Foreign Language Anxiety in Undergraduates of a Sindh University: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

Whereas English carries the status of 'official language' in Pakistan and it is solely used as the medium of instruction at the tertiary level education, English is neither the language of everyday communication nor the medium of education at the primary and secondary level public sector academic institutions in the country. Due to the lack of exposure to English, learners with a background from non-elite and non-English medium education may be observed highly language anxious at tertiary level education. At tertiary education, the students are required to communicate in English and demonstrate high level of language proficiency. However, foreign language anxiety (FLA) is considered to have detrimental effects on learning and performance in the target language. Considering the significant and detrimental role language anxiety may play, this study attempts to understand learner experiences related to foreign language anxiety with specific reference to English as a foreign language. This paper presents a small-scale qualitative case study based on the semi-structured interviews conducted with EFL learners at a public sector university in the province of Sindh, Pakistan. The results suggest that communication apprehension, fear of public speaking, fear of negative evaluation, fear of forgetting vocabulary, and fear of opposite gender are the main factors that are related to the high level of anxiety in the English language learners in the given context. Moreover, the study finds that the students with a reportedly higher level of foreign language anxiety hold a negative perception about themselves and their ability to speak in English before an audience including, but not confined to, their teacher(s) and class-mates.

Keywords: *Foreign language anxiety, language learning and use, learner experiences.*

1. Introduction

Whilst the globalisation of education and widening access to higher education (HE) is extensively debated internationally in the twenty-first century world, some concerns have arisen regarding the competence of learners and their abilities in speaking and understanding the English language from non-English speaking backgrounds enrolled in English-medium universities (Dunworth, 2009; Murray, 2013). Considering a significant growth in young population at the global level, a need for widening access to HE is also realised in Pakistani context where a number measures such as establishing an increased number of higher

education and degree awarding institutions have been taken during the last decade to ensure the extended enrolment of young people into higher education. Whether the increased number of educational institutions ensures quality education remains debatable.

In the international contexts, in order to warrant that the applicants meet the pre-requisite level of language competence, entrants from non-English-speaking background are asked to produce English language proficiency test scores such as IELTS and TOEFL at a certain level to seek admission into undergraduate and postgraduate programs at English-medium universities. Similarly candidates seeking admissions to higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan are required to go through pre-entry tests. At the University of Sindh, for example, the pre-entry/aptitude test comprises three components, i.e. English language skills (25 percent of the test), general knowledge (15 percent of the test), and relevant discipline knowledge (60 percent of the test) (University of Sindh, 2014, pp. 32-3). However, as the pre-entry tests in Pakistan are solely based on multiple-choice questions (MCQ). The assumption behind using MCQ testing strategy is that language skills such as writing, listening, and speaking can appropriately be measured through MCQ type tests. Arguably, the assumption may not be justified to claim that the passing candidates shall have a required level of language proficiency, especially in speaking skills that are mandatory for communicating, participating, and giving presentations in English at the tertiary level education. Once the students are enrolled after such MCQ entry tests, understanding content through classroom lectures and extended reading and then demonstrating and presenting the acquired knowledge in English remain a cause of concern for such students.

Dewaele (2007) argued that conditions in which students are required to communicate in a target language, without having developed the relevant language skills, may develop psychological issues related to language learning and use such as foreign language anxiety in some students. For example, though speaking English and giving classroom presentations is considered to be highly valuable and mandatory for students, many feel afraid of the situation. Thus, foreign language anxiety may keep haunting and halting learners.

2. Literature Review

Since 1980's, foreign language anxiety has been conceptualised as a psychological stress that learners experience during the process of learning a foreign language and/or performing a language task in the target language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989; Price, 1991; Sarason, 1984). According to Horwitz et al. (1986) FLA may lead to and appear in physiological changes (for example, rapid heartbeat, blushing and sweating), psychosomatic symptoms (for example, backache, stomach ache, headache), physical activities (such as

fidgeting), and speech disturbances (for instance, sputtering, quivering voice). In this study, we focus on communication apprehension, fear of public speaking, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety as discussed below.

Communication apprehension seems to be associated with learners' negative perceptions about themselves. This is a particular type of oral communication anxiety that is also labelled as "language shock" (Arnold and Brown, 1999, p. 21) when learners do not know how to convey the words and some expressions in foreign language and, hence, may communicate what they want to say. The feeling of uttering wrong sentences (in terms of grammar, vocabulary or structure) or the feeling that others are noticing them will create feelings of frustration and apprehension for the speaker. MacIntyre and Thivierge (1995) argued that communication apprehension is "a fear and uneasiness caused by the potentially threatening situation (real or anticipated) of speaking before a group of people" (p. 456). Anxious feelings and difficulties in front of others and in or out of the classroom are all "manifestations of communication apprehension" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127). Price's (1991) study also found that students felt anxiety, specifically when making errors in pronunciation and communication. The interviewees expressed their feeling of frustration when they could not communicate as effectively as they were expected to. In terms of affect, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) reported that highly anxious learners in speaking a foreign language had lower ratings on fluency, accent, and sentence complexity when compared to the lower levels of anxious students.

