2023). However, there is a dearth of research specifically investigating the prevalence of plagiarism within defended theses.

The present study seeks to quantify the degree of plagiarism and overlapping content among students' theses. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies have attempted to measure plagiarism rates within master's theses in Iran. A thorough analysis of the content of defended theses helps to gain a more holistic understanding of the extent of plagiarism in academic theses. An analysis of such kind provides educators and researchers with insights into the underlying drives of plagiarism and helps them develop targeted interventions to promote academic integrity. In light of this gap, this study investigates the prevalence of plagiarism among Translation Studies theses and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) theses at Iranian universities. Accordingly, this study is motivated by the following research question:

To what extent do master's theses conducted in TEFL and Translation Studies reflect plagiarism?

2. Literature review

2.1. Plagiarism: types, contributing factors, motives

Plagiarism has emerged as a significant problem for educators, particularly at the tertiary level. Accounts of plagiarism in diverse academic disciplines indicate a high prevalence of plagiarism (from 22% to 25.65%) (Hopp & Speil, 2020; Shang, 2019) among students and a rise in it over the last decades (Briggs, et al., 2013). Numerous studies have documented instances of students' works that contain copied words of others without acknowledging their original sources (e.g., Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2017). Although copying the words of others is the prototypical form of plagiarism, it is not the only type. Prior research (Brandt, 2002; Howard, 2002; Wilhoit, 1994) provides evidence of different types of plagiarism including stealing material from others and appropriating them as their own, buying papers, submitting others' work with or without their knowledge, dropping quotations marks when copying sections of materials even when the reference is included, and paraphrasing materials without supplying references.

Plagiarism is carried out either intentionally as a deliberate act designed to deceive people, or unintentionally and accidentally when a student fails to supply proper referencing or documentation (Park, 2003). When performed intentionally, students may view their dishonest act of plagiarism as permissible under certain circumstances, for example, when they are under social or financial pressures (Waltzer & Dahl, 2020), or when they are overwhelmed with high workloads (Ehrich, et al., 2016). Deliberate acts of plagiarism can also occur as a result of personal risk tolerance and as a reaction toward the competitive environment in which students are embedded (Hopp & Speil, 2020). Unintentional plagiarism, on the other hand, occurs due to unnecessary quoting, incorrect paraphrasing practices where some words are replaced with their synonyms but the structure is kept intact, as well as students' lack of familiarity with referencing rules (Vij, et al., 2009).

A multitude of factors are considered to play a part in the prevalence of plagiarism including students' divergent perspectives of what constitutes plagiarism, the seriousness of its various forms, and the way to cope with this misconduct (Glendinning, 2014). Additionally, the advancement of online tools has accelerated the prevalence of these behaviours due to the ease of access and affordability of original work available on the World Wide Web (Daoud et al., 2019). De Lima et al.

(2021) also describe plagiarism as a product of the interplay between a set of individual and contextual factors. They suggest that plagiarism tends to increase when students are engaged in other forms of academic dishonest behaviours, experience hardship in academic settings, have lenient attitudes toward plagiarism, and when a culture of plagiarism is accepted by their peers.

2.2. Detecting plagiarism

While the internet has paved the ground for conducting plagiarism at copy-and-paste ease, it has also set the foundation for plagiarism detection with a plethora of software tools available that make identifying correspondences between students' work and existing online content on the World Wide Web easy. According to Kunschak (2018), deploying anti-plagiarism software facilitates identifying both intentional and unintentional uses of others' work, exploring problems, and preventing future instances of academic dishonesty.

As the most widely-used anti-plagiarism tool (Batane, 2010), Turnitin software has been extensively studied in academia. It functions by reporting the degree of similarity between the submitted papers and the existing documents in its database (Davis & Carroll, 2009). In a survey study, 98% of students reported that they found Turnitin useful to avoid plagiarism (Walker, 2010). In addition to impeding intentional plagiarism, Turnitin is supposed to prevent unintentional plagiarism by making students aware that their papers will be checked against the database hence, motivating students to double-check their papers before submitting (Kraemer, 2008; Shang, 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

To determine the degree of plagiarism in master's theses, we employed a content analysis approach and utilized plagiarism detection software. Consequently, a collection of theses underwent analysis using the iThenticate software to quantify the extent of plagiarized material.

