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EMPIRICAL STUDY

Focus on Italian Verbal Morphology in Multilingual Classes

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This quasi-experimental study investigated the effects of form-focused instruction on Italian verbal morphology (first- and second-person singular forms and third-person plural forms of the present indicative) in a multilingual primary school in Italy. The 10-hour instructional treatment was distributed over fifteen 40-minute biweekly lessons in three intact Grade 2 classes comprising native and nonnative speakers of Italian. The instruction was designed to increase the saliency and frequency of the target forms while providing opportunities for oral production practice and corrective feedback. To measure the effects of instruction, 14 Chinese L1 students from the three classes comprised the experimental group, while a similar group of nine Chinese L1 students attending Grade 2 classes at the same school during the following year served as the comparison group. Both groups participated in oral elicitation tasks that served as pre- and posttests. A one-way analysis of variance showed a strong treatment effect for the form-focused instruction and qualitative analysis of the production data revealed developmental strategies specific to the experimental group.

Keywords form-focused instruction; multilingual classrooms; minority-language children; Italian verb inflections

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Introduction

Children younger than 8 years old are often presumed to acquire a second language (L2) rapidly and with little effort. This is considered particularly true for children living in a country where the target language is the primary language of communication and who attend schools where the target language is the language of instruction. This situation is handled differently from one country to the next, however. In the United States, for example, through use of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP; Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008), professional development opportunities are available to teachers charged with teaching English language learners along with native speakers of English in mainstream classrooms. The SIOP model provides teachers with guidance in making subject-matter content accessible to L2 learners while maintaining grade-level objectives and enhancing literacy skills as well as skills specific to L2 learners.

In contrast, policy makers in the Italian context have generally considered it unnecessary to implement such language-focused training for teachers working in multilingual classes.[1] In the specific context of the present study—a submersion educational setting where children of different first language (L1) backgrounds attend an Italian primary school—the predominant pedagogical approach is that which is employed for mother-tongue education in Italy. Classroom observations conducted over a period of 40 hours at the participating school prior to the current study revealed that grammar was presented as descriptions of the linguistic system of Italian, focusing (at the Grade 2 level) on definite and indefinite articles (morphology and use), noun and adjective morphology, and indicative verb conjugations—but without any specific consideration for learners for whom Italian is not their L1. Other language activities aimed at expanding the children's vocabulary and mainly involved written texts; accordingly, feedback was provided on written rather than oral production.

In a similar vein, Fazio and Lyster (1998) observed French L1 classrooms in Quebec that included both majority- and minority-language children. The children's language arts classes required them to engage in decontextualized analyses of parts of speech, verb inflections, homonyms, sentence structure, and agreement rules. The researchers concluded that the language learning needs of the minority-language students in these classrooms were not being met by the predominantly traditional focus on L1 grammar that failed to provide "acquisition-rich environments for minority-language students" (p. 314). More recently, Nicholas and Lightbown (2008) also noted the absence of instruction tailored to the needs of L2 learners in submersion contexts: "characteristics of appropriate L2 instruction are often absent as learners are expected to learn

the language and the school subject matter at the same time—more or less by 'osmosis'" (p. 45).

The input provided in multilingual primary school classes is often considered sufficient to at least guarantee the acquisition of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in the target language by children with a different home language (Cummins, 1986). However, this does not seem to be the case for the Chinese-speaking children participating in the present study who were born in Italy and are in their third year at an Italian school in Florence. They are still performing at a low level of language proficiency, including a limited lexical range, difficulties in phonetic discrimination, and few morphological markers for both nouns and verbs. Teachers report that some children acquire the target language at a very slow rate, with the consequence that they participate very little in content-based activities and miss out on much of the instruction.

The aim of the present study was, therefore, to investigate whether the target language development of children whose home language is different from the language of instruction can be accelerated by a form-focused instructional treatment provided to the whole class, which includes native, near-native, and nonnative speakers. Specifically, we present the results from a longitudinal quasi-experimental study conducted in three multilingual Grade 2 classes of an Italian primary school attended by many children of immigrant families.

Form-Focused Instruction

Predominant throughout the 1980s was the idea that L2 acquisition is primarily input driven and best proceeds implicitly without the need for form-oriented interventions targeting L2 features (e.g., Krashen, 1985). By the 1990s, however, applied linguists began to argue for the integration of form- and meaning-oriented approaches to maximize the effects of L2 teaching (e.g., Stern, 1990, 1992). This shift resulted in part from Canadian studies of L2 learners in French immersion programs (e.g., Harley, Cummins, Swain, & Allen, 1990) and intensive English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs based on communicative language teaching (Lightbown & Spada, 1990). The learners in these programs were shown to exhibit high levels of communicative ability but lower-than-expected levels of linguistic accuracy. These and similar findings led Long (1991) to propose that what was missing from these instructional contexts was a *focus on form* whereby teachers would "overtly draw students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning" (p. 46). He considered optimal L2 teaching to include an implicit focus on form operationalized as incidental asides and

unobtrusive focus on language during negotiation for meaning (see also Long, 1996). From the learners' perspective, incidental learning is generally defined as learning without the intent to learn (or the learning of one thing when the learner's primary objective is to do something else; see Schmidt, 1994).

Narrative and meta-analytic reviews alike have since suggested that instruction targeting explicit learning (i.e., awareness of what is being learned) is more effective than implicit treatments (DeKeyser, 2003; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada, 1997; Spada & Tomita, 2010). Thus, there is insufficient evidence from classroom research to support an exclusively implicit focus on form operationalized as incidental asides and unobtrusive focus on language. A more promising approach is *form-focused instruction*, which Spada (1997) defined as "any pedagogical effort . . . used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly" (p. 73). Such a flexible instructional approach that ranges from implicit to explicit is important for two reasons. On the one hand, classroom learners can learn a great deal of language implicitly if they are exposed to sufficient quantities of rich input. On the other hand, an exclusively incidental focus on language in classroom settings is arguably too brief and too perfunctory to convey sufficient information about certain grammatical subsystems (e.g., verbs, pronouns, and grammatical gender in French; see Lyster, 2007).

