

“I Felt That My Well-Being Was Important to the Teacher”: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Emotional Experiences of EFL Learners

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Abstract This study explored Iranian university students' best and worst experiences in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, examining their antecedents and emotional responses. A qualitative phenomenological design was conducted with 62 convenience-sampled Iranian students (20 male, 42 female), aged 18–27, enrolled in a general English course. Adapting the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), the researchers elicited learners' emotional experiences via a narrative frame and analyzed the data inductively using MAXQDA. Findings revealed three major insights: the best experiences were associated with the teacher as a source of affective support, a positive and humanized learning environment, and moments of personal triumph and competence. The worst experiences involved public failure, negative interpersonal dynamics, negative test experiences, impairment of student well-being, and feelings of language incompetence. Enjoyment emerged as the predominant positive emotion, whereas hopelessness was the most frequent negative one. The study offers implications for promoting emotional well-being in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: *Achievement Emotions, EFL Classroom, Emotional Experience, Positive Psychology*

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1. Introduction

Emotions are present everywhere in our daily lives (Frenzel et al., 2023), including in educational settings, where the feeling precedes the learning (Cardozo et al., 2024). Learners and teachers spend many years of their lives in the classroom, and this academic setting is of great importance to them, leading to the development of deep positive/negative emotional experiences (Pekrun et al., 2007). In the context of foreign language learning, it has been found that learners' emotions can affect their motivation, attitudes, and academic achievements (Dewaele et al., 2023a; Shao et al., 2020).

According to Dewaele and Li (2020), the research phase on Positive and Negative Emotions in SLA studies began in the early 2010s, and the growing interest in language learning psychology is evidenced by the increasing number of publications and conferences dedicated to the captivating topic of emotions (Dewaele & Li, 2020). Before that for decades the center of attention was the emotion of anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2008; MacIntyre, 2017) and the expansion of the range was explored recently (Dewaele et al., 2023a; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Fang & Tang, 2021; Shao et al., 2020), especially with the advent of positive psychology, known at the subjective level as a field about “*valued subjective experiences*” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Despite the growing literature on positive and negative emotions of EFL learners, there have been limited studies examining the learners' positive and negative emotional experiences, their antecedents, and the emotional responses to these incidents. Furthermore, emotional responses to English learning are culturally dependent phenomena (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Previous studies on EFL learners' emotions in Iran have predominantly explored individual or a limited range of emotions (e.g., Amiri et al., 2022; Nemati et al., 2020), yet they have rarely examined what classroom events trigger these emotions or how learners respond to them. Therefore, examining the uniqueness of emotional experiences of Iranian learners in EFL classrooms is crucial.

The present study attempted to fill the research gap by exploring the best and worst experiences of Iranian EFL learners in the classroom alongside the sources of and emotional responses to these incidents. Adopting a qualitative methodology, this research was conducted on university students in Iran and

aimed at examining their positive and negative emotional experiences in general English classrooms. It is hoped that the present study may help learners experience less negative and more positive emotions in EFL classes, thereby enhancing their psychological well-being. The study aimed to address two research questions. First, what are the sources of the best and the worst emotional experiences in the classroom based on Iranian English as a foreign language learners' perceptions? Second, what types of emotions do Iranian learners experience in English as a Foreign Language classrooms?

2. Literature Review

2.1. An overview of emotion research in SLA

According to [Dewaele and Li \(2020\)](#), in the field of second language learning, three phases can be distinguished in research on learners' emotional experiences based on the dominant types of emotions studied: In the initial phase, the study of emotions was largely avoided. In the second phase, scholarly focus was predominantly limited to the investigation of anxiety. During the final phase, both positive and negative emotions were investigated ([Dewaele & Li, 2020](#)). Based on [Pekrun et al. \(2002\)](#), students experience nine positive and negative emotions –encompassing enjoyment, anxiety, boredom, anger, relief, pride, hope, hopelessness, and shame– frequently in the academic setting, which is known as academic emotions. However, many of these emotions have received scant attention from L2 emotion researchers ([Shao et al., 2019](#)). Anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom were the most prevalent types of academic emotions that have been investigated in FL studies ([Botes et al., 2024](#); [Dewaele et al., 2023b](#); [Fang & Tang, 2021](#); [Li, 2022](#)).

As Botes et al. (2024) mentioned, most studies in this context have considered emotions as a variable that is used to predict outcomes such as learners' test scores, but in recent times, the subjective experiences of the learners within the FL classroom setting have received greater attention because of the incorporation of positive psychology into the FL research domain. This incorporation has led to considering emotions as an output variable because the holistic well-being of learners is as important as the ultimate aim of achievement in language learning ([Botes et al., 2024](#)). Well-being is regarded as the main topic of positive psychology. [Seligman \(2011\)](#) introduced the well-being theory and formulated the five-dimensional

PERMA model of well-being, which consists of positive emotion (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A). In the field of language learning, Oxford (2016) revised Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, which primarily emphasized positive emotions, and developed a new theoretical framework called EMPATHICS, encompassing nine psychological dimensions: emotion and empathy (E), meaning and motivation (M), perseverance (P), agency and autonomy (A), time (T), hardiness and habits of mind (H), intelligence (I), character strengths (C), and self-factors (S). Oxford (2016) also argued for adopting a holistic approach that considers both positive and negative emotions.

2.2. Empirical studies on learners' emotional experiences

There are not many studies that have placed the learner's emotional experiences at the center of attention, examining the frequency and antecedents of various positive and negative emotions. In relation to this field, Fitriani et al. (2017) investigated the negative emotional experiences of problematic students in the EFL classroom using the method of case study. It was found that anxiety was the most prevalent negative emotion experienced by the students, followed by hopelessness, anger, and boredom. This study further reported that students' low English ability, material difficulty, material repetition, classroom environment, student-teacher relationships, and student-peer relationships were found to be stimulating factors of negative emotions in this research (Fitriani et al., 2017). In another analysis of emotion frequency, the results of a qualitative research by Piniel and Albert (2018) indicate that the English major students experience enjoyment and language anxiety more than other emotions in the context of foreign language use. In this regard, the interviews of advanced EFL learners about the emotions that they felt in English class during the semester showed that enjoyment was the most reported emotion, followed by hope, pride, relief, anger, and boredom (Reilly, 2021). In a related vein, the findings of interview data in a study by Liu et al. (2024) on classroom emotions of Chinese university students revealed that the most common emotions students experienced in the class were anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom as a result of internal and external factors. In another study, Uysal and Güven (2018) employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the sources of the negative emotions according to EFL students and instructors. It was found

that negative feelings of students are rooted in four principal classifications, namely: teacher-oriented (e.g., inappropriate teacher behavior), classroom-oriented factors (e.g., disruptive behaviors of the students), system-oriented factors (e.g., curriculum problems), and student-oriented factors (e.g., preconceived notions). In a qualitative study, [Ramezanzadeh et al. \(2017\)](#) explored the emotional lives of Iranian EFL teachers and learners and reported that caring, love, anger, and anxiety were the most dominant emotions among them.

