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# Problems and Needs Analysis of English for Tourism Industry: A Case of Hotel Staff in Phang Nga Province, Thailand

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## Abstract

Tourism is an important industry that has created a lot of income for many nations, including Thailand; therefore, it is essential to increase its potential as a more sustainable and successful industry, in particular to support a sustainable recovery of nations' economies after a tough situation like Covid-19. The present study was carried out to investigate tourism staff's problems and needs for using English at work and to explore their needs for improving English for their work. The participants were 200 hotel staff in Phang Nga Province, Thailand. Data were collected through a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed for data analysis. The findings showed that in general, the hotel staff's problem in using English at work was at a moderate level ( $M=2.76$ ,  $S.D.=1.11$ ). They had English writing problems the most. They found it very difficult to write letters or e-mails in English. Regarding their needs for using English, it was found that every English skill was rated at a high level ( $M=3.75$ ,  $S.D.=1.11$ ), and English speaking was the most necessary. The hotel staff reported that they had to speak English to welcome, greet and say good-bye to foreign guests. Pertaining to their needs for improving English, overall, the hotel staff needed to improve their English skills at a high level ( $M=3.85$ ,  $S.D.=0.98$ ). They highly needed to improve their English use in every aspect, especially English listening. Based on the interview information, English courses, handbooks or applications relating to English for hotels are truly needed for their English use improvement.

**Keywords:** English Skills, Hotel Staff, Needs, Problems, Tourism

## 1. Introduction

The tourism industry is an important industry that can create a lot of income for many nations. It is a significant sector that helps build the growth of countries' economies which can lead to a sustainability and prosperity of those countries, and this is no exception for Thailand since the country has greatly benefited from its tourism industry. Thailand is one of the top 10 most visited destinations by international tourist arrivals (Industrialnews,

2020; Wikipedia, 2021). This is because every region of Thailand has outstanding sites that can attract foreign tourists, such as mountains, waterfalls, beaches, and cultural sites.

The south of Thailand is a region rich in fertile natural resources. Consequently, various types of natural tourist attractions are located here. Provinces in the south of Thailand like Phuket, Krabi and Suratthani are very famous to foreign tourists. Every year thousands of them visit those provinces. Among those famous provinces in the southern part, Phang Nga is an outstanding one. Many places in Phang Nga, such as Khao Lak, Similan Islands and so on, are famous for their uniqueness (Phang Nga Statistical Office, 2017). These tourist attractions have gradually created income and have ultimately made Phang Nga an important province generating a lot of income for Thailand. Phang Nga has been ranked the sixth most visited province in Thailand by foreign tourists (Thansetthakij, 2019). Due to this popularity, the number of foreign tourists visiting Phang Nga is continually increasing. It is, therefore, essential to develop the potential of the people who work in tourism, particularly their language proficiency as this skill is very crucial for effective international communication.

Although the tourism industry in Thailand has been thriving for an extensive period of time, and many efforts have been made to promote the tourism industry, problems pertaining to the incapability of people who work in this sector still obviously exist. Among those problems, an inadequate English ability is observable. The existence of problems in English use and tourism personnel's language insufficiency can be seen in various areas of Thailand tourism, such as food business (Pochakorn & Homhual, 2018), transportation business (Srichaiwong & Chantarawiroj, 2018; Thongsai & Sittipragan, 2019) and accommodation business (Kalasin & Charumane, 2015; Yutthapirut, Akkarathanawayamon, & Chusai, 2016; Chaichana, Cheawchan, & Thongnen, 2017; Kamwiset, 2017). Moreover, despite an effort to equip people in the tourism industry with the knowledge of various languages, such as Chinese, it is noticeable that English is still the most important and essential language in this sector. Hence, everyone who would like to work or has already worked in this industry tries to develop their English ability for more success.