However, implicitness and explicitness have proven difficult to define categorically in the instructed second language acquisition (SLA) literature and are perhaps best understood along a continuum rather than in opposition. This is because explicitness, defined in terms of both "perceptual salience" and "linguistic marking" (Ortega, 2009, p. 75), is a difficult variable to hold constant across classrooms where learners' perceptions of salience and linguistic marking are affected not only by their age and metalinguistic knowledge but also by contextual variables such as the instructional context and its communicative orientation (Ellis & Sheen, 2006; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Nicholas, Lightbown, & Spada, 2001; Sato, 2011). The form-focused instruction in the present study was designed to draw young learners' attention to target features "as they are experiencing a communicative need" (Loewen, 2011, p. 582) by means of instructional techniques that traverse the implicit–explicit continuum in age-appropriate ways and that are more intentional than incidental.

Because form-focused instruction is intended to create opportunities for students to attend to target language features in the context of meaning-oriented tasks, it is different from more traditional language instruction, which is often used in mother-tongue instruction to isolate language from any content other

than the mechanical workings of the language itself (Fazio & Lyster, 1998). Such an emphasis on learning about language forms out of context does not promote actual language use and does not foster *transfer-appropriate processing*. In accordance with transfer-appropriate processing (Lightbown, 2008; Segalowitz, 2000), the context in which learning occurs should resemble the context in which the learning will be put to use, because memories are best recalled in conditions similar to those in which they were encoded. This means that, on the one hand, language features learned in isolated grammar lessons would be remembered in similar contexts, but would be hard to retrieve in the context of communicative interaction. On the other hand, language features noticed during interaction with a communicative purpose would be more easily retrieved in similar contexts of real communication. The notion of transfer-appropriate processing provides a convincing rationale for L2 teaching that highlights various forms and functions of the target language in the context of purposeful exchanges and activities rather than only in isolation.

The rationale and design of our investigation into the feasibility and effectiveness of form-focused instruction in multilingual classrooms were informed by a series of form-focused instructional interventions undertaken in the context of French immersion classrooms in Grades 2 through 8 in Canada (see Lyster, 2007, for a review). This line of research has revealed varying effects for form-focused instruction on a range of challenging target features for L2 learners of French: grammatical gender (Harley, 1998; Lyster, 2004), second-person pronouns (Lyster, 1994), conditional verb forms (Day & Shapson, 2001), functional distinctions between perfect and imperfect past tenses (Harley, 1989), verbs of motion (Wright, 1996), and derivational morphology (Lyster, Quiroga, & Ballinger, 2013). Drawing on this line of research, the present study investigates the effects of instruction on verbal morphology in Italian, as explained next. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first form-focused quasi-experimental study aiming to improve the target language abilities of minority-language children in multilingual classrooms.

Target Structures

With respect to L2 features that classroom learners find difficult simply to pick up from classroom input and that are thus prime candidates for form-focused instruction, Harley (1993) identified features that: (a) differ in nonobvious or unexpected ways from the L1; (b) are irregular, infrequent, or otherwise lacking in perceptual salience; and (c) do not carry a heavy communicative load. These features fall within the realm of morphosyntax, which has long been recognized as the most difficult for L2 learners, owing mainly to low

Table 1 Present indicative verb forms in Italian

Person and number	Form
First-person singular (1SG)	root + ending (*–o*)
Second-person singular (2SG)	root + ending (*–i*)
Third-person singular (3SG)	root + ending (*–a* or *–e*)
First-person plural (1PL)	root + ending (*–iamo*)
Second-person plural (2PL)	root + thematic vowel (*–a*/*–e*/*–i*) + ending (*–te*)
Third-person plural (3PL)	root + thematic vowel (*–a*/*–o*) + ending (*–no*)

salience (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2005; Mackey, 2006) and also lack of communicative value (Han, 2004). Especially in languages that are highly inflected and morphologically complex, such as Italian and other Romance languages, many morphosyntactic features are prone to "slipping under the radar" in classrooms whose primary focus is on meaning.

A good example of a morphologically complex system that proves challenging for L2 learners is grammatical conjugation in Italian, which includes a total of 87 finite forms.[2] As Harley (1986) submitted, the verb system is a "centrally important area of the structure of a language which is likely to be a major hurdle for learners of any age" (p. 59). Leaving it to chance, therefore, as opportunities arise (or not) during regular classroom instruction, is likely to have detrimental effects on L2 development.

The instructional target of this study is the present indicative in Italian, which, as illustrated in Table 1, is conjugated through six different endings: *–o*, *–i*, *–a*/*–e* in the singular, and *–iamo*, *–te*, *–no* in the plural. The second- and third-person plural endings are preceded by a verb thematic vowel, which is different for the three conjugations. Furthermore, many frequent verbs have an irregular conjugation (suppletion and allomorphic verbs) but, regardless of root variation, irregular verbs still display regular endings, thus making the general conjugation architecture of Italian verbs relatively transparent (Berretta, 1990).

The present indicative conjugation in Italian appears to be a relatively easy structure for L2 acquisition for a variety of reasons. First, there is a simple one form/one function structure, although each morpheme conflates person and number. Second, it is semantically relevant: Italian is a null-subject language, so person and number are marked on the verb ending. Third, it is pervasive: Every verb form is morphologically marked both in written and oral language.

Chinese-speaking learners of Italian, however, may not find these forms perceptually salient, owing in part to expectations carried over from their L1. Chinese and Italian are typologically distant, with Chinese being an isolating

language and Italian an inflecting language. This means that in Italian—but not in Chinese—information about person, gender, number, tense, aspect, and mood is conveyed through morphology. Chinese-speaking learners of Italian, therefore, are not predisposed by virtue of their primary language to expect morphological encodings of such information to appear in the input. In this regard, the role of instruction, is to "focus attention on forms and meanings in the input," according to Schmidt (2001, p. 10), "*by changing expectations*" (emphasis added).

The children participating in this study—despite the fact that they have good communication skills, are able to manage school life, and effectively exchange with adults and peers—show very little verb morphological variation in their production. Example 1, extracted from the pretest of one of the Chinese-speaking participants in this study is a good illustration. In this and all subsequent examples, student names are pseudonyms, inaccurate verb forms are in bold, periods indicate 2-second pauses, and underlining indicates intonational emphasis; English translations enclose pronouns in square brackets when they are not overtly used in Italian, and verb forms are indicated in square brackets with digits referring to person and SG and PL to singular and plural, respectively (as in Table 1).

