

The Assertive Communication Style of English Language Education Students in Verbal Interaction: A Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

Assertive communication is a communication style that enables individuals to express thoughts, feelings, and opinions openly, honestly, and confidently while respecting the rights of others. This study aims to describe how students of the English Language Education Study Program apply assertive communication in their everyday verbal and non-verbal interactions. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with four students. The research instrument was developed based on the assertive communication indicators proposed by Samfira (2020) and Yoshinaga and Cooper (2025), complemented by recent studies on assertive communication in language education (Ogunyemi & Olagbaju, 2020; Hastuti & Wijayanto, 2023). The verbal findings revealed that all participants consistently demonstrated openness, the use of "I" statements, respect for their own rights and those of others, non-aggressive firmness, and contextual appropriateness through empathic assertion. In contrast, the non-verbal findings showed greater variation, particularly in maintaining eye contact, with three participants displaying limited eye contact and one participant demonstrating it consistently. Triangulation of observation and interview data also identified discrepancies between self-perceived and actual communication behaviors, as well as individual differences in empathic assertion strategies. These findings contribute to understanding assertive communication development among prospective English teachers.

Keywords: *Assertive Communication Style, Verbal Interaction, Students, English Language Education, Descriptive Study*

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is a fundamental part of human life, including within academic settings. One communication style widely regarded as effective for building healthy interpersonal relationships is assertive communication, namely the ability to express thoughts, feelings, and needs openly and honestly without sacrificing one's own rights or the rights of others (Samfira, 2020). A range of recent studies indicate that assertive communication significantly influences several academic and social aspects of student life. Ogunyemi & Olagbaju (2020) found a significant difference in self-confidence scores between students taught by teachers with an assertive communication style compared to an aggressive style, as well as a significant difference in English language learning achievement between students with low and high self-confidence. This finding confirms that a teacher's communication style also affects language learning outcomes.

In higher education settings, assertive communication provides room for students to communicate openly, thereby making their interactions with those around them more effective and their relationships stronger (Samfira, 2020). Furthermore, the assertiveness skills developed during university study enable students to accept criticism, whether self-directed or from others,

without generating feelings of superiority. The context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning is also an important domain for examining assertive behaviour, particularly in conversational interaction. Hastuti & Wijayanto (2023), who examined politeness strategies in the assertive speech acts of Indonesian EFL learners, found that learners tend to select positive or negative politeness strategies, while bald-on-record strategies are rarely used in English conversational interaction. Meanwhile, Wijayanto & Hastuti (2021), who examined the communication strategies of Indonesian EFL learners in conversation classes, further strengthen the understanding of how English language students form and adapt their communication strategies during verbal interaction. From a broader perspective, the shift from an aggressive to an assertive communication style is war educating unnecessary conflict (Maloney & Moore, 2020). These findings indicate that the study of assertive communication style is relevant to various groups, including students in teacher-education programs for language instruction.

Students of the English Language Education Study Program constitute an important population for investigating assertive communication because they are preparing to become future English teachers whose professional responsibilities require effective interpersonal communication, classroom interaction, and collaborative engagement. During teacher preparation, these students frequently participate in presentations, discussions, peer collaboration, teaching simulations, and practicum activities that demand the ability to express ideas confidently while respecting the opinions of others. Assertive communication is therefore essential for fostering positive classroom relationships, providing constructive feedback, managing conflicts, and creating supportive learning environments (Samfira, 2020). Furthermore, prospective English teachers are expected to model appropriate communication behaviours that encourage students' participation and confidence in language learning (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Despite its importance, limited research has specifically explored how English Language Education students demonstrate assertive communication in authentic daily interactions. Investigating this population can provide valuable insights into their communication strengths and areas requiring further development, thereby informing teacher education programs in designing communication training that better prepares future educators for professional practice.

Nevertheless, research that specifically describes the assertive communication style of English Language Education students in everyday verbal interaction (outside the context of formal classroom learning) remains limited. This study therefore aims to fill that gap by providing an in-depth description of how English Language Education students apply assertive communication style in their verbal interactions. This study aims to describe the forms and the factors influencing the assertive communication style of English Language Education students in their everyday verbal interactions.