3.2. Corpus

To investigate the prevalence of plagiarism in Iranian theses, a corpus comprising TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and Translation theses from various universities across Iran was downloaded from the Irandoc database and analyzed using iThenticate. The corpus consisted of 43 Translation theses and 46 TEFL theses. The theses were selected from academic institutions such as the University of Esfahan, Chabahar, Zabol, Mazandaran, Yazd, Tabriz, Kerman, Kashan, Shahrekord, Alzahra, Shiraz, Guilan, and Urmia, ensuring a diverse representation of academic work from different regions of Iran. The selection process aimed to encompass a wide range of topics and research methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the extent of plagiarism in Iranian theses.

3.3. Instrumentation and material

iThenticate: iThenticate is a web-based tool that scans millions of current research papers and web pages, comparing the text in uploaded documents against this vast database to identify matching content. It is the preferred plagiarism detection software utilized by leading researchers, publishers, and academics worldwide. The user-friendly submission process compares submitted work for similarity against the world's most esteemed published literature, ensuring that academic reputations are safeguarded. Journal editors, publishers, and thesis examiners frequently leverage iThenticate or comparable software to identify and prevent instances of plagiarism and self-plagiarism. By incorporating iThenticate into their workflow, researchers can proactively identify and address potential areas of concern during the writing process itself.

In this study, iThenticate was employed to examine the theses for any potential occurrences of plagiarism. The output generated a comprehensive report highlighting similarities between the submitted document and existing sources, including percentages of matching text and specific excerpts of copied information. The report utilized color-coded highlights to indicate the degree of similarity and the location of the matched text within the document. This facilitated a thorough review process, enabling the identification and resolution of any potential plagiarism issues or improper citation practices before final submission.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

To assess the extent of plagiarism and overlapping content among master's theses, a corpus comprising 43 Translation theses and 46 TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) theses were downloaded from the Irandoc database and subjected to analysis using plagiarism detection software. Specifically, the iThenticate tool was utilized to quantify the degree of plagiarized material present within these academic works.

4. Results

An analysis was conducted to identify instances of plagiarism in master's theses using the iThenticate tool. The examination revealed that the percentage of overlapping text, which could indicate potential plagiarism, ranged from 14% to an alarming 99%. The average overlap across all these stood at 50.24%, with a standard deviation of 19.00%.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the percentage of overlap in students' theses

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|----|---------|---------|-------|----------------|
| Thesis | 89 | 14.00 | 99.00 | 50.24 | 19.00 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 89 | | | | |

Table 2 presents data on the frequency of theses containing overlap, which refers to verbatim text from other sources that were properly cited. Additionally, it showcases the number of theses exhibiting plagiarism, where word-for-word copying from books or journals occurred without appropriate acknowledgment.

Table 2. Frequency of overlap and plagiarism in theses

| | Copying verbatim from other research works using quotation marks and page number | Copying word for word from a book or journal without acknowledgement |
|------------|--|--|
| Plagiarism | 65 | 24 |

To further investigate the frequency of overlap in Translation and TEFL theses separately, the iThenticate tool was employed to analyze the translation theses. The findings revealed that the percentage of overlapping text in these theses ranged from 14% to 56%. The average overlap for translation theses was 35.18%.

4.1. Overlap in translation theses

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the percentage of overlap in translation students' theses

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|----|---------|---------|-------|----------------|
| Percentage | 43 | 14.00 | 56.00 | 35.18 | 10.71 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 43 | | | | |

Table 4 presents the frequency of theses containing overlap, which refers to the verbatim inclusion of text from other research works, appropriately cited using quotation marks and page numbers. Additionally, it showcases the number of theses exhibiting plagiarism, where direct copying from books or journals occurred without proper acknowledgment or attribution.