Example 1. Pretest performance for Italian verb inflections

Researcher: *cosa fate quando è ora di andare a mensa*?
what do [you] do [2PL] when it's time to go to the canteen?
Arianna: *mensa . **mangiare***
canteen . **eat** [INFINITIVE in lieu of 1PL]
Researcher: *e poi cosa fate*?
and then what do [you] do [2PL]?
Arianna: *e poi . quelo signora . dice . che lo vuoi ancora . e poi **alza** mano*
and then . that lady . says [3SG] . do [you] want [2SG] more. and then **raises** [3SG in lieu of 1SG] hand
Researcher: *e prima di andare a mensa . cosa fate*?
and before going to the canteen. what do [you] do [2PL]?
Arianna: ***lavare** . mano*
wash [INFINITIVE in lieu of 1PL] . hand
Researcher: *bene . cosa fai quando un bambino ti dice una cosa che non capisci*?
good . what do [you] do [2SG] when a child tells you something [you] don't understand?

Arianna: ***dici*** *maestra*
[you] **tell** [2SG in lieu of 1SG] teacher

Arianna answers the researcher's questions without hesitation. She appears well aware of the class rules, knows how to get extras from the canteen employee, and whom to ask for help if she is stuck with the language. Her sociocultural knowledge, her oral interaction skills, and the conversation strategies she adopts associate her with a B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR: Council of Europe, 2011).[3] Nevertheless, her linguistic competence is compatible with an A1 level.[4] Her verbal system is limited to infinitive forms, 2SG indicative forms, and 3SG indicative forms. As found in previous research on the Italian interlanguage of Chinese speakers (Banfi, 1990; Rastelli, 2010; Valentini, 1992), these default verb forms are overextended to functions they do not cover in the target language.

After analyzing the children's interlanguage produced during the pretest oral elicitation tasks, we narrowed the instructional focus on the Italian present indicative to include only 1SG, 2SG, and 3PL forms. They were the three most accurate forms at the time of the pretest, other than 3SG forms, which were so overgeneralized that they were ambiguous to interpret in terms of accuracy. Together these three target forms require form–function mappings of first- versus second-person deixis (a pragmatic ability) and the singular/plural distinction between 3SG and 3PL—the former already present as a default form in the participants' interlanguage.

Research Questions

The present study measured the effects a form-focused instructional treatment delivered to three intact classes that included both native and nonnative speakers of the language of instruction. The research questions are stated as follows:

1. Can the language accuracy of Chinese-speaking children attending an Italian primary school benefit from a form-focused instructional treatment?
2. Can the interlanguage development and interaction strategies of Chinese-speaking children attending an Italian primary school benefit from a form-focused instructional treatment?
3. Can native-speaking children be motivated to participate in a form-focused instructional treatment designed for nonnative speakers?

Method

To address these questions, we employed a quantitative-based concurrent-embedded mixed method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010). The mixed-method

design included pretest, immediate posttest, and delayed posttest measures, in addition to both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the participants' interlanguage development, complemented by analysis of classroom interaction during the treatment, interviews with school personnel, and a posttreatment focus-group discussion with teachers. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis was used to better understand the effects of form-focused instruction from different perspectives.

Instructional Context and Participants

Prior to the actual study, hour-long interviews with seven teachers and the school principal were conducted to provide data on the social context, the children's linguistic backgrounds, and the school's teaching practices. These data are used here to describe the instructional context.

The participating school is situated in a socially disadvantaged neighborhood in Florence, Italy, and offers 8 hours per day of activities, 6 of them curricular and 2 socially oriented (lunchtime and playtime). As in most primary schools in Italy, each class has two different teachers, who overlap their schedule twice a week to allow for activities in small groups. The teacher, however, who implemented the form-focused instructional treatment in this study, was the first author—a primary school teacher with 30 years of experience in L2 teaching in different contexts. She was not a teacher at the school but received permission to teach in the three experimental classes for research purposes. The classroom teachers were present during the instructional treatment and encouraged to observe the lessons but not to interfere.

Three Grade 2 classes at this school received the form-focused instructional treatment, described in the next section, during the 2010–2011 school year. These three classes comprised a total of 68 students, ranging in age from 7 to 8, including 32 native speakers of Italian, 23 native speakers of Chinese, and 13 native speakers of other languages. During the preliminary observation phase, it became clear that the Chinese-speaking children were among those with the lowest proficiency in Italian. For this reason, only these children were recorded during the pretest session, the results of which showed that eight of the Chinese-speaking children had native or near-native skills, 14 had low-proficiency skills, and one was still in the nonverbal period (Paradis, 2007) and therefore could not be interviewed. The 14 low-proficiency students, all of whom had been born in Italy and attended at least 2 years of full-time school (one preschool and one primary), were thus selected as focal students in the present study. These 14 Chinese-speaking children were present in all three participating Grade 2 classes, with three, five, and six in each of the classes,

respectively. Only this focal group of 14 students—all native speakers of the Zhejiang dialect—participated in both pre- and posttest measures before and after the instructional intervention and thus constitute the experimental group (EG) in this quasi-experimental study. Preliminary classroom observations confirmed that the focal children appeared to be well integrated into their classes, interacting with Italian children as well as with their Chinese peers and completing some of the schoolwork, although more successfully so when it was mechanical (e.g., copying from the blackboard, reading aloud without comprehension checks, reciting multiplication tables).

To form a comparison group (CG) for the purpose of measuring the effects of form-focused instruction, students were selected from three Grade 2 classes at the same school during the following year (2011–2012). These classes did not receive the form-focused instruction. All the students in these classes who shared the same age, L1, and low levels of proficiency in Italian as the EG participants were selected as CG participants ($n = 9$) and thus completed the pre- and posttest tasks.