Phang Nga was chosen for this study because insufficient English proficiency of people who work in Phang Nga tourism has been noted in the development plan for the Andaman coastal provinces in Thailand during 2018-2021 as an important problem that must be solved urgently (The Office of Strategy Management, Andaman, n.d.). Furthermore, Phang Nga has launched the campaign "Phang Nga Prompt," which is a campaign to promote its tourism for the recovery of Thailand's economy (National News Bureau of Thailand, 2021), it is essential to strengthen the people's English proficiency in this industry. Among businesses relating to tourism, the accommodation business is considered important (Wiriy, 2017). If people working in this area are able to use English effectively, it is possible that the management of the business will be successful. A development of the English skills of hotel staff may help increase their confidence and thus can improve the potential of Thailand's tourism industry. In addition, according to the information obtained from some hotel staff working in Phang Nga, it can be concluded that hotel staff still have English communication problems at work although they have worked in this business for a certain period of time; therefore, examining their problems and needs of English use necessary for their work can be very helpful.

Most of the research studies concerning hotel service usually focus on a study of problems and needs of staff who work in the front office section. The present study, hence, investigated problems and needs of the hotel staff from various sections in order to explore whether or not staff from other sections have problems and needs for using English when they are at work. Additionally, as mentioned earlier that Phang Nga tourism needs people with language ability to fulfill its tourism success, this research study was then carried out to examine problems and needs pertaining to the English use of personnel working in Phang Nga tourism. The present study focused on studying the problems and needs of staff working in 1-3 star hotels in Phang Nga since this group of people may lack an opportunity to improve their English proficiency. The results from the study can be used for finding effective methods to develop and prepare these people for the reopening of Thailand tourism. Moreover, the findings can serve as a guideline for developing courses and teaching materials with regard to English for the hotel business and other related fields.

## 2. Literature Review

The hotel business is one of the industries very important to the success of the tourism industry. Good and effective service provided by people working in hotels can impress foreign tourists. This can result in generating a lot of income. However, findings from a number of studies indicate that the hotel business cannot be fully successful when the people in this business lack language skills, in particular the English language, which is necessary for providing good and effective hotel service. Therefore, studies on problems and needs of English use of people working in this area are necessary since they can help provide precise solutions to the problems. Several studies, hence, were conducted with the objectives of searching for problems encountered by people working in the hotel business and their needs of English use. Some studies can be viewed below.

Kalasin and Charumanee (2015) studied hotel front desk staff's needs for using English. 315 hotel front desk staff in Phuket Province, Koh Samui and Hatyai District participated in a questionnaire session, and 16 hotel front desk managers joined in a semi-structured interview. From the findings, the four English skills were highly needed. Considering each area, it was found that hotel staff who worked in Phuket and Koh Samui needed to use English at work more than those in Hatyai at the 0.05 statistical significance level because most of the foreign tourists used English.

Similarly, Yutthapirut et al. (2016) explored problems in using English at work of hotel front desk staff in Phuket Province. In general, it was found that the hotel front desk staff moderately had problems in using English. A deep analysis revealed that the different educational backgrounds and work experience of the hotel front desk staff caused them to have different levels of problems.

Chaichana et al. (2017) carried out a study using a questionnaire to examine foreign tourists' attitudes toward hotel front desk staff's English communication problems in Nan Province. The samples of the study consisted of 30 foreign tourists. Based on the results, the foreign tourists thought that the hotel front desk staff in Nan Province had high-level problems in English communication. The hotel front desk staff were seen not being able to use correct English on telephone communication, and they were not able to give information about their hotel and tourist attractions in Nan Province. In addition, their English sentences were incomplete, and they failed to understand English spoken by foreign tourists.

In the late 2010s, Prachanant (2018) studied problems in communicating English of hotel staff in order to find proper solutions. The samples of the study were 150 hotel staff in Buriram Province chosen by convenient sampling. A questionnaire was used to collect data from 150 hotel staff, and 20 of them took part in a semi-structured interview. It was found from the findings that hotel staff had problems in listening to English the most. They reported that they were not able to understand the different accents of foreigners from different countries.

Through a questionnaire, Firharmawan and Andika (2019) conducted a survey on the needs and problems of hotel staff when they had to use English for communication. The samples were 20 hotel staff from Meotel Hotel in Indonesia. The findings showed that the hotel staff agreed that English speaking, listening, reading and writing were essential for effective communication. Pertaining to problems in using English, the hotel staff mentioned that their knowledge about English grammar and vocabulary was very limited, so they could not understand foreigners' spoken English.