Table 4. Frequency of overlap and plagiarism in translation theses

| | Copying verbatim from other research works using quotation marks and page number | Copying word for word from a book or journal without acknowledgement |
|------------|--|--|
| Plagiarism | 30 | 13 |

The content analysis revealed that the majority of graduate students demonstrated an awareness of plagiarism by mentioning the author's name, using quotation marks, and including the corresponding page numbers. However, the excessive use of direct quotations exceeded the acceptable standards, resulting in a high percentage of overlapping text.

4.2. Plagiarism in translation theses

Among 43 translation theses, thirteen theses contained instances of plagiarism. Table 5 illustrates the occurrence of plagiarism across the five chapters of thirteen translation theses. Upon examining the data, it becomes evident that Chapter 2 exhibits the highest frequency of plagiarism (N= 169) among all the theses, indicating that this chapter may be a common area where

plagiarism tends to occur in translation theses. For instance, in Thesis 12, Chapter 2 contained 18 instances of plagiarism, which is the highest frequency among all the chapters within that particular thesis. This pattern suggests that Chapter 2 typically has the highest prevalence of plagiarism in the majority of the analyzed theses, while Chapters 3 and 5 have the least, with only 5 instances recorded.

Table 5. The frequency of plagiarism in the five chapters of translation theses

| | Chapter 1 | Chapter 2 | Chapter 3 | Chapter 4 | Chapter 5 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Thesis 1 | 3 | 9 | -- | 3 | -- |
| Thesis 2 | 6 | 9 | 1 | 2 | -- |
| Thesis 3 | 5 | 14 | -- | 5 | 1 |
| Thesis 4 | 3 | 15 | -- | 1 | -- |
| Thesis 5 | 7 | 13 | -- | 1 | 1 |
| Thesis 6 | 10 | 16 | -- | 3 | -- |
| Thesis 7 | 4 | 21 | 2 | 5 | 1 |
| Thesis 8 | 5 | 8 | -- | 4 | -- |
| Thesis 9 | 4 | 9 | 1 | -- | -- |
| Thesis 10 | 7 | 13 | -- | 2 | -- |
| Thesis 11 | 5 | 14 | -- | 2 | -- |
| Thesis 12 | 8 | 18 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Thesis 13 | 3 | 10 | -- | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 70 | 169 | 5 | 31 | 5 |

4.3. Overlap in TEFL Theses

To investigate the frequency of overlap in TEFL students' theses, the iThenticate tool was employed to identify instances of overlapping text in 46 M.A. TEFL theses obtained from the Irandoc database. The analysis revealed that the percentage of overlapping content ranged from 30% to an alarming 99%. The average overlap across all TEFL theses stood at 64.32%, with a standard deviation of 13.41.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the frequency of overlap in TEFL students' theses

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|----|---------|---------|-------|----------------|
| Teaching | 46 | 30.00 | 99.00 | 64.32 | 13.41 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 46 | | | | |

Table 7 presents the frequency of theses containing overlap, which refers to the verbatim inclusion of text from other research works, appropriately cited using quotation marks and page numbers. Additionally, it showcases the number of theses exhibiting plagiarism, where direct copying from books or journals occurred without proper acknowledgment or attribution.

Table 7. Frequency of overlap and plagiarism in TEFL Theses

| | Copying verbatim from other research works using quotation marks and page number | Copying word for word from a book or journal without acknowledgement |
|------------|--|--|
| Plagiarism | 35 | 11 |

The content analysis findings revealed that while most graduate students demonstrated an understanding of plagiarism by acknowledging the original author, using quotation marks, and providing page numbers when incorporating external sources, a significant portion of students exceeded the recommended guidelines for direct quotations, resulting in a substantial amount of overlapping text.