Instructional Treatment

The 10-hour instructional treatment—distributed over fifteen 40-minute biweekly lessons in each of the three participating classes—was operationalized as deliberate and planned provision of opportunities for learners to notice the target features, orally produce language, and receive corrective feedback. To guarantee the communicative quality of interaction, the instructional tasks involved games that focused learners' attention on meaning and social communication while also drawing attention to the target structures. Adapted from course books for teaching Italian L2 to children (Casati, Codato, & Cangiano, 2007; Whittle & Chiappelli, 2005), the activities included card games, miming, role playing, mingling, and singing, all of which were adapted in the present study for use in multilingual classes. The challenge of the experiment was in fact to test the possibility of introducing L2 teaching practices in an L1 curriculum. The treatment incorporated Ranta and Lyster's (2007) proposal for form-focused instruction that interweaves opportunities for (a) developing awareness of the target forms, (b) using the target forms in contexts of meaningful practice, and (c) receiving corrective feedback.

With respect to awareness, Ellis (2002) referred to two different types: (a) awareness of formal properties of the target language that are consciously noticed and (b) awareness in the sense of developing an explicit representation of the target form (see also Schmidt, 1990). Awareness tasks in the present study, given the young age of the learners, targeted the first but not the second

type of awareness, and thus involved either increased saliency or increased frequency of the target forms. Some tasks drew the children's attention to verb endings in games such as "Odd One Out" that provided a sequence of verbs in the oral input, such as *ascolto* ("[I] listen"), *mangio* ("[I] eat"), *finisco* ("[I] finish"), *balli* ("[you] dance"), *dormo* ("[I] sleep"), and asked students to select which one is different and why (all are 1SG verb forms except for *balli*, which is 2SG). Such tasks thus sought not only to draw learners' attention to target forms but also to encourage them to elaborate on what they noticed. Other tasks entailed songs with a high occurrence of the target forms, or animal bingo in which the teacher described what animals do, using 3PL forms repetitively.

Practice activities were used to elicit oral production of the target forms in order to provide opportunities for learners to proceduralize their knowledge of the emerging forms (DeKeyser, 1998; Lyster & Sato, 2013). For example, one activity was designed to elicit 3PL forms by asking students what various animals do; the question *Cosa fanno gli orsi?* ("What do bears do?") was intended to elicit forms such as *camminano* ("[they] walk") and *dormono* ("[they] sleep") and, if necessary, to provide opportunities for corrective feedback. In another practice activity, the teacher played a recording of different noises coming from a house and asked the children to guess which room the noises were coming from and what the inhabitants were doing (from Casati et al., 2007, p. 13). One of the recordings played the sounds of dishes and running water, and students were expected to guess that it was a kitchen, at which point the teacher asked *Che cosa fanno in cucina?* ("What are [they] doing in the kitchen?") in order to elicit 3PL verb forms from the students such as *lavano i piatti* ("[they] are washing dishes"), *mangiano* ("[they] are eating"), and *bevono* ("[they] are drinking"). Other tasks had students being interviewed by a finger puppet to elicit 1SG forms and interviewing a finger puppet to elicit 2SG forms. Mime games were also played where the class guessed actions performed by a child who asked the question *Che cosa faccio?* ("What am [I] doing?"), creating obligatory contexts for using 2SG forms. All practice activities involved oral collective work and therefore provided contextualized input for the target forms to the EG children through the contribution of the native and near-native children.

Corrective feedback was used to scaffold the preceding activities. It was provided primarily on the target features in the case of focal students and on a wider range of target forms that included dialect features in the case of native speakers (e.g., *prendano* instead of *prendono*, "[they] take"). Aiming to use feedback that best suited the instructional context, the teacher provided either prompts, which are signals for students to retrieve the correct form on their

own, or recasts, which provide students with the correct form (both illustrated below). This hybrid feedback strategy was based on the premise that learners are more likely to benefit from a variety of feedback types than from only one type (Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013).

Prompts were used for forms that learners were able to retrieve autonomously. Following Lyster and Ranta's (1997) taxonomy, some prompts provided metalinguistic clues while others entailed elicitations or clarification requests, as in the following illustrations:

Example 2. Prompt with metalinguistic clues

Teacher: *che cosa fanno nella camera da letto*?
what are [they] doing in the bedroom?
Piero: ***dorme***
[he] is sleeping [3SG]
Teacher: *attenzione Piero . fai attenzione . che cosa fanno? . tanti eh*
careful Piero . be careful . what are [they] doing? . many ok?
Piero: *dormono*
[they] are sleeping [3PL]

Example 3. Prompt with elicitation

Teacher: *che cosa faccio*? . *Olga*
what am [I] doing? . Olga
Olga: ***disegna*** *la lavagna* . ***disegna*** *le lavagna*
[she] is drawing [3SG] the blackboard . [she] is drawing [3SG] the blackboard
Teacher: *ripeti . cosa faccio*?
repeat . what am [I] doing?
Olga: *disegni la lavagna*
[you] are drawing [2SG] the blackboard

Recasts were used mainly for errors out of the children's reach. For example, the student in the extract in Example 4 uses a reflexive form rather than a nonreflexive form to explain that the action he is miming is that of sleeping. Following her recast (*dormo*), the teacher juxtaposes the nonreflexive form (*dormo*) with a reflexive form (*mi siedo*) to facilitate a comparison without any further explanation.

Example 4. Recast

Adrian: *io mi dormo*
I am myself sleeping [1SG-REFLEXIVE]

Teacher: *dormo . vieni Adrian . . mi siedo . dormo*
[I] am sleeping [1SG-NON-REFLEXIVE]. come Adrian . . [I] am sitting [REFLEXIVE]. [I] am sleeping [NON-REFLEXIVE]

In order to document the instructional treatment and to give an idea of the frequency and distribution of target forms as they occurred during the treatment, the 10-hour treatment in one of the classes was audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The analysis considered all target forms present in the teaching materials and in the teacher's input or brought to the class's attention by the children during brainstorming activities, while excluding forms that occurred during episodes of classroom management and procedures, which were considered as part of the input the children already receive in class and not as part of the form-focused instruction. A total of 265 types and 3073 tokens were used, of which 54% were 1SG forms, 25% were 2SG forms, and 21% were 3PL forms.