Kijpoonphol and Linh (2021) explored the need for using English of hotel receptionists in Ubon Ratchathani Province. 16 hotel receptionists, 16 foreign hotel guests and 10 hotel managers participated in the data collection session. Four sets of instruments comprising a self-assessment form, a questionnaire, a needs survey form and a semi-structured interview were used to collect data. From the data analysis, it was found that the hotel receptionists needed to improve their English listening in certain topics, such as guests' requirements and information, their accents and guests' problems. English speaking was also found to be a skill that needed urgent improvement. Based on the findings, the hotel receptionists had to improve their English in greeting and welcoming guests, giving information about hotel rooms and facilities, and recommending tourist destinations and local food.

It can be concluded from the studies above that problems and needs regarding the English use of hotel staff are vital in that they can be great sources for finding appropriate solutions for people working in this area. However, it is noticeable that participants in most of the studies were front desk staff. The present study, hence, would like to investigate the problems and needs of hotel staff working in various hotel sections, not just in a front desk office.

### **3. Objectives of the Study**

The present study was carried out with three objectives which were:

1. To study problems in English use encountered by hotel staff in Phang Nga Province, Thailand.
2. To explore their needs for English use necessary for their work.
3. To investigate their needs for improving their English use at work.

### **4. Methodology**

The present study was a survey research that employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

#### *4.1 Population and Samples*

The population in this study were hotel staff working in 1-3 star hotels in Phang Nga Province, Thailand, ranked by Agoda 2020. The samples of the study were 200 hotel staff working in the mentioned hotels by means of the simple random sampling method. These 200 hotel staff were asked to complete a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire aiming to explore their problems and needs of English use at work as well as their needs for English improvement. 50 out of these 200 hotel staff were further interviewed to get in-depth information about problems and needs of English use, including their needs to develop their English skills.

#### *4.2 Instruments for Data Collection*

Two types of instruments were employed to collect the data.

4.2.1 A questionnaire used in the study was adapted from the ones used in the studies of Kalasin and Charumane (2014, 2015) and Pochakorn, Chantarangkul and Sermsook (2018). It consisted of three parts. The first part focused on hotel staff's personal information, including gender, age, educational background, their workplace and working information, and their English use and English ability. The second part was composed of 5-point Likert scale items relating to hotel staff's problems and needs for the four skills of English used at their workplace. The third part also employed 5-point Likert scale items inquiring about hotel staff's needs to develop their English ability necessary for their work. In this final part, there were also four open-ended items used to let the hotel staff freely express their needs for developing their English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Prior to a real distribution of questionnaires to the participants, a questionnaire was verified by three experts to check its content validity through IOC (Index of Item-Objective Congruence), and the IOC value of the questionnaire was 0.98. Moreover, some questionnaires were distributed to 20 hotel staff who were not the participants of the present study. Through the method of Cronbach's alpha reliability, the 20 sets of questionnaires were tested, and the reliability value of the questionnaire was 0.96. These two figures indicated the high validity and reliability of the questionnaire used in the present study.

4.2.2 A semi-structured interview was also employed to obtain in-depth information. The questions for the interview were as follows:

1. Do you have problems in using English at work?
2. What English skill is the most problematic?
3. What English skill is the most necessary?
4. Would you like to improve your English use?
5. How do you think can help improve your English?

These five questions were also verified by the three experts to check their validity and appropriateness.

#### 4.3 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection of the present study comprised two stages.

Stage 1: At each hotel, after getting permission from the manager, questionnaires were distributed to hotel staff. They were given some time to complete the questionnaires. After that, all of the questionnaires were collected by the researchers.

Stage 2: After each hotel staff completed the questionnaire, the researchers asked for interview permission from each hotel staff. Only hotel staff who were available for an interview joined in this stage. The answers from the interview were recorded for further interpretation.

#### 4.4 Data Analysis

The analysis of data was conducted according to the information styles in each part of the questionnaire.

Hotel staff's personal information in the first part of the questionnaire was analyzed using frequency and percentage. Problems and needs of English use and their needs to develop their English ability from the second and third parts respectively were analyzed to obtain means and standard deviations. This information type was later interpreted according to its type as follows:

4.51-5.00	The highest	
3.51-4.50	High	
2.51-3.50	Moderate	
1.51-2.50	Low	
1.00-1.50	The lowest	(Cheenatrakoon, 1995)

Lastly, the information from the third part of the questionnaire in the form of open-ended style questions and information from the semi-structured interview was categorized, interpreted and analyzed through content analysis.