Fear of public speaking, on the other hand, refers to a situation wherein a learner feels afraid of delivering a talk before a small or large audience (Ayres & Hopf, 1993). It is also considered as a stage fright which increases anxiety in the speakers when they come upon the stage. Sloan and Slane (1990) defined public speaking anxiety as a "generalized context apprehension" (p.517). Young (1990) considered 'public speaking anxiety' as an addition to the research in foreign language anxiety in the 1990s. Pribyl, Keaten, and Sakomoto (2001) mentioned the lack of familiarity to the audience and the foreign language fluency as elements that contribute to public speaking anxiety. The English language learners in anxious situations may perceive their weakness being exposed in the public as MacIntyre and MacDonald (1998) stated that the learners' perceptions are "a key factor in public speaking anxiety" (p. 359). It is the learner perception which makes a situation more anxious.

Fear of nagtive evaluation also plays an important role. According to Kitano (2001), "fear of negative evaluation influences anxiety more strongly for advanced students" (p. 560). Learners think that if their performance is being evaluated and carries some marks or some other reward then their mistakes or

errors related to grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or sentence structure may lower their grades or marks in the results. This feeling intensifies the level of anxiety for them because fear of negative evaluation leads learners to commit more errors, especially when they are afraid of making mistakes (Gregersen, 2003). However, many learners mostly show fear of making mistakes and are reluctant because they consider mistakes as an obstacle to making a good social impression on others (Gregerson & Horwitz, 2002; Kim, 2009; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). The learners who are highly conscious of their performance in English before others constantly avoid participation in language activities. Hence, they become passive in the classroom. (Gregersen, 2007; Miyuki, 2000) leading to "exhibit avoidance behaviour such as missing class and postponing homework" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.127).

Test anxiety is yet another important factor. Sarason (1978) defined test anxiety as a "tendency to view with alarm the consequences of inadequate performance in an evaluative situation" (p.214). Thus, test anxiety is an apprehension of assessment and evaluation. Apart from the general anxiety that learners may feel in the classroom, Madsen et al. (1991) suggested that a test situation can also arouse feelings of anxiety. Daly (1991) asserted that learners, when confronted with extremely evaluative situations, feel anxiety. Learners' consciousness of a competitive and evaluative atmosphere may have an inauspicious impact on their performance. This feeling creates a negative impact on their minds. Consequently, they become psychologically distressed and disturbed, lose self-confidence and consider themselves inferior to others. Hancock (2001) explored that the learners who were anxious about tests were also "significantly more sensitive to environments in which competition [was] emphasized and teacher control [was] evident" (p. 288).

Although foreign language anxiety is a well-researched area in regions such as North America, Canada, Europe, and Asia (Dewaele, 2007; Hurd, 2007; Kim, 2009; Liu and Jackson, 2008; Yan and Horwtiz, 2008), however little research has been conducted at the tertiary level public education in the Pakistani context. This study attempts to fill this gap with an aim to understand the university-level EFL students' foreign language anxiety experiences with specific reference to English.

3. Research Method
In this study, we followed a qualitative case study approach to understand EFL learners' experiences about various factors causing foreign language anxiety. The main focus of our study remained on how participants have experienced the FLA phenomenon in a natural setting (language classroom) in a particular context (University of Sindh). We chose a qualitative approach to this case study because we consider that social reality is not something fixed and external. Rather, we

take it as dynamic, fluid, and distinct for each individual (Burton and Bartlett, 2009; Duff, 2008; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2009; Silverman, 2010). According to Merriam (2009), "Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the research as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigation strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive" (p. 39). This approach enabled us to listen to the participants' stories to better understand the phenomenon under question (Baxter and Jack, 2008). In terms of scope, we limited the study to only one academic unit/department of the University of Sindh (where the main author was teaching English) from where EFL learners were invited to participate. This is a single-case study with only one specific classroom of learners as a bounded system that characterises the unit of analysis (Merriam, 2009).

3.1 Semi-structured interviews

We collected data through semi-structured interviews in Sindhi—participants' first language (L1). It was anticipated that the participants would feel comparatively less anxious, more relaxed and they would find it easier to share their experiences regarding EFL anxiety in their L1 rather than second language (L2). It was particularly so because they had to speak in English in front of the interviewer—the one who was also their language teacher. The decision of taking interviews in L1 was in line with the evidence of Gass and Mackey (2000) that foreign language learners participating in interviews might give inadequate responses in L2 because of some perceived fear of making errors in the target language. This was a particular risk in this case due to the very nature of the topic of the interview being about participants' foreign language anxiety itself. Moreover, the focus of the interviews was not to analyse language competence involving linguistic features and/or grammatical correctness. Rather, the main aim was to understand the participants' own accounts, perceptions, and experiences of foreign language anxiety. It was not deemed necessary to conduct the full-length interviews in English. The participants were also told that their language competence was not being assessed; hence, there were no right or wrong answers. As such the respondents were able to respond to interview questions as naturally as possible (see Friedman, 2012).