In relation to the research question regarding the sources of enjoyment and anxiety in foreign language classrooms according to the learners, [Jiang and Dewaele \(2019\)](#) reported that English language anxiety in the classroom primarily results from the learner, whereas enjoyment is more triggered by the teacher. Similarly, in a qualitative part of a study by [Yeşilçınar and Erdemir \(2023\)](#), the sources of foreign language enjoyment and anxiety were explored in a Turkish context. It has been indicated that enjoyment is more dependent on the learner-external variables in comparison to internal ones. Enjoyment originates from personal, peers, teachers, teaching methodology, and institution factors, and triggers for anxiety originate from personal, peers, teachers, and teaching methodology. According to a qualitative study by [Sun \(2024\)](#) on Chinese college students, learners' gaps with peers, fear of making mistakes and losing face, and exam worries are the antecedents of anxiety. Conversely, learners' progress and their outstanding peers are enjoyment-provoking elements in speaking classrooms. Furthermore, the analysis of the qualitative part of a study by [Gan and Ma \(2025\)](#) on foreign language enjoyment and anxiety of Chinese high school students showed that the emotion of enjoyment stems from utilizing authentic English and recognition of self, teacher, and peers. In contrast, factors including mistakes in assignments and lack of lesson preparedness contribute to anxious experiences in this investigation. In a related subject domain, [Liang \(2025\)](#) conducted a qualitative longitudinal study examining the affective responses of five college students over 18 months. The results demonstrated that worries about failure and vulnerability to teacher evaluations stimulate High-arousal emotions, including doubt and fear. Also, in relation to language-learning experiences, [Oxford \(1989\)](#) investigated the best and worst experiences of learners and emotional responses to these episodes. In this research, the

characteristics of best experiences were summarized in several groups (e.g., teacher support situations), and various situations were identified as the characteristics of worst experiences (e.g., intense emphasis on grades).

2.3. Theoretical framework

Despite the current turn in research on foreign language learners' emotional experiences, studies exploring the diversity of positive and negative classroom emotions of EFL learners and their antecedents have remained scarce. Therefore, considering the significance of learners' emotional experiences in the foreign language classroom and the existing research shortage in this area, along with the influence of cultural contexts on learners' emotional responses, this study focuses on Iranian learners' best and worst experiences in the foreign language classroom, including their antecedents and the emotional responses to these incidents.

According to [Pekrun's \(2006\)](#) control–value theory of achievement emotions, the perceived control over learning processes and outcomes, together with the subjective value attached to those activities and results, play a central role in shaping learners' emotional experiences. Nine academic emotions—including enjoyment, pride, and hope as positive emotions, and anxiety, boredom, anger, relief, hopelessness, and shame as negative ones—are most frequently experienced by students in academic contexts ([Pekrun et al., 2002](#)). Because each specific emotion within achievement contexts is shaped by its distinct appraisal configuration, students' emotional experiences are, therefore, domain-specific ([Pekrun, 2006](#)). In this study, control–value theory clarifies the antecedents of both positive and negative achievement emotions in EFL classrooms. [Cameron and Larsen-Freeman \(2007\)](#) describe the language classroom as a complex system that cannot be reduced to its parts, since the parts both shape and are shaped by the whole, and a systems perspective helps in understanding classroom issues more holistically. From a complex dynamic systems view, the language classroom emphasizes “interaction across interconnected levels of organization—from individual minds up to the socio-political context of language learning—and interconnected timescales—from the minute-by-minute of classroom activity to teaching and learning lifetimes” ([Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007, p. 236](#)). This dynamic conceptualization provides the foundation for viewing

learners’ emotions and interactions in this study as interconnected and context-dependent phenomena.

3. Method

This study was guided by descriptive phenomenology, a method aimed at capturing the essence of lived experience as directly reported by participants (Edmond & Kennedy, 2016). It sought to explore university students’ best and worst experiences in EFL classrooms, with a focus on the sources of and emotional responses to these incidents. Following the descriptive phenomenological principle of bracketing, the researchers consciously set aside their prior assumptions and avoided imposing external theoretical interpretations during data analysis, allowing themes to emerge inductively from participants’ narratives.

3.1. Participants and context

A total of 62 undergraduate students from a large public university in Iran participated in the study. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling. The sample included 20 male and 42 female students, aged 18 to 27. All were undergraduate students except for one doctoral student in veterinary medicine. Participants were enrolled in various disciplines, including mechanical engineering, psychology, accounting, and veterinary medicine, and were at different stages of their studies (Terms 1–9). All participants were native Persian speakers. At this institution, general English classes are primarily taught in Persian, with instructors using students’ first language for explanations. Regarding prior English learning experiences, 12 participants had only studied English in school and university; 18 had attended private language institutes for fewer than five terms, 15 for 5–10 terms, and 17 for more than 10 terms. To further contextualize participants’ linguistic backgrounds, they were asked to self-assess their English proficiency level. The distribution was as follows: beginner ($n = 2$, 3.2%), elementary ($n = 9$, 14.5%), lower-intermediate ($n = 20$, 32.2%), intermediate ($n = 16$, 25.8%), upper-intermediate ($n = 14$, 22.5%), advanced ($n = 1$, 1.6%), and very advanced ($n = 0$, 0%).

3.2. Instruments

The instrument consisted of three main components:

1. An informed consent form assuring anonymity and voluntary participation;
2. A demographic section collecting data on gender, age, academic major, term of study, and prior English learning experiences;
3. Two structured narrative prompts, one for a best memory and one for a worst memory.