Measures

Oral elicitation tasks were used in the present study to assess the progress made over time by the 14 children in the EG. The tasks were adapted from the oral elicitation protocol for adult learners of Italian L2 created by Ferrari and Nuzzo (2009) and piloted with 10 children from the three classes then adjusted accordingly. Of these 10 children, 3 were native speakers and 7 were near-native speakers (three of whom were Chinese speaking), and all 10 obtained 100% accuracy scores on the target forms.

The quasi-experimental design of this study entailed a pretest prior to the instructional treatment at Time 1 (TI) in November, an immediate posttest following the treatment at Time 2 (T2) in early April, and a delayed posttest 6 weeks later at Time 3 (T3) in May. Due to time restrictions the following year, the nine children in the CG were tested on two rather than three occasions. They completed the pretest elicitation task in November and then the immediate posttest elicitation task in April.

During the oral elicitation task, the children's production was audio recorded for subsequent transcription and coding. The elicitation tasks at each testing time were designed to elicit the three target forms but the pretest was greater in scope, being designed to elicit all forms of the present indicative except for 2PL, which is difficult to elicit in a one-to-one interview. The pre- and posttests were thus not completely identical; for example, the pretest used a story-retell task based on a video to elicit 3SG and 3PL forms whereas the posttest used puppet role-plays to elicit 1SG and 2SG forms. However, both

Table 2 Pretest oral elicitation tasks

Tasks	Elicited forms
Picture descriptions	
Spot the difference	agreement within noun phrase (e.g., *due gatti bianchi*, "two white cats")
Story telling	agreement within verb phrase (e.g., *è andata*, "[she] went"; *sono andati*, "[they] went")
What are they doing?	Third-person singular and plural (e.g., *balla*, "[s/he] is dancing"; *ballano*, "[they] are dancing")
Mime descriptions	
What am I doing?	Second-person singular (e.g., *dormi*, "[you] are sleeping")
Open questions	
What do you do when . . . ?	First-person singular and plural (e.g., *apro*, "[I] open"; *apriamo*, "[we] open")
Video description	
Story retelling	Third-person singular and plural (e.g., *va*, "[s/he] goes"; *vanno*, "[they] go")

pre- and posttests included some of the same picture-description tasks (i.e., "What are they doing?"), the same miming description task (i.e., "What am I doing?"), and similar open questions (i.e., "What do you do when . . . ?"). The tasks at T2 and T3 were identical except for a different order in task presentation. In all cases, only the three target forms (1SG, 2SG, 3PL) were accounted for in the analysis of accuracy gains. Tables 2 and 3 identify the tasks and the forms they were designed to elicit in the pretest and posttests, respectively.

The pre- and posttest task were administered with no predetermined time limitation; the average duration was 30 minutes for the pretest and 20 minutes for the posttests. The average number of target forms elicited during the pretest was 28 for the EG ($min = 18$, $max = 45$) and 30 for the CG ($min = 21$, $max = 40$). The average number of forms produced at T2 was higher than at T1 as the posttest task elicited only the three target forms: 72 for the EG ($min = 43$, $max = 88$) and 73 for the CG ($min = 58$, $max = 95$). The recordings were fully transcribed, taking into account pauses, truncation, voice volume, intonational emphasis, overlapping of speakers, and nonverbal behavior such as laughing. Verbs occurring in obligatory contexts for the present tense were then coded according to person, verb ending, lexeme, verb class, and accuracy.

Table 3 Posttest oral elicitation tasks

Tasks	Elicited forms
Picture descriptions	
Daily routines	First-person singular (e.g., *mi alzo*, "[I] get up"; *scrivo*, "[I] write")
Animal families	Third-person plural (e.g., *corrono*, "[they] run")
What are they doing?	Third-person singular and plural (e.g., *balla*, "[s/he] is dancing"; *ballano*, "[they] are dancing")
Mime descriptions	
What am I doing?	Second-person singular (e.g., *dormi*, "[you] are sleeping")
Open questions	
What do you do when . . . ?	First-person singular (e.g., *gioco*, "[I] play"; *faccio i compiti*, "[I] do my homework")
Puppet role-plays	
Interviewing	Second- vs. first-person singular (e.g., *abiti*, "[you] live"; *fai*, "[you] do")
Being interviewed	First- vs. second-person singular (e.g., *mangio*, "[I] eat"; *dormo*, "[I] sleep")

Verb forms coinciding with nouns (e.g., *lavoro*, "work"), repetitions of the interviewer's question, repetitions in the same turn, and some ambiguous forms were excluded.

Accuracy rates were calculated as the percentage of correct forms relative to the total of target forms produced. Only lexical verbs were analyzed (both regular and irregular), thereby excluding the verbs *essere* ("to be") and *avere* ("to have") because they appear mostly in formulas (*c'è*, *c'ho*, *ce l'ho*, etc.). Verbs were coded as accurate if the ending was the right person marker in that context (e.g., *–o* for 1SG as in *dormo,* "[I] sleep") and wrong if the ending was not the right person marker (e.g., *cammina*, in place of *cammino*, "walk," in a 1SG context). Because the focus was exclusively on verb endings, overgeneralizations such as *ando*—a regularization of the infinitive *andare* ("to go") was considered correct even though the right 1SG form is *vado*. Similarly, forms with incorrect pronunciation, such as *bracciano* instead of *abbracciano* ("[they] hug") were considered correct if the ending was right, as were creative forms such as *fotano* (derived from *foto*) instead of *fotografano* ("[they] take a photo"). Also correct were dialect forms present in the Tuscan input which bear the correct ending, such as *bevano* instead of *bevono* ("[they] drink"). If

Table 4 Accuracy rates for the three target features by time and group

	Experimental group ($n = 14$)			Comparison group ($n = 9$)	
Forms	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2
1SG	37/86 (44%)	327/440 (74%)	375/486 (77%)	28/73 (38%)	150/294 (51%)
2SG	37/94 (39%)	159/217 (73%)	178/240 (74%)	12/61 (20%)	65/138 (47%)
3PL	53/216 (25%)	258/345 (74%)	322/413 (78%)	27/138 (20%)	38/221 (17%)
Total	127/396 (32%)	744/1001 (74%)	875/1139 (77%)	67/272 (25%)	253/653 (39%)

pronouns were used erroneously to mark person as in *ti abiti* (instead of *tu abiti*, "you live") the verb was considered correct as long as the ending was right; in contrast, a form such as *mi cammina* (in place of *io cammino*, "I walk") was coded as wrong because, in spite of the attempt to mark person through use of a first-person clitic pronoun, the ending is wrong. Finally, in cases where learners successfully self-corrected (e.g., *vada . . . ehmm . . . vado*) the initial error was ignored and the self-correction was coded as correct.