## 5. Results and Discussion

200 hotel staff consisted of 73 males and 127 females aged between 17 and 62 years old. The biggest part of them (41.50%) held a bachelor's degree. Most of them (31.50%) have had 3-6 years of work experience in the hotel business. Regarding the work section, most of the hotel staff (45.31%) worked in the front desk office, followed by the food and beverages (21.88%) and housekeeping section (17.19%). 105 of them reported that they had to use English every day, but most of them accounting for 45.50% rated their English ability at a fair level. The information from these 200 hotel staff was analyzed and illustrated in accordance with the research objectives as follows:

#### 5.1 Problems in using the four skills of English at their workplace

Table 1: Hotel staff's problems in using the four skills of English

English Skills	M(SD)	Levels of Problems
Listening	2.77(1.08)	Moderate
Speaking	2.76(1.10)	Moderate
Reading	2.72(1.10)	Moderate
Writing	2.81(1.14)	Moderate
Total	2.76(1.11)	Moderate

The analysis of the information revealed that overall, the hotel staff had a moderate-level problem in using English at work (M=2.76, S.D.=1.11). Considering each skill, the moderate level of the problem was found in every skill of English, and they had English writing problems the most (M=2.81, S.D.=1.14). They found it very difficult to

write letters and emails in English. This finding lends support to Kalasin and Charumanee (2014) and Yutthapirut et al. (2016) whose findings reported that the hotel staff in their studies also moderately had problems in using English. However, their participants marked speaking English as their biggest problem. This difference may be due to the fact that the types of hotel staff in the present study and the previous ones were different. The ones in the present study were the staff from every hotel section, but the ones in Kalasin and Charumanee's (2014) and Yutthapirut et al.'s (2016) were only front desk staff. A reason for this difference is that English speaking and listening skills were frequently used by the hotel staff. Though they encountered problems, they could overcome them because they had opportunities to speak and listen to English. However, for writing, they only had limited chances to use it, so the hotel staff found it hard. Some of them who worked in a reservation section and a management section needed to write emails or reports in English. This is supported by the findings of Ingwersen (2019), which pointed out that people working in a management section often had problems when they had to write in English. The interview information confirmed these findings in that the hotel staff mentioned that they were not able to write grammatically correct sentences because of their deficient English grammar and vocabulary knowledge. This finding was in line with Pochakorn et al. (2018), who reported that their participants faced problems in English writing due to their inadequate grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The findings from the present study and the previous ones point out that grammar and vocabulary are important for creating English sentences for effective communication. As a result, having hotel staff be able to use grammatically correct sentences and correct vocabulary should be taken into account.

Regarding problems in English listening, the hotel staff was not able to understand different accents of foreign customers, especially those with a British accent. This finding can also be found in the studies of Kalasin and Charumanee (2014) and Prachanant (2018). Being able to understand various English accents needs a lot of practice and familiarity; consequently, it is difficult for Thai people to be successful, as claimed by Chumchaiyo (2002). An important point that can be drawn from this finding is that English is an important language in the tourism industry since it is the main language for cross-cultural communication between hotel staff and foreign customers. Therefore, training hotel staff to listen to different English accents is definitely necessary because foreign customers usually use English.

Pertaining to speaking skills, it was found that the hotel staff could not speak English correctly as their sentences were ungrammatical and sometimes resulted in foreign customers' misunderstandings. This finding agrees with the one conducted by Pochakorn et al. (2018,) who reported that English sentences spoken by their participants had some grammatical errors. Ungrammatical English sentences are common mistakes made by Thai people as confirmed by a number of scholars whose studies relate to English errors made by non-native English speakers. Consequently, grammar is still necessary in order to convey the correct meanings of English sentences for effective communication.

English reading was the least problematic skill for the hotel staff. According to the analysis, the hotel staff failed to understand maps and announcements in English the most. This finding differs from those in previous studies, which reported that their participants usually had problems in reading work instructions. It can be concluded from the interview information that the hotel staff rarely read these types of texts, so it was more difficult for them to understand in comparison to other texts types, such as work manuals. Therefore, it can be helpful to have hotel staff get familiar with maps and announcements so that they would be able to assist foreign customers when they need help.