To elicit consistent yet deeply personal accounts, a structured written narrative frame was developed in Persian and administered as the primary data collection instrument. Narrative frames are particularly well-suited to phenomenological inquiry because they allow participants to reflect on and articulate lived experiences in their own words, without the immediate presence or influence of the researcher (Barkhuizen, 2014). This participant-directed format facilitates the elicitation and stimulation of deeply rooted experiences and practices (Kayi-Aydar, 2021). In addition, to facilitate rich recall of emotionally significant classroom experiences, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) was employed as a narrative elicitation strategy. Participants were invited to describe specific memorable incidents, both positive and negative. This use of CIT aligns with phenomenological inquiry, as it supports participants in articulating their lived experiences in contextual and reflective detail (Hughes, 2008).

Two parallel narrative prompts were provided: one for the best memory and another for the worst experience in a general English course during the current term. Each frame began with a standardized opening sentence that participants were asked to complete, followed by guided reflective questions. The full prompts were as follows:

The best experience frame:

“The best memory I have from this term’s general English class was when, one day, ...

At that moment, I was thinking that ...

This event/experience was very important and special to me because ...”

The worst experience frame:

“The worst memory I have from this term’s general English class was when, one day, ...

At that moment, I was thinking that ...

This event/experience was very important and special to me because ...”

Following these open-ended sections, participants were presented with a structured emotion checklist based on Pekrun’s (2006) control-value theory of academic emotions. For positive incidents, they could select one or more emotions from: *enjoyment, pride, hope, or none of the above*. For negative incidents, options included: *anxiety, anger, shame, boredom, hopelessness, or none of the above*. In both cases, a final open-ended item invited participants to name any additional emotions they had experienced but that were not listed. This design ensured systematic attention to emotional dimensions while preserving space for idiosyncratic affective responses.

The instrument was pilot-tested with three experts in qualitative research and emotion studies to ensure content relevance, linguistic clarity, and alignment with phenomenological aims (Nassaji, 2020). Minor refinements were made to phrasing and formatting based on their feedback before final deployment.

3.3. Data collection

An online narrative questionnaire was administered via Porsline, a widely used and user-friendly survey platform in Iran known for its accessibility and visual appeal. Before data collection, brief oral and written explanations (via voice messages and in-class announcements) were provided to clarify the study’s purpose and guide participants in recalling meaningful episodes. The second author, an EFL university instructor in Iran, distributed the link among the general English students through official class messaging groups. Given that all participants were native Persian speakers and exhibited varying levels of English proficiency, data were collected exclusively in Persian to ensure participants could express complex emotional and cognitive experiences with nuance, accuracy, and minimal linguistic constraint.

3.4. Ethical considerations

This study received formal ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Allameh Tabataba’i University (Approval Code: IR.ATU.REC.1403.030). Before data collection, all participants were presented with a detailed digital informed consent form outlining the study’s purpose, procedures, estimated duration, voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any

time without any negative consequences. Participation was contingent upon explicit consent: respondents were required to tick a consent checkbox to confirm willingness to take part. The consent form explicitly stated that responses would remain strictly confidential and all data would be anonymized using participant codes (e.g., P.01, P.02).

3.5. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using MAXQDA software (Version 2024) following the six-phase inductive thematic analysis framework ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)):

- 1. Familiarization:** Repeated, line-by-line reading of all narratives to immerse in the data.
- 2. Initial coding:** Generating concise labels for meaningful segments related to thoughts and emotions in positive and negative incidents.
- 3. Searching for themes:** Grouping similar codes into potential overarching themes.
- 4. Reviewing themes:** Checking candidate themes against both coded extracts and the full dataset.
- 5. Defining and naming themes:** Refining theme definitions and assigning meaningful names for each theme.
- 6. Producing the report:** Writing up the findings with anonymized embedded participant excerpts using participant numbers (e.g., P. 33).

Consistent with best practices in multilingual qualitative research, all initial coding was conducted in the original language (Persian) to preserve semantic integrity and contextual subtleties. Only after the thematic structure—comprising themes, sub-themes, and associated codes—was fully developed and validated in Persian were these analytical constructs translated into English. Similarly, all illustrative excerpts included in the Findings section were translated from Persian into English. To enhance trustworthiness, a second researcher reviewed the initial codes and theme definitions. Any discrepancies in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached. Consistent with the study's descriptive phenomenological stance, the researchers maintained a neutral analytical posture, consciously setting aside personal views during coding and theme development. Finally, transferability was supported through a thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures.

4. Results

To address the first research question, which focused on the sources of the best and worst emotional experiences of Iranian EFL learners, the data were analyzed separately based on the best and the worst incidents. Each domain is further categorized into themes, sub-themes, and associated codes, with frequencies indicating how often each element appeared across the 62 participants' narratives.

4.1. Sources of best emotional experiences

As illustrated in Figure 1, regarding the sources of the best experiences, the following three themes emerged from the data: (1) the teacher as a source of affective support ($f = 93$), (2) Positive and humanized learning environment ($f = 65$), (3) Moments of personal triumph and competence ($f = 40$).

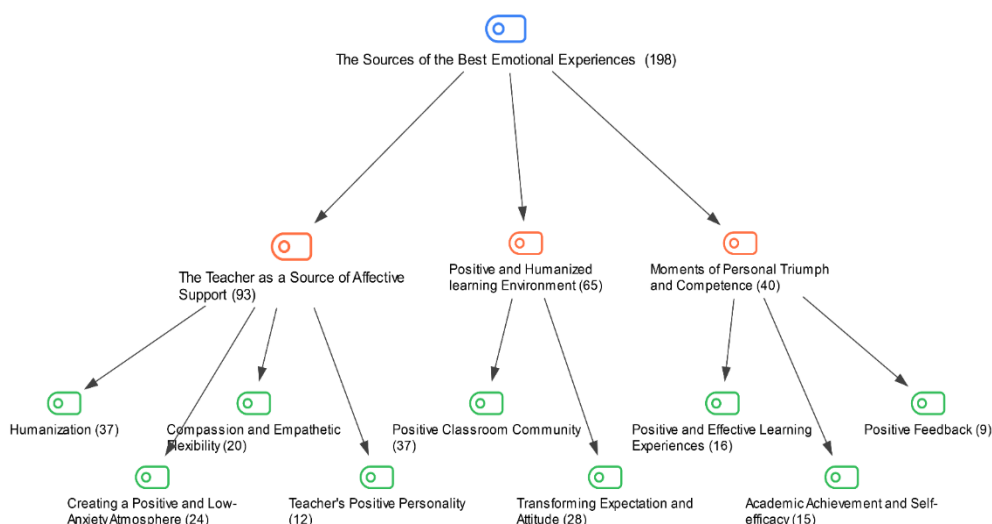


Figure 1. Sources of the best emotional experiences of Iranian EFL learners in the classroom