Historically, the concept of assertiveness is rooted in the classic work of Alberti and Emmons in *Your Perfect Right: Assertiveness and Equality in Your Life and Relationships*, first published in 1970 and regarded as the grand theory underlying the study of assertive behaviour to this day (Alberti & Emmons, 2017). Alberti & Emmons (2017) define assertive behaviour as an individual's action in defending their personal rights and expressing their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs directly, honestly, and appropriately to the context, while still respecting the rights and feelings of others, without violating the rights of others. This foundational framework subsequently became the basis for various later developments in assertiveness theory, including the multidimensional reformulation proposed by Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025). The theory of assertive communication is rooted in classical behavioural literature and has been substantially reformulated through the multidimensional assertiveness framework developed by Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025). According to Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025), assertive behaviour is an individual's action in defending their personal rights and interests and in expressing their thoughts and feelings honestly and directly, without excessive anxiety, while still respecting the rights of

others. This theory serves as a fundamental reference for much contemporary research on assertive communication style, including further development by Samfira (2020). Assertive communication style is an individual's ability to express thoughts, feelings, and needs openly and directly, while still safeguarding the rights and feelings of others (Samfira, 2020). This style differs from a passive communication style, which tends to avoid conflict and give in, as well as from an aggressive communication style, which tends to dominate and disregard the rights of others (Dunbar et al., 2022).

Assertive communication allows an individual to convey their needs directly without violating the rights of others, and thus tends to produce healthier relationships than aggressive communication, which—although effective in the short term—often triggers conflict and damages relationships (Maloney & Moore, 2020). The communication style used by both instructors and learners has been shown to influence psychological and academic variables, including self-confidence and language learning achievement (Ogunyemi & Olagbaju, 2020). This is highly relevant for English Language Education students, who will eventually become teachers themselves, making the mastery of assertive communication style an important competency that needs to be cultivated from the university years onward.

In the practice of verbal interaction in English, politeness strategies also shape the way EFL learners convey assertive speech acts, with a tendency toward positive and negative politeness strategies rather than direct, unmitigated strategies (Hastuti & Wijayanto, 2023). Research on assertive communication has also developed within Indonesia's social and organizational contexts. Studies in organizational settings show that a leader's assertive communication style contributes to employee performance (Raka et al., 2023). Within the context of social relationships, assertive communication is understood as a strategy of communicating openly and firmly while still respecting the interlocutor, with the aim of obtaining and offering mutual respect and opening space for compromise when differing needs arise (de la Torre et al., 2021).

Engagement in interactional behaviour among English Language Education students has also been examined in technology-mediated learning contexts. Kusriandi et al. (2022) investigated the learning engagement of five English Language Education students at a private university in Cirebon, West Java, during online lectures conducted through digital literacy tools such as Schoology. Using a qualitative approach combining questionnaires and interviews, the study found that all five participants exhibited behavioural engagement, evidenced by attentiveness, participation in class discussion, and effort in completing assignments, and that all five also exhibited cognitive engagement through the use of learning strategies to understand course material. Emotional engagement, however, was less consistent: only three participants reported feeling motivated and interested during online classes, while two participants indicated that online interaction felt less engaging than face-to-face communication. This finding suggests that even in the absence of embodied verbal cues, students' willingness to participate and sustain effort in an interaction is shaped by individual and contextual factors, a pattern that parallels the variation in non-verbal assertive behaviour observed among the subjects of the present study. Language competence among English Language Education students at this institution has also been examined from a translation perspective; Mahmud & Wirabhakti (2024) found that literal translation and calque were the procedures most frequently relied upon by student translators when rendering Indonesian and English texts, underscoring the broader cross-linguistic challenges these students navigate alongside their verbal communication skills.