4.4. Plagiarism in TEFL theses

Among 46 TEFL theses, eleven theses contained instances of plagiarism. Table 8 illustrates the frequency of plagiarism instances across the five chapters of the TEFL theses. It is evident that Chapter 2 exhibits the highest number of plagiarism occurrences, with 87 instances, followed by Chapter 1 with 39 instances, Chapter 5 with 30 instances, Chapter 4 with 22 instances, and Chapter 3 with 20 instances. The total instances of plagiarism across all chapters are also provided at the bottom of the table, indicating 39 instances in Chapter 1, 87 instances in Chapter 2, 20 instances in Chapter 3, 22 instances in Chapter 4, and 30 instances in Chapter 5. The results revealed a higher frequency of plagiarism in Translation theses compared to TEFL theses, with Chapter 2 being particularly problematic.

Table 8. Frequency of plagiarism in the five chapters of TEFL theses

| | Chapter 1 | Chapter 2 | Chapter 3 | Chapter 4 | Chapter 5 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Thesis 1 | 2 | 4 | -- | -- | -- |
| Thesis 2 | 1 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 5 |
| Thesis 3 | 1 | 2 | -- | -- | -- |
| Thesis 4 | 4 | 7 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Thesis 5 | 6 | 11 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Thesis 6 | 4 | 10 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| Thesis 7 | 4 | 8 | 2 | -- | 2 |
| Thesis 8 | 3 | 5 | -- | 1 | 2 |
| Thesis 9 | 5 | 9 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| Thesis 10 | 3 | 12 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Thesis 11 | 6 | 13 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 39 | 87 | 20 | 22 | 30 |

4.5. Plagiarism in translation and TEFL theses

As indicated in Table 9, the results showed that while the amount of overlapping text was significantly higher in TEFL theses, the frequency of plagiarism was higher in Translation theses. This finding suggests that TEFL students were more conscious of plagiarism and made efforts to include the names of the scholars in their theses, albeit with excessive direct quotations.

Table 9. Frequency of plagiarism in the five chapters of TEFL and translation theses

| | Chapter 1 | Chapter 2 | Chapter 3 | Chapter 4 | Chapter 5 | Total |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| <i>TEFL Theses</i> | 39 | 87 | 20 | 22 | 30 | 198 |
| <i>Traion Translation Theses</i> | 70 | 169 | 5 | 31 | 5 | 280 |

Table 10 presents the frequencies of plagiarism in both Translation and TEFL theses.

Table 10. Frequency of plagiarism in TEFL and translation theses

| | Observed N | Expected N | Residual |
|-------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Translation | 280 | 239.0 | 41.0 |
| TEFL | 198 | 239.0 | -41.0 |
| Total | 478 | | |

As shown in table 11, the results revealed a statistically significant difference in the frequency of plagiarism between Translation theses and TEFL theses ($p = 0.00$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 11. Chi-square test

| Chi-Square | Df | Asymp. Sig. |
|------------|----|-------------|
|------------|----|-------------|

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the frequency of plagiarism among Translation Studies theses and TEFL theses from universities in Iran. The results demonstrated that while there were instances where students acknowledged plagiarism by citing the author, using quotation marks, and providing page numbers, there were also several cases of students paraphrasing entire passages from books or journals without giving proper credit. The findings revealed that translation theses exhibited more instances of plagiarism compared to TEFL theses, particularly in Chapter 2. Despite the significantly higher degree of overlap in TEFL theses, the frequency of plagiarism was higher in translation theses, suggesting that TEFL students were more conscious of citing the names of scholars in their theses. The results of the chi-square test also indicated a statistically significant difference between the frequencies of plagiarism in Translation theses compared to TEFL theses.

The results indicated that in both translation and TEFL theses, there were instances where students avoided plagiarism by citing the author's name, using quotation marks, and providing the page number. However, there were also cases of plagiarism where students copied the work of other scholars verbatim without proper citation, quotation marks, or paraphrasing. These findings are consistent with Higgins et al. (2016), who discovered that 82% of the papers from countries where English was not an official language had unacceptable amounts of copied content.

The findings also revealed a higher frequency of plagiarism in Translation theses compared to TEFL theses, particularly in Chapter 2. This higher frequency in Translation theses, especially in Chapter 2, suggests that there may be a greater temptation or tendency for translation students to engage in plagiarism. On the other hand, the lower incidence of plagiarism in TEFL theses, despite a higher amount of overlap, indicates that TEFL students may have a better awareness of academic integrity and a greater tendency to properly cite sources.