4.1.1. Teacher as a source of affective support

This was the most frequently reported theme, highlighting the importance of the teachers' role in the formation of students' positive emotional experiences. This theme encompassed four sub-themes:

a. Humanization: Students described teachers who demonstrated interest in their well-being, recognized and valued them as individuals, behaved in a friendly and respectful manner, and engaged in conversations beyond the curriculum. Reflecting on this, participant 33 remarked:

“How wonderful it would be if all instructors, before focusing on the lesson, first valued students as human beings and learners, making an effort to understand their personalities, psychological states, and temperaments, and adjusting their teaching accordingly to foster effective learning without leaving students constantly anxious or worried about the class or the teacher’s behavior. It was the first time I encountered someone who related to students first as friends, then as their instructor—someone who genuinely cared for the students before even thinking about the subject matter.” (P. 33)

b. Creating a positive and low-anxiety atmosphere: this sub-theme included teachers’ use of humor, efforts to create a relaxed environment, positive first impressions, and awarding bonus points. In describing such an environment, participant 11 shared:

“The instructor always broke the formality and dryness of the classroom with their sense of humor and friendly demeanor, turning language learning into a genuinely enjoyable experience.” (P. 11)

c. Compassion and empathetic flexibility: Students recalled instances of teacher flexibility, understanding, empathetic responses, support, and encouragement. Participant 17 recalled a particularly supportive interaction during a midterm exam:

“In my view, the best memory from that class was during the midterm. We were really struggling emotionally, and the instructor kept reassuring us, ‘It’s okay—I’ll give you a chance to make up for it; don’t cry. With your effort, you’ll get where you need to be.’ I also remember once telling the instructor directly, ‘I’m exhausted—I don’t understand anything; I’m just slow.’ Their response was incredibly kind: ‘You’re not slow. You’re capable. You can do this.’” (P. 17)

Participant 36 described a moment of understanding during a reading task:

“When the instructor asked me to read the passage and I said I wasn’t ready, they calmly accepted my hesitation and kindly assigned the reading to me for the next session instead.” (P. 36)

d. Teacher's positive personality: Participants referred to the teacher’s overall positive personality as a meaningful aspect of their classroom experience. Participant 12 contrasted their expectations with reality:

“Based on my past experiences in middle and high school English classes, I expected to face someone rigid, authoritarian, arrogant, and overly serious, which filled me with fear and anxiety. But the opposite happened entirely. I met a person who was remarkably humble, calm, spirited, and full of humor!” (P. 12)

4.1.2. Positive and humanized learning environment

This theme encompassed students’ accounts of positive experiences that arose from the classroom setting itself. It comprised two sub-themes:

a. Positive classroom community: It included descriptions of an intimate classroom environment, joyful atmosphere, opportunities for social interaction, the presence of a friend or relative in class, and in-class birthday celebrations with shared sweets. As participant 11 put it:

“That friendly atmosphere made language learning feel easier for me. I didn’t feel like I was in a stiff, formal setting—rather, it was as if I were learning English alongside my friends.” (P. 11)

b. Transforming expectation and attitude: It included accounts of unexpectedly positive classroom experiences and a renewed or improved attitude toward the English class. Participant 5 recounted a day that defied their expectations:

“After a grueling day at university—having taken a pure math exam and done physical training right before the general English class—I assumed I’d go home with a headache, even more exhausted. But I actually returned home feeling better than when I’d arrived. Can you believe it? After ten hours on campus, by 8 p.m. I was still energized! That day, I understood everything in class and felt proud that I’d made

it through such a tough day so well. It was then I realized my attitude toward English and English class had truly changed.” (P. 5)

Participant 39 described a spontaneous, affirming moment:

“My best memory this term was when, during free time in the middle of class, my friends and I went out briefly for lunch but returned a bit late. Instead of getting upset, the instructor laughed and made lighthearted, humorous remarks. I was deeply moved by their kindness. In that moment, I thought to myself: how differently people can behave—and how a teacher’s words and actions can leave either a positive or negative mark on a student. This experience was especially meaningful to me because it was the first time I’d witnessed such compassion in an educational setting.” (P. 39)

4.1.3. Moments of personal triumph and competence

This theme reflected students’ accounts of experiences in which they felt successful, capable, or effective in their English learning. It comprised three sub-themes.

a. Academic achievement and self-efficacy: Students described instances of exam success, a sense of academic competence in English, and overcoming fear to gain confidence in their abilities. Participant 59 shared a moment of unexpected success: *“We had a quiz, and I hadn’t had much time to study because I had the English class that evening and needed to memorize vocabulary from two texts. Still, I didn’t skip class and took the exam. Even though I hadn’t prepared well, I scored a 19 based on my prior knowledge—and I felt incredibly proud of myself for facing the challenge head-on instead of backing down. I was one of the top students in class, having earned the highest score.” (P. 59)*

b. Positive feedback: This sub-theme included reports of receiving praise from the teacher and recognition from peers or others in the classroom. Participant 61 recalled a rewarding presentation:

“I gave a presentation on film genres and received such positive reactions from both classmates and the instructor. It was a truly enjoyable experience.” (P. 61)

c. Positive and effective learning experiences: participants recalled moments when their learning felt effective, enjoyable, or when they developed a stronger sense of efficacy in learning English. Participant 13 reflected on a breakthrough in vocabulary retention: *"My best memory from this term's general English class was when the instructor used a mnemonic keyword coding technique to teach a new word. In that moment, I thought: 'This is brilliant! With this method, I'll forget vocabulary much less often. It feels reliable—and enjoyable. I'm not getting tired of learning; in fact, I'm motivated to keep going.' This experience was deeply significant for me because I'd always struggled with memorizing words for exams—only to forget them immediately afterward and have to start over each time, which was incredibly frustrating."* (P. 13)

4.2. Sources of worst emotional experiences

As illustrated in Figure 2, regarding the sources of the worst experiences, the analysis yielded five themes: (1) Experience of Public Failure (f = 24), (2) Negative Interpersonal Dynamics (f = 21), (3) Negative Test Experiences (f = 16), (4) Impairment of Student Well-being (f = 15), and (5) Feeling of Language Incompetence (f = 5).