Based on the review above, students' assertive communication style can be analysed through seven main indicators: (1) openness, (2) use of "I" statements, (3) respect for one's own rights and the rights of others, (4) non-aggressive firmness, (5) active listening ability, (6) supporting non-verbal behaviour, and (7) contextual appropriateness (empathic assertion), which

collectively form the basis for developing the research instrument as described in the Method section.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, aiming to describe students' assertive communication style in depth and in context rather than to test causal relationships between variables, as qualitative descriptive research is intended to provide a comprehensive account of participants' experiences and behaviors in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research subjects were four students of the English Language Education Study Program in Cirebon, selected using a purposive sampling technique on the consideration that they had completed a number of communication-related courses and possessed fairly intensive experience in academic interaction. Purposive sampling enables researchers to select information-rich participants who can provide relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015).

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The observations were conducted during classroom discussions, presentations, and informal academic interactions to capture students' naturally occurring assertive communication behaviors. A structured observation guideline based on verbal and non-verbal assertive communication indicators was used to ensure systematic and consistent data collection (Cohen et al., 2018). Each participant was observed on multiple occasions to increase the credibility of the findings and to minimize the influence of situational factors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually after the observation sessions and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. The interviews explored participants' understanding of assertive communication, their experiences in expressing opinions, handling disagreements, and maintaining respectful interactions with others. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences while enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions for clarification, which is a key strength of semi-structured interviewing in qualitative research (Kallio et al., 2016). With participants' informed consent, selected classroom interactions and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and documentation were used to complement the observation and interview data, supporting data triangulation and enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.

The research instrument was developed based on the seven indicators of assertive communication style, adapted from recent empirical findings (de la Torre et al., 2021; Dunbar et al., 2022; Hastuti & Wijayanto, 2023; Maloney & Moore, 2020; Samfira, 2020; Winer et al., 2025; Yoshinaga & Cooper, 2025), and validated through expert judgement. Data were analysed using an interactive qualitative analysis model comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Mezmir, 2020). Data trustworthiness was obtained through source triangulation (observation, interviews, and documentation) as well as member checking with the informants.

Research Instrument

Table 1

Indicator	Descriptor	Theoretical Source	Observation Item No.	Interview Item No.
Openness	Expressing thoughts and feelings honestly and directly	Samfira (2020)	1, 2	1
Use of "I" Statements	Using phrases such as "I feel...", "in my opinion..."	Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025)	3	2

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Respect for One's Own Rights and the Rights of Others	Expressing opinions without demeaning the interlocutor	de la Torre et al. (2021)	4, 5	3
Non-Aggressive Assertiveness	Refusing/agreeing firmly without a confrontational tone	Maloney & Moore (2020)	6	4
Active Listening	Responding to and valuing the interlocutor's opinion	Winer et al. (2025)	7	5
Supporting Non-Verbal Behavior	Eye contact, stable tone of voice, open posture	Dunbar et al. (2022)	8, 9	6
Contextual Appropriateness (Empathic Assertion)	Acknowledging the interlocutor's feelings before expressing one's own opinion	Hastuti & Wijayanto (2023)	10	7

The structured observation guideline covers ten observed aspects, distributed across the following seven indicators: openness (expressing opinions openly without hesitation; expressing feelings honestly according to context); "I" statements (using "I"-based sentences when expressing opinions); respect for one's own and others' rights (valuing the interlocutor's opinion despite disagreement; not dominating or interrupting others' speech); non-aggressive firmness (able to refuse or agree to something firmly and politely); active listening (giving active responses – nodding, verbal confirmation – while listening); supporting non-verbal behaviour (maintaining appropriate eye contact while speaking; stable tone and intonation, neither excessively raised nor flat); and contextual appropriateness/empathic assertion (acknowledging the interlocutor's feelings before expressing one's own opinion). Each aspect was recorded as "Yes," "No," or accompanied by descriptive notes.