In sum, though the hotel staff's problems were at a moderate level, it cannot be denied that English use improvement is necessary for them to provide a more effective and successful hotel service.

### *5.2 Needs for using the four skills of English at the workplace*

As Phang Nga has been one of the popular destinations for foreign tourists, hotel staff's ability to use correct English is necessary. The results from the questionnaires illustrated in Table 2 can confirm this.

Table 2. Hotel staff's needs for using the four skills of English

English Skills	<i>M(SD)</i>	Levels of Needs
Listening	3.79(1.07)	High
Speaking	3.86(1.07)	High
Reading	3.69(1.13)	High
Writing	3.67(1.15)	High
Total	3.75(1.11)	High

In general, need for using English at work of the hotel staff was at a high level ( $M=3.75$ ,  $S.D.=1.11$ ). The participants of the study reported that they had to use every skill of English at a high level. This finding supports the finding from Kalasin and Charumanee's (2015). The information analysis showed that among the four skills, English speaking was the most necessary ( $M=3.86$ ,  $S.D.=1.07$ ). Kalasin and Charumanee (2015) and Firharmawan and Andika (2019) also reported this in their findings. A deep analysis revealed that the hotel staff had to speak English in order to welcome, greet and say good bye to their customers. This is supported by Piriyasilpa (2014) and Kijpoonphol and Linh (2021) who reported that the hotel staff in their study needed to improve their English for welcoming, greeting and saying good bye as well because these three activities are very first and basic activities that can impress foreign customers (Wiriy, 2017; Sahawatthanapong, 2018).

Listening to English was the second mostly-needed skill with the mean score of 3.79 ( $S.D.=1.07$ ). The hotel staff needed to listen to customers' requests, questions and doubts, for example, asking about room details and prices or directions. Kijpoonphol and Linh (2021) also found this in their study. To be able to answer customers' questions or doubts is considered common for hotel staff as mentioned by Kamwiset (2017). Therefore, it is necessary that hotel staff be prepared with the English knowledge necessary for their work.

English reading skill was less needed compared to the above-mentioned two skills with the mean score of 3.69 ( $S.D.=1.13$ ). The hotel staff needed to read emails and documents relating to room reservations. This finding can also be found in the study of Kalasin and Charumanee (2015). It can be concluded from this finding that understanding customers' details from reading is a very first and essential skill for working in the hotel business as mentioned by Kamwiset (2017).

Although English writing was needed the least ( $M=3.67$ ,  $S.D.=1.15$ ), it is important since the hotel staff mentioned in the semi-structured interview session that they needed to write messages spoken by foreign customers and to fill up forms for customers. Kalasin and Charumanee (2015) and Kamwiset (2017) also pointed out that English writing skill, such as note taking and form filling was extremely necessary for an effective hotel service.

To conclude, every skill of English is very important and necessary for people working in the hotel business. The level of needs and importance may vary depending on the work types; nevertheless, it is necessary that hotel staff are equipped with English knowledge essential for their work.

### 5.3 Needs for developing their English use at work

Hotel staff's needs for their English use improvement are considered important because it can provide precise information for finding an effective and right solution. The present study, hence, sought for this information as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Hotel staff's needs for developing English use at work

English Skills	<i>M(SD)</i>	Levels of Needs
Listening	3.95(0.91)	High
Speaking	3.89(0.97)	High
Reading	3.82(0.93)	High
Writing	3.84(0.99)	High

Related-to-work vocabulary	3.91(0.93)	High
Grammar usage	3.81(1.02)	High
Correct pronunciation	3.83(1.05)	High
Appropriate tones	3.77(1.01)	High
Total	3.85(0.98)	High