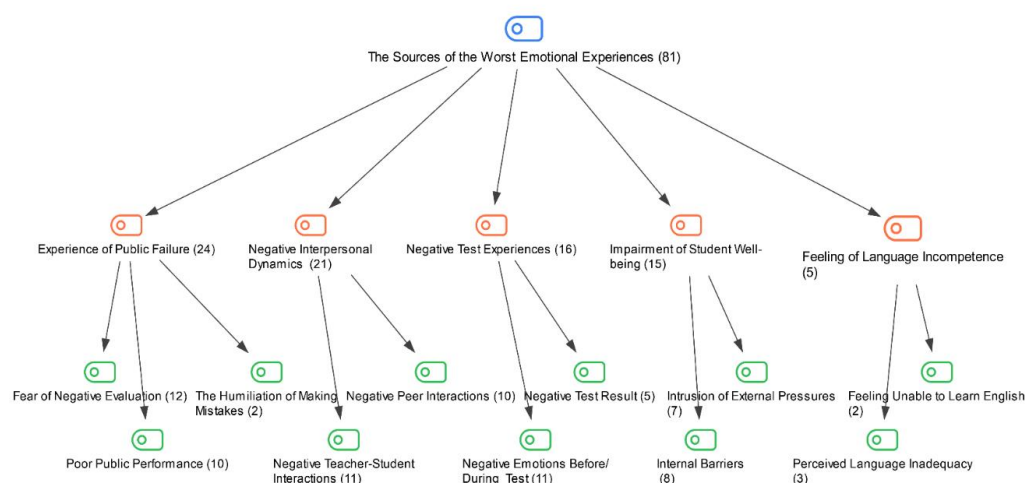


Figure 2. Sources of the worst emotional experiences of Iranian EFL learners in the classroom

4.2.1. Experience of public failure

This theme included students' accounts of situations in which they experienced fear of negative evaluation, humiliation from mistakes, or poor performance in public classroom activities. It comprised three sub-themes:

a. Fear of negative evaluation: students described concerns about being judged, disapproved of, or ridiculed by others, fear of disappointing the teacher, and worry about demonstrating incompetence. Participant 10 confided:

"I kept thinking, 'Everyone must think I'm so dumb for not knowing the meaning of such a simple word.'" (P. 10)

Participant 4 shared:

"I felt the instructor saw me as unreliable and careless—someone who didn't pay attention or care about the course. I believed they thought I was the weakest student in class, incapable of learning, and that they'd already given up on me." (P. 4)

b. The humiliation of making mistakes: This sub-theme captured reports of loss of face and being laughed at following errors in class. As participant 3 recalled:

"Once, I mispronounced a word, and it was repeated several times—causing others to laugh." (P. 3)

c. Poor public performance: Students recalled moments of underperformance, stage fright, difficulty with reading, mispronunciation, mistranslation, or receiving the lowest score. Participant 12 reflected on a virtual class setback:

"During one online session, I read a passage but couldn't perform as effectively as I usually do. My delivery was full of errors, and after every sentence, I was heavily criticized. I felt terrible about myself—wondering why I couldn't answer questions as well as I normally do." (P. 12)

Participant 41 remembered:

"There was a time I misread a word during a reading activity because I was distracted—and I was so embarrassed that I kept blaming myself for days afterward." (P. 41)

4.2.2. Negative interpersonal dynamics

This theme involved reports of unhelpful or distressing interactions with peers and the teacher. It comprised two sub-themes:

a. Negative peer interactions: Students described disruptive behavior, unfairness, feeling misunderstood or socially isolated, and conflict with classmates. Participant 48 described a frustrating classmate:

“A new student sat in front of me and either kept making irrelevant comments, cracking silly jokes, or doing things even high schoolers wouldn’t do during class.” (P. 48)

b. Negative teacher-student interactions: this sub-theme included feeling misunderstood by the teacher, disruptive teacher behavior, criticism, perceived indifference or dislike, fear of teacher judgment, and lack of support. Participant 3 recounted a disheartening conversation:

“I once spoke with the instructor about my absences and tried to explain my situation, but no matter how clearly I spoke, it felt as though no one was listening—or as if I were speaking a different language. Although the conversation ended calmly, I left feeling deeply discouraged by their response.” (P. 3)

4.2.3. Negative test experiences

This theme referred to difficulties and distress related to quizzes and exams. It comprised two sub-themes:

a. Negative emotions before/during test: Students reported being unable to answer questions, feeling unprepared, and worrying about exam performance. Participant 17 shared:

“My worst memory was during that quiz—I felt so stupid because I thought I knew everything, but when the exam started, my mind just went blank.” (P. 17)

b. Negative test result: this sub-theme described receiving a lower score than peers, an unexpected low score, and being late for the exam, resulting in losing the score. Participant 13 expressed their dismay:

“The worst memory I have from this term’s general English class was receiving a 17 on the first quiz—even though I’d studied hard and expected a perfect score.” (P. 13)

4.2.4. Impairment of student well-being

This theme described how personal and external factors interfered with students’ classroom experience. It comprised two sub-themes:

a. Intrusion of external pressures: Students mentioned disruptions from personal life issues, academic pressures, and sympathy for struggling peers. Participant 4 explained:

“I’d promised the instructor I’d read aloud in the next session and had practiced the night before. But just before class, I received devastating personal news over the phone, which completely shattered my concentration—I couldn’t bring myself to read from the text again.” (P. 4)

b. Internal barriers: this sub-theme included sickness, fatigue, initial unfamiliarity with tasks, profound distress, pre-existing language anxiety, and fear of academic failure. Participant 50 described entering an unfamiliar classroom:

“My worst memory this term was walking into a class in another department where I didn’t know anyone. As an introvert, and already carrying the anxiety I’d developed toward English classes since middle school, I sat down quietly and tried to take a deep breath.” (P. 50)

Another recalled sheer exhaustion by participant 24:

“One day, I was so tired I just wanted the class to end. Honestly, I didn’t understand anything that was happening.” (P. 24)

4.2.5. Feeling of language incompetence

This theme included students’ expressions of perceived language inadequacy and feeling unable to learn English. Participant 11 reflected:

“My worst memory this term was realizing I was falling behind the rest of the class in language learning. During one session, the instructor asked a question, and most students answered easily—but I struggled just to understand the question, let alone formulate a response.” (P. 11)

4.3. Emotional responses to the best and worst experiences

The Iranian students reported diverse positive and negative emotions in the EFL classroom. The following patterns emerged from the data.

4.3.1. Positive emotional responses

According to Figure 3, among the best experiences, students reported 21 distinct positive emotional responses. The most frequently positive emotion was enjoyment ($f = 45$), followed by hope ($f = 28$), joy ($f = 19$), pride ($f = 12$), satisfaction ($f = 4$), rapport ($f = 3$), self-efficacy ($f = 3$), self-esteem ($f = 2$), dignity ($f = 2$), method efficacy ($f = 2$), and comfort ($f = 2$). Other less frequent emotions included admiration ($f = 1$), eustress ($f = 1$), responsibility ($f = 1$), empathy ($f = 1$), cognitive freedom ($f = 1$), agency and impact ($f = 1$), mindfulness ($f = 1$), fortuity ($f = 1$), status ($f = 1$), and meaning ($f = 1$).

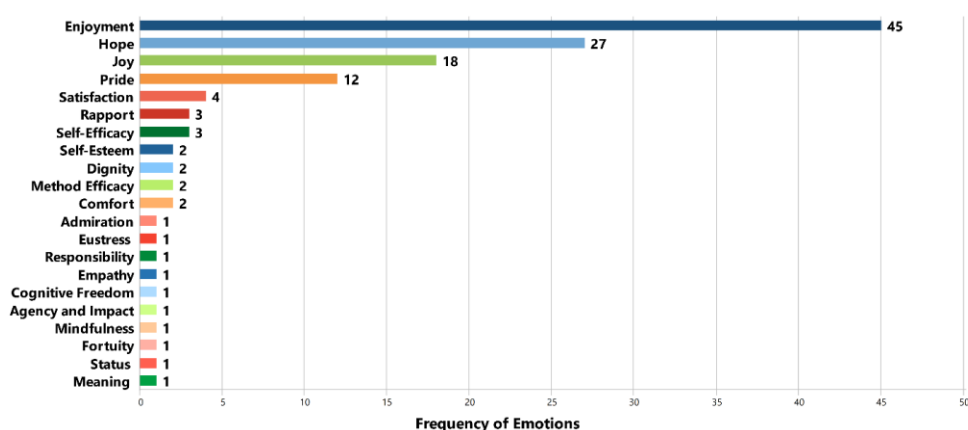


Figure 3. Iranian EFL students' emotional responses to the best classroom experiences

4.3.2. Negative emotional responses

According to Figure 4, the worst experiences were accompanied by 22 distinct negative emotional responses. The most frequently negative emotion was hopelessness ($f = 33$), followed by anxiety ($f = 27$), shame ($f = 22$), boredom ($f = 16$), anger ($f = 14$), sadness ($f = 8$), stress ($f = 7$), fear ($f = 4$), worry ($f = 3$), futility ($f = 3$), humiliation ($f = 2$), and annoyance ($f = 2$). Other less frequent emotions included confusion ($f = 1$), heartbreak ($f = 1$), regret ($f = 1$), agitation ($f = 1$), hatred ($f = 1$), resentment ($f = 1$), dejection ($f = 1$), loneliness ($f = 1$), envy ($f = 1$), and insecurity ($f = 1$).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This phenomenological research examined the best and worst experiences and emotions that were reported by 62 Iranian university students in their EFL classrooms, and yielded three major findings.

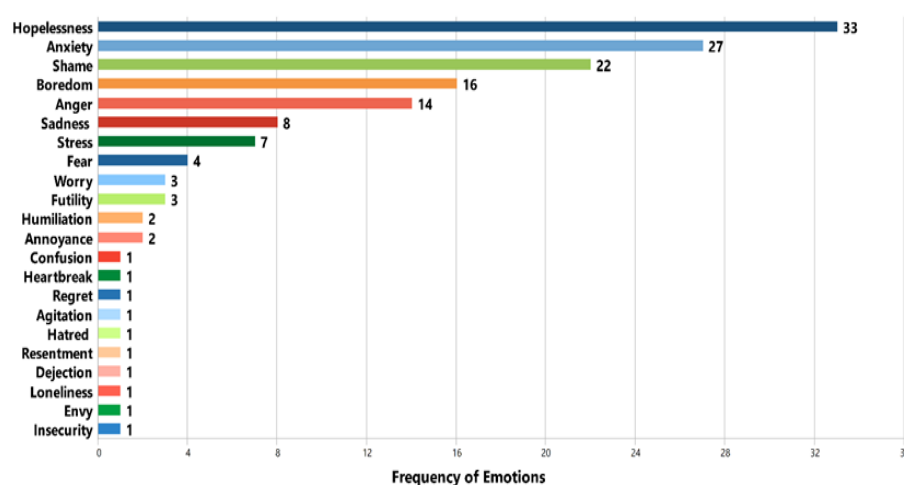


Figure 4. Iranian EFL students' emotional responses to the worst classroom experiences

First, the factors contributing to learners' best experiences encompass three main themes: (1) the teacher as a source of affective support ($f = 93$), (2) positive and humanized learning environment ($f = 65$), and (3) moments of personal triumph and competence ($f = 40$). These findings further support the idea of the critical role of external factors, especially the teacher in cultivating positive emotion of enjoyment (the most reported emotion in learners' best experiences) among foreign language learners. For example, a study by [Jiang and Dewaele \(2019\)](#) on the sources of enjoyment revealed that the emotion of enjoyment primarily stems from the teacher. In the same vein, [Yeşilçınar and Erdemir \(2022\)](#) reported that enjoyment is more dependent on the learner-external variables in comparison to internal ones. Furthermore, they

emphasized that the theme ‘teacher’ is highly related to foreign language enjoyment.