Table 2. Observation Result

No.	Variable	Indicator	Aspect Observed	Yes	No	Descriptive Notes
1	Assertive Communication Style	Openness	Expressing opinions openly without hesitation			
2			Expressing feelings honestly according to context			
3		"I" Statement	Using "I"-based sentences when expressing opinions			
4		Respect for Own and Others' Rights	Valuing the interlocutor's opinion despite disagreement			
5			Not dominating or interrupting others' speech			
6		Firm but Non-Aggressive Attitude	Able to refuse or agree to something firmly and politely			
7		Active Listening	Giving active responses (nodding, verbal confirmation) while listening			
8		Supporting Non-Verbal Behavior	Maintaining appropriate eye contact while speaking			
9			Stable tone and intonation, not excessively raised or flat			
10		Contextual Appropriateness (Empathic Assertion)	Acknowledging the interlocutor's feelings before expressing one's own opinion			

Instrument validity was obtained through expert judgement from the supervising lecturers, who reviewed the correspondence between the indicators, descriptors, and observation/interview items with the theoretical framework of Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025) and recent empirical findings (Dunbar et al., 2022; Samfira, 2020). Reliability in this qualitative study was understood in terms of dependability and credibility, pursued through source triangulation (observation, interviews, documentation) and member checking with informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation aligned with the subjects' actual experience. For one subject, the audio quality of the interview recording was not entirely clear, making some utterances difficult to transcribe verbatim; under such conditions, field notes and the researcher's contextual understanding could still yield data adequate for thematic analysis, as demonstrated by Rutakumwa et al. (2020), who found that transcripts derived from audio recordings and those compiled from direct notes can yield comparable data quality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved four students of the English Language Education Study Program as subjects. The researcher assigned the codes Subject 1, Subject 2, Subject 3, and Subject 4 to protect the informants' identities. All four subjects were selected through a purposive sampling technique. All subjects had completed communication-related courses and possessed intensive experience in academic interaction. The researcher collected complete observation data, documentation of recorded verbal interactions, and semi-structured interview transcripts for analysis. The researcher conducted observations using a structured observation guideline comprising ten behavioural aspects.

Table 1 Summarizes the Observation Results Regarding the Presence of Assertive Communication Style Indicators Across the Four Subjects

No.	Indicator / Aspect Observed	Subject 1	Subject 2	Subject 3	Subject 4
1	Expressing opinions openly without hesitation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Expressing feelings honestly according to context	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
3	Using "I"-based sentences when expressing opinions	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Valuing the interlocutor's opinion despite disagreement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Not dominating or interrupting others' speech	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Able to refuse or agree to something firmly and politely	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	Giving active responses (nodding, verbal confirmation) while listening	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	Maintaining appropriate eye contact while speaking	No	No	Yes	No
9	Stable tone and intonation, not excessively raised or flat	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Acknowledging the interlocutor's feelings before expressing one's own opinion	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Subject 1 displayed eight of the ten observed aspects. Subject 1 did not display active responses while listening and did not maintain appropriate eye contact while speaking. Subject 2 displayed nine aspects. The only aspect not present in Subject 2 was the ability to maintain appropriate eye contact while speaking. Subject 3 displayed nine behavioural aspects. Subject 3 did not display the aspect of expressing feelings honestly according to context. However, Subject 3 was the only subject who displayed full eye contact and a stable tone of voice. Subject 4 displayed nine behavioural aspects, with a success rate of 90%. Based on the actual observation instrument sheet, Subject 4 showed high consistency in the verbal and vocal aspects. The only aspect not present in Subject 4 was maintaining appropriate eye contact while speaking (item number 8). This non-verbal pattern was similar to the findings for Subject 1 and Subject 2. Overall, all four subjects showed a strong tendency toward a verbal assertive communication style. Behavioural gaps emerged on the non-verbal dimension, particularly regarding eye contact, which tended to be absent in the majority of subjects.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to explore each informant's subjective understanding. The following narrative presents the interview results organized around the seven main indicators: 1) Openness. Subject 1 and Subject 2 exhibited a similar pattern of openness. They chose to listen to the interlocutor's opinion before openly expressing their own views. Subject 3 also listened fully to the interlocutor but tended to give in to avoid debate. Subject 4 expressed his own feelings first before confidently presenting his opinion when it differed from the interlocutor's view. This data is consistent with the field observation results. 2) Use of "I" Statements. Subject 2 consistently used "I" statements during discussions. Subject 1 used such phrases only situationally, in formal contexts. Subject 3 used "I" statements to clarify the boundaries of his personal viewpoint so that it would not appear vague. Subject 4 was able to provide a direct example of applying this in verbal interaction, expressing his personal opinion on the importance of proper school management at the regional level in order to avoid corrupt practices. 3) Respect for One's Own Rights and the Rights of Others. Subject 1 and Subject 2 displayed a non-defensive attitude when the interlocutor rejected their opinion. Subject 3 chose to remain silent and avoid escalating conflict when the situation grew tense. Subject 4 responded to rejection by first offering appreciation to the interlocutor. Subject 4 would follow the other person's opinion if it was based on genuine facts; however, Subject 4 would still explain his own view if the interlocutor's line of thinking did not align with his own.