Focus-Group Discussion

The six teachers—two for each of the three classes—who were present during the instructional treatment were audio recorded during a focus-group discussion. They listened to recorded extracts from the treatment interaction and provided commentary on the children's participation and motivation. They were asked also to give their opinion regarding the implementation of form-focused instruction in multilingual classes. The discussion was led by a different researcher from the one who had conducted the treatment lessons in order to make sure the teachers felt free to express their frank opinions about the instructional intervention and the children's reactions; the researcher leading the discussion was acquainted neither with the teachers nor with the research objectives. The audio recording of the focus-group discussion, which lasted 70 minutes, was fully transcribed for subsequent analysis.

Results

Accuracy

The accuracy rates for each target form as well as the overall accuracy rates attained by each group across time are displayed in Table 4. The EG more than doubled its overall accuracy rate from 32% at T1 to 74% at T2 and maintained these gains at T3 (77%) whereas the CG made less progress, increasing from 25% at T1 to 39% at T2. The EG obtained similar accuracy rates for all three target features at T2 and T3 (ranging from 73% to 78%). To a lesser extent, the CG improved its accuracy from T1 to T2 in its use of 1SG forms (from 38% to

Table 5 Descriptive statistics for one-way analysis of covariance results by time and group

	T1	T2	
Group	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	adjusted *M* (*SE*)
Experimental ($n = 14$)	30.93 (22.39)	72.29 (28.90)	69.28 (5.03)
Comparison ($n = 9$)	23.56 (15.91)	38.11 (26.00)	42.79 (6.30)

51%) and even more in its use of 2SG forms (from 20% to 47%) but decreased from 20% to 17% in accurate use of 3PL forms. In contrast, a comparison of the posttest data and the interaction that occurred during the treatment showed that focal students did particularly well with 3PL forms insofar as they produced some during the posttest elicitation tasks that had not appeared in the treatment (*fischiano*, "[they] whistle"; *mazzano*, mispronounced for *ammazzano*, "[they] kill"; *scartano*, "[they] unwrap"; *sputano* "[they] spit").[5] There was no evidence of such generalization for 1SG and 2SG forms in the data.

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to statistically compare the accuracy scores at T2 (the dependent variable) of the EG and the CG to determine the effects of form-focused instruction (the main factor). ANCOVA is considered ideal for quasi-experimental studies, such as this one, in which participants are not assigned randomly to experimental and comparison groups. ANCOVA generates between-group comparisons of posttest means that have been adjusted relative to the pretest means in order to factor out the effects of initial between-group differences. To confirm that the assumptions for ANCOVA were met, we first checked the homogeneity of variance between the two groups by using Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances, which was not significant ($p = .759$). Second, we tested the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes, which also proved to be not significant ($p = .329$). The statistical analyses were conducted using version 22.0 of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, IBM Corp., released 2013).

Table 5 displays the descriptive statistics at T1 and T2 for each group as well as the adjusted means at T2 resulting from the ANCOVA, while Figure 1 graphically illustrates the unadjusted mean accuracy scores for the EG from T1 to T3 and for the CG from T1 to T2. The one-way ANCOVA revealed Group as a significant factor, $F(1, 20) = 10.63$, $p = .004$. Specifically, the EG significantly outperformed the CG at T2 with an adjusted mean difference of 26.49 (95% CI [9.55, 43.43]) and the effect size based on the adjusted means was large ($d = 1.42$).

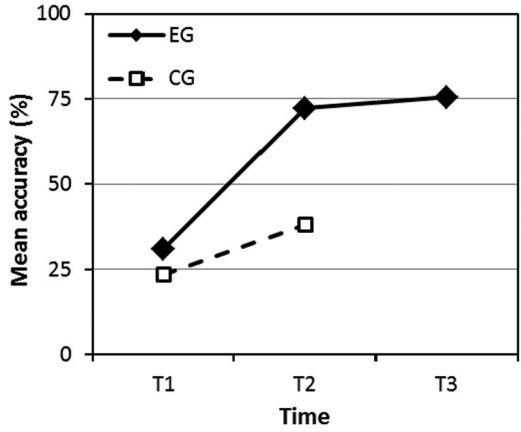

Figure 1 Mean accuracy scores over time.

Interlanguage Strategies

In addition to examining the increase in participants' use of accurate forms, we also looked at their continued use of inaccurate forms at T2 in order to document their interlanguage development as a result of the instruction. This analysis revealed an increase in the children's use of two types of strategies resulting from the form-focused instruction.

First, in addition to their use of more accurate verb forms, the EG participants' initial overuse of infinitive forms was replaced by a greater number of inflected forms at T2 but occasionally with incorrect endings. For example, with respect to errors in their use of verbs belonging to the first conjugation (i.e., those with infinitive form ends in *–are*), which is the most frequent verb class in Italian, 53% involved use of infinitive forms at the expense of indicative forms at T1 but only 13% at T2. At T2, overuse of infinitive forms was replaced by more attempts at conjugated forms but with erroneous endings. These interlanguage forms included either what Banfi and Bernini (2003) refer to as central forms ("forme centrali," p. 72) corresponding to the root + thematic vowel (e.g., *balla*, "[s/he] dances"; *prende*, "[s/he] takes"; *apri*, "[s/he] opens"), or by forms constructed as present indicative singular flexional forms (root + no thematic vowel + person ending) but not yet mapped onto the correct morphological function of person and number (e.g., *prendi* in lieu of *prendo*, "[I] take").