This result underscores the importance of providing explicit education and support for students in understanding and adhering to academic integrity standards within their specific fields of study. By recognizing these discipline-specific differences, educators and institutions can tailor their efforts to prevent plagiarism and promote ethical writing practices effectively within different academic programs.

Students copied word-for-word from books or journals without acknowledgment. They could have avoided plagiarism by completely paraphrasing what other scholars have published or by making references to those scholars and including page numbers after direct quotations. Students can avoid verbatim copying without acknowledgment by practicing effective note-taking techniques, which involve summarizing and paraphrasing information rather than directly copying sentences or paragraphs.

Additionally, plagiarism can be prevented if students understand and apply proper citation and referencing practices, use style guides, or seek guidance from their instructors when in doubt. Utilizing plagiarism detection tools to check their work before submission can also help students identify any unintentional instances of direct copying and ensure they properly acknowledge the sources. Ultimately, fostering a culture of academic integrity and ethical writing within educational institutions can help prevent direct copying without acknowledgment, as students will be more aware of the consequences and the importance of original work.

6. Conclusion

The issue of plagiarism has become a significant concern for most institutions of higher education, threatening the foundations and principles upon which these institutions were established. Studies conducted by various higher education institutions across the globe have focused on the detrimental nature of plagiarism, intending to curb or reduce it to provide a conducive and favorable environment for teaching and learning (Ford & Hughes, 2012). However, the literature and findings of this study indicate that students' understanding or perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism are very limited. While the majority of students understand plagiarism, they do not fully appreciate its depth, breadth, and scope. This creates a situation where they sometimes engage in plagiarism because they do not perceive such acts as constituting plagiarism. Educational programs must emphasize the various avenues where students can enhance their knowledge of plagiarism. In this way, students would be proactive in seeking knowledge about plagiarism to improve their research and writing skills. Therefore, to curb or reduce plagiarism, lecturers and university authorities must prioritize educating and orienting students on the constituents of plagiarism.

The findings of the present study highlight the necessity for collaborative efforts among higher education institutions and relevant stakeholders to establish clear standards, guidelines, and training programs on plagiarism, thereby elevating the standards of education, academic writing, and publications across the higher education landscape. This demands that academic and scientific writing development training for students should be given top priority by Iranian higher education institutions. In addition to principles of academic writing, topics covering how to avoid plagiarism and maintain academic integrity, such

as proper referencing, quoting, and paraphrasing, as well as what constitutes plagiarism, should be covered. Students should also take English writing classes to increase their confidence in communicating ideas in a second language. Universities must understand that this kind of instruction should be included from the moment a student enrolls in a master's degree program. This basic instruction must be paired with real-world tasks to encourage and reinforce the application of learning. Educators, mentors, and peers should be equipped with the knowledge to educate students about plagiarism, fostering a deeper comprehension of the issue. It is also recommended to develop and implement measures to monitor and assess progress in addressing plagiarism, thereby providing a proactive approach to addressing the issue. Universities should organize literacy programs specifically focused on plagiarism, ensuring that students are well-versed in the various forms and manifestations of plagiarism. Additionally, integrating plagiarism education as a dedicated course unit within university curricula can serve as a proactive measure to mitigate instances of plagiarism.

This study had certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the corpus of the study was limited in size. Additionally, the translation and TEFL theses analyzed were not from the same educational institutions. Different institutions may have varying policies, guidelines, and rules regarding plagiarism, which could potentially contribute to the observed higher frequency of plagiarism in translation theses. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies address this issue by selecting a larger corpus for analysis from the same institutions to ensure consistency in policies and guidelines. Furthermore, uncovering students' perceptions and knowledge of plagiarism is another area that future researchers can explore to gain deeper insights into this topic. By investigating students' understanding and awareness of plagiarism, more targeted and effective strategies can be developed to mitigate its occurrence in academic work.

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