The result also shows 4) Non-Aggressive Firmness. Subject 1 and Subject 2 conveyed refusals briefly, honestly, and with concrete reasons, without a confrontational tone. Subject 3 conveyed refusals with longer sentences and repeated apologies. Subject 4 declined a friend's invitation using a highly structured pattern: first thanking the person for the invitation, then explaining that he already had a prior commitment with another group, and closing the refusal by expressing willingness to join on another occasion. 5) Active Listening. Subject 2 and Subject 4 showed consistency between their verbal self-report and the direct observation results. Subject 1 exhibited a gap, claiming to be an active listener even though this behaviour was not observed in practice. Subject 4 provided a concrete example when responding to a differing opinion about a character analysis regarded as weak for being gentle in demeanour, explaining his argument logically without judging others' views during the discussion. 6) Supporting Non-Verbal Behaviour. Subject 1, Subject 2, and Subject 4 conceptually understood the importance of non-verbal aspects such as intonation and facial expression. However, these three subjects did not display appropriate eye contact during interaction. Subject 4 gave a brief verbal confirmation of his awareness of how intonation affects message clarity. Only Subject 3 showed full alignment between verbal understanding and actual eye-contact practice in the field. 7) Contextual Appropriateness (Empathic Assertion). All subjects demonstrated the ability to detect the interlocutor's feelings. Subject 1 acted adaptively based on the interlocutor's level of sensitivity.

Subject 3 applied a layered feedback technique (sandwich feedback) to mitigate offense. Subject 4 chose to express his opinion carefully so that the interlocutor would understand the intent of the message while still feeling respected.

Discussion

The observation findings for all four subjects are broadly consistent with the concept of assertive behaviour proposed by Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025), namely the ability to defend one's personal rights and interests and to express thoughts and feelings honestly and directly without excessive anxiety, while still respecting the rights of others. The dominant presence of the indicators of openness, "I" statements, respect for rights, firmness, and contextual appropriateness across all four subjects indicates that the verbal aspect of assertive behaviour, as conceptualized by Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025), has been reasonably well internalized in the verbal interactions of English Language Education students.

Nevertheless, the absence of appropriate eye contact in Subjects 1, 2, and 4 warrants attention. Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025) emphasize that assertive behaviour is determined not only by the content of the verbal message but also by supporting non-verbal behaviour such as eye contact, posture, and a stable tone of voice, since misalignment between verbal and non-verbal messages can weaken the firmness of the message conveyed. This finding aligns with the emphasis placed by Dunbar et al. (2022) on the role of vocal and non-verbal behaviour in interpersonal conflict situations, and further reinforces the relevance of Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025) assertiveness framework as a key reference for assessing the completeness of assertive behaviour, not merely at the verbal level. With three of the four subjects showing the same pattern, the weakness in eye contact appears more prominent than a case-by-case occurrence; nevertheless, Subject 3 displayed both non-verbal aspects (eye contact and stable intonation) fully, indicating that weakness on the non-verbal dimension remains an individual matter rather than an absolute characteristic uniform across all students studied.