Second, the posttest data show an increase in the use by EG participants of *mi* and *ti* as clitic pronouns to mark person. On the surface, these appear to be reflexive forms serving nominative functions, but this is an unexpected finding

clearly worthy of further pursuit. Clitic pronouns are frequent and in some cases optional in Italian, with many verbs allowing variants either with or without a clitic as in *mangio un panino* or *mi mangio un panino* ("I eat a sandwich"). The children in the EG sometimes overmarked person in the posttests by using (a) the clitic pronoun *mi* to mark first person as in *mi rido* ("I laugh") rather than the native-like *rido* and (b) *ti* to mark second person as in *a che ora ti fai i compiti?* ("at what time do you do your homework?") instead of *a che ora fai i compiti?* In cases where the verb ending encoded the wrong person marking, clitic pronouns served as the only person marker, as in *mi cammina*, "walk" (1SG) and *ti mangia*, "eat" (2SG). In cases where verb endings encoded the right person marking, the clitic pronouns served as redundant person markers as in *mi disegno*, "[I] draw myself" (1SG) and *ti abiti*, "[you] live yourself" (2SG). Whereas there were only two instances of *mi* to mark first person at T1, there were 24 instances at T2 and 18 at T3. There were no instances of *ti* to mark second person at T1, only one at T2, then 11 at T3. This strategy occurred only once in the CG (at T2).

Interaction Strategies

Further analysis of the posttest production data revealed that the children in the EG, unlike those in the CG, adopted a strategy of self-correction which was absent from their production at T1. Of the 744 turns at T2, 36 included attempts at self-correction, of which 27 were successful. Of the 875 turns at T3, 23 were attempts at self-correction and 18 of these were successful.

Focus-Group Discussion

In the focus-group discussion, the class teachers who had acted as observers during the treatment, reported that the nonnative children were more active and involved during the experimental treatment than during their ordinary classes. For example, one teacher commented that "these activities contributed to open the Chinese children; they were not afraid of making mistakes" while another stated that "the situation reassured the Chinese children." Undoubtedly, the nonnative children were highly motivated by the fact that, during the treatment, they were able to participate in class activities adapted to their language skills. However, the teachers also reported a high level of motivation for native speakers, owing arguably to the types of activity used during the form-focused instruction, which were familiar to all students because of their similarity with activities in their English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) lessons. Nevertheless, the teachers commented that their young age may have played a part in the enthusiasm exhibited by the Italian L1 children and speculated that older

children may not be as interested in activities that do not sufficiently challenge their language skills. The teachers also commented on learning having occurred; one described the students' progress as follows: "They don't just say a word, they make a sentence." Surprisingly, however, none of the teachers was able to identify the target structures. They mentioned nouns, articles, adjectives, and verbs, but there was no specific mention of present-tense indicative verb endings to mark person and number (i.e., 1SG, 2SG, 3PL). They seemed to have confounded the instructional treatment with activities designed to promote socialization and missed the focus on the target forms.

Discussion

The results provide a positive answer to our first research question, which asked whether the language accuracy of Chinese-speaking children attending an Italian primary school would benefit from form-focused instruction. For the three target structures (i.e., 1SG, 2SG, and 3PL), statistical analysis of the mean accuracy scores of both groups revealed a strong treatment effect for the EG and the qualitative interlanguage analysis provided an additional perspective on the progress made by the EG.

The form-focused instructional treatment appears to have provided the kind of salient input, opportunities for output practice, and corrective feedback that are needed to direct learners' attention to verbal morphology. The awareness activities were designed to draw students' attention to the target forms in a way that helped them to notice the patterns, while the practice activities were intended to provide opportunities for hypothesis testing and also proceduralization in meaningful contexts. At the same time, the corrective feedback was provided to students to draw their attention to their own production of the target forms. That the students in the EG group began self-correcting after the form-focused instruction—a strategy that was absent at T1 and nonexistent in the CG production—is not only indicative of an increased sensitivity toward their own production but may also reflect the internalization of the corrective nature of the instructional input. Although self-corrections occurred in only a limited number of turns, this emergent strategy deserves attention as it suggests that the form-focused instruction increased the children's awareness of morphological endings to an extent that enabled them to attempt to control their oral production that was otherwise only partially automatized (DeKeyser, 2015; Lyster & Sato, 2013).

Although the accuracy rates of both groups increased over time, those of the EG were significantly greater than those of the CG. Moreover, the high accuracy

rates attained by the EG were similar for all three target features whereas the CG actually exhibited a slight decline over time in its already very low accuracy in producing third-person plural forms. These results are particularly interesting as the children are in their third year of full-time attendance at school in Italy. Regular classroom input, therefore, does not appear to provide adequate learning opportunities for children in a submersion context and so targeted teaching is needed.

The analysis of the interlanguage strategies of the EG provides further evidence of language development resulting from the instruction and provides a positive answer to the second research question. First, a decrease in the use of infinitive forms and an increase in attempts at inflected forms can be seen as the children's active engagement in testing hypotheses about word segmentation. Rather than being a sign of confusion in form–function mapping, the increase of phonological variability in the learner repertoire (from infinitive forms to a range of finite forms) can be considered the result of experimentation and evidence of incipient acquisition. In line with Di Biase's (2007) Bootstrapping Hypothesis regarding the development of Italian verbal morphology, learners' phonological variation in verb endings not yet mapped onto grammatical function "may help learners in word segmentation when engaging in comprehension and production tasks, and may contribute to bootstrapping their morphological sensitivity" (p. 54).

Second, the instructional treatment, which included the use of some reflexive verbs (e.g., *mi lavo*, "[I] wash myself"; *mi vesto*, "[I] dress myself"; *mi chiamo*, "[I] call myself = my name is"), clearly had the effect of accelerating and encouraging the use of clitics for person marking. It may be the case that, while the form-focused instruction increased students' awareness of the semantic relevance of marking person (through verb endings) and indeed increased their accuracy in doing so, it also inadvertently incited them to occasionally overmark person by using clitic pronouns in a nonnative-like fashion rather than relying solely on verb endings. Similar to verb endings, clitic pronouns may be thought of as inflectional affixes (Monachesi, 1999), but with greater semantic transparency for expressing person deixis from the perspective of L2 learners of Italian. The learners improved but their intermittent use of clitic pronouns to mark person may be seen as a sign of enhanced awareness of person deixis and as attempts to use inflectional affixes to mark person while opting for more semantically transparent affixes (i.e., clitics) than verb endings alone.