Based on the questionnaire results, it was found that the hotel staff needed to develop their English ability at a high level ( $M=3.85$ ,  $S.D.=0.98$ ), and they would like to develop every English skill at a high level. This finding agrees with those from a considerable number of studies that reported that their participants would like to develop every English skill at a high level (Thanwapitak, Nilmanee, & Poonkaew, 2013; Pochakorn et al., 2018; Kijjpoonphol & Linh, 2021). Considering each skill, the hotel staff wanted to improve their English listening the most, followed by English speaking. This discovery is also in line with the one from the previous studies (Thanwapitak et al., 2013; Firharmawan & Andika, 2019; Kijjpoonphol & Linh, 2021). The information from the interview and the open-ended questionnaires also agree with these findings in that the hotel staff reported that they wanted to improve their English speaking and listening. An interesting point that can be drawn from these results is that English listening and speaking skills are considered essential for hotel staff since they are skills which hotel staff have to perform at a time once they need to deal with foreign customers within a little or no time of preparation in a face-to-face communication as pointed out by Aunruen (2005) and Dejkujorn (2005). Therefore, the hotel staff would like to improve these two skills once they had a chance. Additionally, English vocabulary and grammar are other issues that cannot be overlooked since the hotel staff mentioned that they were of importance for their effective and correct English use. Moreover, the ability to use correct pronunciation and proper tone is also vital because these two things are able to make them be more professional English users. This finding agrees with Hymes (1972), who mentioned that being able to pronounce English words correctly in a natural tone can lead to more effective and successful communication in English.

To ensure the information about the hotel staff's needs for developing their English use at work, a semi-structured interview was carried out in order to cross-check the obtained information, and the information from the interview was consistent with the one from the questionnaires in that the hotel staff said that they highly needed to improve their English use though they used it every day at work because they thought that their English was not good enough, and they wanted to improve it in order to use English more confidently and effectively. Although they had a limited chance to use English after the explosion of Covid-19, they mentioned that they still had to practice using the four skills of English in order to prepare themselves for the reopening of international tourism. They, therefore, proposed that they wanted concerned parties to organize English courses taught by native English speakers since they believed that they could get familiar with English and be more confident when using the language. Furthermore, handbooks or applications containing English for hotel service were other alternatives for staff who were not convenient to attend an English course.

Although the tourism industry has been dramatically affected by Covid-19, a development of English proficiency is still necessary because once the country reopens for international tourist arrivals, hotel staff have to be ready to welcome and service foreign tourists. As a result, English handbooks or applications would be very useful for their self-study at their convenience.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate problems and needs for English use at work of hotel staff, including their needs for improving English use. The participants of the study were 200 hotel staff working in 1-3 star hotels in Phang Nga Province, Thailand. Data collection was done using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The statistics for data analysis were frequency, percentage, means, standard deviations and content analysis. The findings showed that the hotel staff had overall problems at a moderated level, and they had English writing problems the most. Regarding their needs for using English, it was found that the hotel staff needed to use English at work at a high level. They reported that English speaking was the most needed. Moreover, according to the analysis, English listening was the skill which was needed to be improved urgently together with English speaking

skill. The information from the semi-structured interview indicated that the hotel staff needed concerned parties to organize courses for their English improvement. In addition, handbooks or applications relating to English at work were truly needed for their self-study at anytime and anywhere. The findings from the present study also contribute to the design of courses and teaching materials relating to English for hotel service in order to equip students with the necessary knowledge before entering into the world of real work.

## 7. Suggestions

1. Based on the findings, it is observable that English trainings or courses containing common English contents, such as greeting, welcoming or saying good-bye will be useful for hotel staff working in every section because these are basic sentences that can be used to impress foreign customers. Although these sentences are basic, without practicing using them, hotel staff, especially those who are not in the front desk office, may be too shy and unconfident to say them.
2. English handbooks or applications can fulfill hotel staff's needs for improving their English use. Having a handbook or an application with them can let hotel staff study English on their own at their convenience.
3. Hotel staff working in different sections need to use English no matter what section they are in; therefore, it is necessary to have them be trained in English use appropriate for their work. If every hotel staff member can use effective English, it is likely that a hotel service can be successful.
4. The findings can be useful for developing English courses and teaching materials in order to prepare students who are aiming to work in the hotel business.
5. As the current study involves 200 hotel staff in a questionnaire session and only 50 of them in a semi-structured interview session, it may have some limitations. Therefore, further studies may include more participants and more methods, such as an observation or an English proficiency testing. This may help provide more reliable information.

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