The tendency to avoid eye contact in three of the four subjects can also be interpreted within the context of Indonesian communication culture, in which overly intense eye contact is sometimes regarded as disrespectful toward an interlocutor of higher seniority or status. Studies on non-verbal communication in the Indonesian context further confirm that non-verbal cues such as eye contact carry cultural meanings that govern respect and politeness in everyday interaction (Ramdani et al., 2024). Accordingly, the application of Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025) non-verbal indicators needs to take local cultural context into account, in line with the notion of contextual appropriateness (empathic assertion) proposed by Hastuti & Wijayanto (2023). Even so, the full presence of eye contact in Subject 3 shows that cultural factors alone are insufficient to explain this variation; individual characteristics such as communicative confidence and social experience may also play a role, indicating a need for further study with a larger number of subjects.

The interview results also reveal a gap between conceptual understanding and actual practice on the indicators of non-verbal behaviour and active listening, although this gap was not experienced uniformly by all subjects. Subjects 1 and 2 verbally understood the importance of intonation, facial expression, and eye contact in assertive communication, yet eye contact remained unobserved in both; Subject 1 even reported himself as an active listener despite this behaviour not being directly observed. Subject 4 gave a more concise verbal confirmation of his awareness of the influence of intonation and eye contact, yet eye contact likewise remained unobserved in his case – a pattern similar to Subjects 1 and 2, albeit with a lower degree of verbal elaboration. In contrast, Subject 3's verbal conviction regarding the importance of eye contact was fully consistent with the non-verbal behaviour observed. This verbal-behavioural gap in Subjects 1, 2, and 4, contrasted with the full alignment in Subject 3, is consistent with Yoshinaga & Cooper

(2025) emphasis that the effectiveness of assertive behaviour is determined by the alignment between what a person believes and states and how the message is actually conveyed non-verbally; such misalignment risks producing mixed messages that can weaken the firmness of communication even when the verbal content itself is already assertive.

The findings for Subject 3 also enrich the understanding of the contextual appropriateness (empathic assertion) indicator. The use of a layered feedback technique (the "Berger principle"/sandwich feedback)—beginning with appreciation, followed by criticism in the middle, and closing with a suggestion—represents a concrete strategy for maintaining one's right to express an opinion while respecting the interlocutor's feelings, and stands as the most explicit illustration among the four subjects of the empathic assertion principle proposed by Hastuti & Wijayanto (2023). On the other hand, Subject 3's tendency to avoid confrontation when disagreement escalates shows that students' assertive communication style does not always appear fully and consistently across all dimensions; an individual can be highly assertive on one indicator (for example, non-verbal behaviour and empathic assertion) yet tend to be accommodating or avoidant on another indicator (respect for rights during open conflict), consistent with Yoshinaga & Cooper (2025) view that assertiveness is a situational skill that can be developed, rather than a fixed personality trait.

CONCLUSION

English Language Education students generally demonstrated a strong assertive communication style in the verbal dimension, characterized by openness, the use of "I" statements, respect for their own rights and those of others, non-aggressive firmness, and contextual appropriateness through empathic assertion. Variation was more evident in the non-verbal dimension. Subjects 1, 2, and 4 maintained limited but appropriate eye contact, while Subject 3 consistently displayed strong eye contact and stable intonation, reflecting greater confidence in interpersonal communication. Triangulation of observation and interview data revealed discrepancies between participants' self-perceptions and their actual communication behaviors, particularly regarding active listening. It also identified Subject 3's layered feedback technique as the most reflective example of empathic assertion. These findings support Yoshinaga and Cooper's (2025) framework, which argues that effective assertive communication depends on the balanced integration of verbal and non-verbal behaviors while recognizing individual differences in its development. However, the study was limited by its small sample size and single institutional context. Future research should involve more diverse participants across multiple institutions and examine cultural, educational, and personal factors influencing assertive communication development.

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