A positive answer can also be provided in response to our third research question, which asked whether native speakers can be motivated to participate

in form-focused instruction designed for nonnative speakers. Results of the focus-group discussion confirmed that the instructional treatment was compatible with multilingual class work as the activities were motivating for both majority-language and minority-language children alike. The teachers cautioned, however, that motivation may not be as high for native-speaking children of an older age. Nevertheless, the high percentage of minority-language children in these submersion contexts calls for a shift in pedagogy. To support their continued development in the language of instruction, short and regular sessions of form-focused instruction to the whole class seem to provide an important part of the answer.

Limitations and Future Directions

In terms of limitations, as with other quasi-experimental studies conducted in classroom contexts, this study had to deal with the conditions imposed by the school setting. Decisions concerning the sampling and test administration had to be made in light of the availability of classes and their composition, the time allocated, and the willingness of teachers to be involved in the project. For example, the pretest elicitation task was designed to obtain a general overview of the children's ability to use a range of morphological markers and thus elicited a lower number of target forms than the two posttests. Administering an additional T1 task specifically eliciting the three target features would have been preferable for comparison purposes but proved unfeasible in terms of time constraints. Also, in order to strengthen the comparisons undertaken in the present study and to allow for some generalizability, a much larger sample in both the EG and CG would of course be necessary. The generalizability of the present study is also moderated by the primary role played by the first author in delivering the instructional treatment. While this ensured consistency in the instruction across the three participating classes, the extent of the instructor's academic credentials and professional experience, which included L2 teaching (i.e., Italian as a foreign language to adults, Italian L2 to immigrant children, Italian as a heritage language in France, ESL in Italian primary schools), is arguably not typical of primary school teachers. We hasten to add, however, that the instructor had no prior experience in teaching to both native and nonnative speakers of Italian nor in addressing the specific linguistic needs of Chinese-speaking learners of Italian.

Some of the limitations of this study provide the impetus for more fine-grained investigations of form-focused instruction in multilingual classrooms. For example, while our study clearly demonstrated positive effects for

form-focused instruction, future studies could endeavor to disentangle the relative effects of the various instructional components (enhanced input vs. production practice vs. corrective feedback) and could do so in relation to a wider range of target features. In addition, to gain more insight into the motivation of the participating children and especially with respect to differences between the native and nonnative speakers of Italian, stimulated-recall sessions with students would doubtless provide a rich source of information. Also in this regard, it would be revealing to further explore the opportunities for learning from peers afforded by the form-focused instructional activities (see Ballinger, 2013). The transcript of the instructional treatment in the present study indeed revealed many instances of native and near-native speakers of Italian providing helpful support to the focal children, but we did not conduct a systematic analysis of peer collaboration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research was a first attempt at a quasi-experimental study investigating the effectiveness of form-focused instruction on the acquisition of L2 Italian in a primary school submersion context. Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations in its design, this study has important pedagogical implications, suggesting that minority-language children in multilingual classrooms benefit from form-focused instructional techniques specifically employed to enhance their continued growth in the language of instruction and that the instruction can be implemented as part of the regular curriculum. This finding supports a reorientation of instructional practices in multilingual classrooms comprising both native and nonnative speakers of the language of instruction to better accommodate the latter. A surprising finding in the present study was that the format and targets of the form-focused instruction remained obscure to the L1 teachers. They did not recognize the treatment target forms, despite their presence at the treatment sessions, and perceived the instruction as "a prolonged recreation time" with fun activities and a lot of socialization. They did not recognize instruction that interweaves opportunities for input enhancement, oral production practice, and corrective feedback as an effective catalyst for continued language growth, as has been demonstrated by previous research in L2 instructional contexts (e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006; Lyster, 2004). The present study adds to this line of research by confirming (a) the feasibility of integrating form-focused instruction operationalized in this way into multilingual classrooms and (b) its positive effects on minority-language children whose development in the language of instruction has hitherto been expected

to proceed solely through exposure to the same curriculum and instruction as their native-speaking peers.

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Notes

1 At the time of the study, the *Guidelines on the Integration of Foreign Students* (*Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranier*) published by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca [MIUR], 2006) underscored the importance of implementing intercultural education, acknowledging cultural diversity and recognizing the value of the students' L1. To develop minority-language students' skills in Italian, teachers were encouraged to provide opportunities for socialization and peer interaction during hands-on activities and to provide visual aids for vocabulary learning. Only in a very recent decree, the MIUR (2014, p. 16) recognized the specificity of teaching Italian L2 (different from L1 teaching and from Italian foreign language teaching) and the importance of "specific educational interventions designed for non-native students" ("è giunto il momento di qualificare l'intervento didattico specifico rivolto agli alunni non-italofoni") to be implemented through small-group workshops, especially for high school students and for study skills. Both documents emphasize content-based teaching without any specific reference to addressing language development.

2 There are 14 tenses in the Italian finite verb conjugation (8 in the indicative mode, 4 in the subjunctive mode, and 2 in the conditional mode) each articulating six persons (three singular and three plural). The imperative mode distinguishes only three persons (plural first person, plural second person, and singular second person). This system includes only a limited number of homophones.

3 Although the CEFR does not take into account child language development, it represents a shared reference point for the evaluation of learners' level of proficiency in Europe. At the B1 level, in overall spoken interaction skills, the CEFR indicates that a learner can "enter unprepared into conversation on familiar topics, express personal opinions and exchange information on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g., family, hobbies, work, travel and current events)" (p. 83). Concerning conversation abilities at the B1 level, a learner can, "enter unprepared into conversations on familiar topics: follow clearly articulated speech directed at him/her in everyday conversation, though will sometimes have to ask for repetition of particular words and phrases; maintain a conversation or discussion but may sometimes be difficult to follow when trying to say exactly what he/she would like to; express and respond to feelings such as surprise, happiness, sadness, interest and indifference" (p. 85).

4 At the A1 level of grammatical accuracy, the CEFR specifies that a learner "[s]hows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire" (p. 123).
5 This comparison was possible only for one of the classes as only one recording of the interaction during the instructional treatment was fully transcribed. Target forms produced by the researcher or by the children during activities were compared with target forms produced at T2 by the five children attending this class.

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