Second, with regard to the sources of learners’ worst experiences, students’ responses were categorized into five main themes: (1) experience of public failure ($f = 24$), (2) negative interpersonal dynamics ($f = 21$), (3) negative test experiences ($f = 16$), (4) impairment of student well-being ($f = 15$), and (5) the feeling of language incompetence ($f = 5$). There are similarities between the findings of the present study and previous studies that focused on the sources of anxiety (one of the most reported emotions in learners’ worst experiences). According to Sun (2024), learners’ gaps with peers, fear of making mistakes and losing face, and exam worries are the antecedents of anxiety in speaking classrooms. Similarly, fear of negative evaluation and negative emotions before/during the test are recognized as important sources of the worst experiences in the present research. In another analysis of emotion-provoking elements, students’ low English ability, material difficulty, material repetition, classroom environment, student-teacher relationships, and student-peer relationships are reported as stimulating factors of negative emotions (Fitriani et al., 2017). Uysal and Güven (2018) similarly highlighted that improper teacher behaviors, negative teacher-student relationships, and group dynamics are among the negative-emotion-provoking factors. These findings are in accord with our results, which show that negative interpersonal dynamics, including negative peer interactions and negative teacher-student interactions, are identified as key sources of negative emotions. The findings of this study also mirror those of Jiang and Dewaele (2019), who reported that exams and quizzes, bad language performance, and peer pressure are among the important antecedents of anxiety. Furthermore, results of the current study indicate that the role of teachers in the formation of negative emotions is less prominent than their role in the formation of positive emotions. This finding further supports the idea that the formation of foreign language classroom anxiety is less related to the teacher compared to the teacher’s role in triggering enjoyment (Dewaele et al., 2018; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, findings of this study show that the experience of public failure encompassing fear of negative evaluation, poor public performance, and the humiliation of making mistakes is a key antecedent of

the worst experiences of Iranian EFL learners in the classroom. A possible explanation for this might be the Iranian cultural context. In Iranian culture, the concept of *Âberu* including “*terms like reputation, face, or good name*”, is a crucial factor of personal and public life, and losing it generally is understood as a threatening element to life (Zaborowska, 2014). Furthermore, face is identified as an emotionally charged concept (Hosseini, 2022); therefore, losing it can trigger negative emotional experiences, especially in the context of Iran. It is also important to note that the results related to achievement emotions can be interpreted through the theoretical lens of the Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006). In this regard, variables such as moments of personal triumph and competence, public failure, and negative test experiences illustrate situations of high or low perceived control over learning, which consequently elicit corresponding positive or negative achievement emotions.

Third, the Iranian students experienced diverse positive and negative emotions in the EFL classroom. In this research, enjoyment was the most prevalent positive emotion reported by the students during their best experience, followed by hope, joy, and pride. These findings support previous studies, which report that students experience enjoyment more than other positive emotions in the foreign language context (Liu et al., 2024; Piniel & Albert, 2018), and that hope and pride are also prevalent among students (Reilly, 2021). In terms of worst experiences in the present study, hopelessness was the most prevalent negative emotion reported by the students, followed by anxiety, shame, boredom, and anger. There are similarities between the most prevalent negative emotions in this study and those of Fitriani et al. (2017), who found that anxiety, hopelessness, anger, and boredom were the most prevalent negative emotions during the EFL classroom with this difference that anxiety was reported as the most reported negative emotion in some previous studies (Fitriani et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2024). This may be due to the unique focus of our study on the emotional responses to the worst experiences, in contrast to previous studies that have focused only on the frequency of negative emotions in classrooms.

In conclusion, the findings have shown that the sources of best experiences were categorized into three main themes: 1) the teacher as a source of affective support, 2) positive and humanized learning environment,

3) moments of personal triumph and competence. On the other hand, the sources of worst experiences were identified as five factors: 1) experience of public failure, 2) negative interpersonal dynamics, 3) negative test experiences, 4) impairment of student well-being, and 5) the feeling of language incompetence. Furthermore, concerning best experiences, enjoyment was the most prevalent positive emotion reported by the Iranian students in EFL classrooms, followed by hope, joy, and pride. Conversely, in terms of worst experiences, hopelessness was the most prevalent negative emotion reported, followed by anxiety, shame, boredom, and anger.

These findings have important implications for both learners and teachers, who are the shapers of the emotional environment of EFL classrooms. This is particularly true for teachers, who lead the development of the positive classroom environment (Ye, 2024) and play a prominent role in fostering positive experiences (Mohammadi & Ahmadpour Kasgari, 2024; Pishghadam & Farkhondehfal, 2017). Teachers should understand, support, encourage, recognize and value each student, while also demonstrating flexibility, empathetic response, interest in student well-being, friendliness, and respect for learners in the EFL classrooms. They should also strive to create a positive and low-anxiety atmosphere. The participants in the present study identified moments of personal triumph and competence as one of the best experiences in the EFL classrooms. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers use effective and engaging teaching techniques and offer various activities for learners so that they can attain positive and effective learning experiences, leading to a sense of academic achievement and self-efficacy. In addition, it is crucial that teachers be aware of the antecedents of negative emotional experiences of students, such as feeling misunderstood by the teacher, disruptive teacher behavior, teacher criticism, perceived teacher indifference or dislike, fear of teacher judgment, and lack of teacher support. They should also attempt to avoid these situations in the classrooms. Moreover, the results of this study indicate the influence of the classroom climate, student-teacher relationship, and peer interactions on triggering EFL learners' emotions. By exploring the best and worst emotional experiences, students will understand more about their own emotional journey through EFL learning. Learners should be aware that learning a foreign language is emotionally charged and that they experience both positive and negative

emotions in EFL classrooms. Knowing about the sources of and responses to the emotional experiences can help learners to examine and cope with these events. The results of this study also help learners recognize the influence of external pressures and internal barriers on their emotional well-being in the classroom. EFL learners should be aware of how their country's contextual factors, such as the crucial importance of face and the test-oriented education system in Iran, influence their emotional responses, leading to the effective management of these responses. This research adds to a growing body of literature on emotions beyond enjoyment and anxiety and extends our knowledge of the best and worst experiences of language learning that have ingrained significant cognitive and affective data into participants' memories (Oxford, 1989).

The generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations. First, this study centered on the emotional experiences of students from general English courses at one university who were taught by the same teacher, which means that the findings are not representative enough. Future studies should focus on students from various educational settings and different teachers. Second, all data of this research were gathered using students' self-reports. Future studies should incorporate other methods, such as classroom observations, to address this limitation. Third, for examining the dynamic aspect of emotional experiences, longitudinal studies should be conducted.

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Appendices

Appendix A. The narrative frame for the best memory

بهترین خاطره‌ای که از کلاس زبان عمومی این ترم به یاد دارم این بوده است که یک روز.....
در آن لحظه افکاری که داشتم این بود که.....
این اتفاق و تجربه/خاطره برایم خیلی مهم و خاص بود، چون.....
در خاطره‌ای که تعریف کردید، کدام یک از احساسات زیر را تجربه نمودید؟ (لذت، افتخار،
امیدواری، هیچکدام) (در پاسخ به سوال می‌توانید بیش از یک گزینه را انتخاب نمایید)
اگر احساس دیگری نیز تجربه نموده‌اید، لطفاً نام ببرید.

The Narrative Frame for the Worst Memory:

بدترین خاطره‌ای که از کلاس زبان عمومی این ترم به یاد دارم این بوده است که یک روز.....
در آن لحظه افکاری که داشتم این بود که.....
این اتفاق و تجربه/خاطره برایم خیلی مهم و خاص بود، چون.....
در خاطره‌ای که تعریف کردید، کدام یک از احساسات زیر را تجربه نمودید؟ (اضطراب، عصبانیت،
خجالت، خستگی، ناامیدی، هیچکدام) (در پاسخ به سوال می‌توانید بیش از یک گزینه را انتخاب
نمایید)
اگر احساس دیگری نیز تجربه نموده‌اید، لطفاً نام ببرید:

Appendix B. Inductive thematic analysis of best memories with associated codes

Perceived themes for the best Memories							
Themes	Total Frequency for each theme	Sub-themes	Frequency of each sub-theme	Associated codes	Frequency for each associated code		
Moments of Personal Triumph and Competence	40	Academic Achievement and Self-efficacy	15	Exam Success	3		
				Sense of Academic Competence	6		
				Conquering Fear and Gaining Confidence	6		
		Positive Feedback	9	Teacher Praise	5		
				Positive Social Recognition	4		
		Positive and Effective Learning Experiences	16	Enhanced Learning Effectiveness	5		
				Enjoyable Learning Experience	7		
				Building Efficacy in learning	4		
		Positive and Humanized learning Environment	65	Positive Classroom Community	37	Intimate Classroom Environment	14
						Joyful Classroom Environment	5
Opportunities for Social interaction	2						
Presence of a Friend/Relative in the Classroom	2						
In-Class Birthday Celebration and Sharing Sweets	14						
Transforming Expectation and Attitude	28		Positive Event Contrary to Student Expectation	24			
			Positive Shift in Attitude toward the English Class	4			

	The Teacher as a Source of Affective Support	93	Compassion and Empathetic Flexibility	20	Teacher Flexibility	10
					Teacher Understanding	3
					Teacher's Empathetic Response	3
					Teacher Support	3
					Teacher Encouragement	1
			Humanization	37	Demonstrating Interest in Student Well-being	8
					Recognizing and Valuing Each Student	8
					Teacher Friendliness	10
					Teacher's Respect for Students	4
					Class Conversation Beyond the Curriculum	7
			Creating a Positive and Low-Anxiety Atmosphere	24	Creating a Relaxed Environment	4
					Teacher Humor	12
					Positive First Impression	5
					Bonus Points	3
					Teacher's Positive Personality	12

Appendix C. Worst memories inductive thematic analysis with associated codes

Perceived themes for the worst Memories	Themes	Total Frequency for each theme	Subthemes	Frequency of each sub-theme	Associated codes	Frequency for each associated code
	Impairment of Student Well-being	15	Intrusion of External Pressures	7	Intrusion of Personal Life	2
					Intrusion of Academic Pressures	1
					Intrusion of Sympathy for Peers	4
			Internal Barriers	8	Sickness	1
					Fatigue	1
					Initial Unfamiliarity	3
					Profound Distress	1

					Academic Failure Anxiety	1
					Pre-existing Language Anxiety	1
	Negative Interpersonal Dynamics	21	Negative Peer Interactions	10	Disruptive Peer Behavior	3
					Peer Unfairness	2
					Feeling Misunderstood by the Peers and Socially Isolated	2
					Conflict with Peers	3
			Negative Teacher-Student Interactions	11	Feeling Misunderstood by the Teacher	2
					Disruptive Teacher Behavior	1
					Teacher Criticism	1
					Perceived Teacher Indifference/Dislike	2
					Fear of Teacher Judgment	4
					Lack of Teacher Support	1
	Experience of Public Failure	24	Fear of Negative Evaluation	12	Fear of being judged by others	3
					Fear of disapproval by others	2
					Fear of being ridiculed	1
					Fear of disappointing the teacher	5
					Fear of demonstrating incompetence	1
			The Humiliation of Making Mistakes	2	Feeling of loss of face	1
					Experience of being laughed	1
			Poor Public Performance	10	Feeling of underperformance	3
					Stage fright in public speaking	1
					Difficulty with reading	2

					Mispronunciation of a word	2
					Mistranslation of a word	1
					Getting the lowest score	1
	Negative Test Experiences	16	Negative Emotions Before/During Test	11	Feeling Unable to Answer Quiz/Exam Questions	4
					Feeling Unprepared to Answer Questions	4
					Worry about Exam Performance	3
			Test Negative Result	5	A Lower Score than Other Students	2
					An Unexpected Low Score	2
					Being Late for the Exam, Resulting in Losing the Score	1
	Feeling of Language Incompetence	5		—	Perceived Language Inadequacy	3
					Feeling Unable to Learn English	2

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