3.2 Participants

For this small-scale qualitative study, the interviewees were selected based on the purposive sampling method. This method was selected because the main author of this paper observed a high level of anxiety among students from three departments combined in a single classroom for remedial English classes at the University of Sindh. These students were in the second semester of second year undergraduate program with an average age of nineteen years. The combined

classroom consisted of seventy students. Ten students were approached for the interviews; however, only seven of them—four female and three male students—agreed and participated in the interview.

3.3 Ethical Considerations
We informed the potential participants about the nature and purpose of this study. Additionally, we informed them that their participation was totally voluntary and that it would not impact their grades or relationship with the researcher or any of their other teachers. We also assured the participants that their anonymity would be maintained. The interviews were audio-recorded after they read and signed the informed consent.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure
We coded and analysed the seven interviews thematically. We followed the deductive-inductive approach that not only seeks evidence for *a priori* themes (communication apprehension, fear of public speaking, fear of negative evaluation, and text anxiety) but also looks for themes that may emerge (e.g. fear of forgetting vocabulary, and fear of opposite gender) by concentrating on the unexpected patterns in the responses (Creswell, 1998; Friedman, 2012; Silverman, 2010). We simultaneously transcribed and translated the interviews to maintain the nature of contextual discourse rather than the verbatim translation. For validity, the translated transcripts were cross-checked by the interviewees and another researcher. The suggested corrections were incorporated.

4. Findings
In this section, we present the detailed analysis of our findings based on a priori themes as well as the themes that emerged from the data. From the four a priori themes – communication apprehension, fear of public speaking, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety – the two themes (i.e. fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety) were combined together as we received similar responses to these. We also found two emergent themes – fear of forgetting vocabulary and fear of opposite gender – that are presented following the a priori themes here.

4.1 Communication Apprehension
As discussed in the literature review above, EFL learners may feel communication apprehension. In that, they worry about making grammatical mistakes, inaccurate pronunciation and their overall language proficiency, particularly when they compare themselves with others. Resultantly, they may consider themselves as weaker than others (Toth, 2012).

In the interviews, a female respondent (F3) reported a negative perception about herself in speaking English when compared to the others. She said:

"I feel very good but at the same time I feel an inferiority complex; that's why I cannot speak English without any hesitation. I also wish to [be able to] speak fluently like them in the classroom, in front of everyone without getting stressed." (F3)

It shows that the interviewee felt good about speaking English; however, she hesitated to speak English in front of others due to a lack of fluency in her speech as compared to that of others hence felt herself inferior to others. She wished that she could speak in front of others without feeling that stress.

A male participant (M2) also reported some physical symptoms of communication apprehension. He reported:

"I feel trembling. My heartbeat becomes very fast. I also stammer. When I was a student in an English language centre, I had felt these things and I still feel these things whenever I speak English." (M2)

Furthermore, this study found that the majority of the participants thought themselves to be weaker at speaking English when compared to others. According to the foreign language anxiety theory, this type of feeling may lead sufferers to feel some symptoms of anxiety such as rapid heartbeat, trembling and hesitation.

4.2 Fear of public speaking
Referring back to the literature review, as MacIntyre and Thiverge (1995) defined fear of public speaking as "a fear and uneasiness caused by a potentially threatening situation (real or anticipated) of speaking before a group of people" (p.456). Accordingly, EFL learners become self-critical (Daly, Vangelisti & Lawrence, 1989; MacIntyre and MacDonald, 1998) where the fear of the audience plays the main role to increase the anxiety level of the learners. Self-critical learners may consider themselves less competent than the audience (Beatty, 1988). Fear of public speaking was found to be a high anxiety provoking factor among English-language learners at the University of Sindh.

Four of the seven participants expressed feelings of anxiety while speaking English before other students and teachers. One of the female participants (F4) reported that she felt losing confidence when she spoke English in front of others in the classroom. She feared if she spoke English, others would laugh at her:

"I think at that time people will laugh at me and then the words don't come into my mind". (F4)

Furthermore, the participant (M3) while speaking English before others thought that he was weaker as compared to his class-mates; therefore, he could not speak English before others. He stated:

"I think that my other fellows, I mean, classmates are better in speaking English than me. This feeling makes me more worried and I cannot speak English." (M3)

Moreover, when he speaks English in the classroom, reportedly he seems to be more scared of the competent class fellows.

"They will not think something is wrong because most of them are at the same level as I am. At the same time, it is my feeling that my class fellows who are very good at speaking English will laugh at me." (M3)

F1 reported her uneasiness while speaking English. Sometimes, her hands get 'pale and cold', and she starts sweating too:

"Whenever I want to speak English in the classroom, in front of everyone, I get stressed; therefore, I give [it] up. Though I know the importance of English, I am unable to speak it in the classroom." (F1)

Another participant (F2) reported similar symptoms of anxiety. She also told the interviewer that she forgot to recall the words while speaking English. She said:

"I get pale; I start to shiver, and I get annoyed at myself at that time. When I leave the stage then everything, or you can say every word comes in my mind that I should have used or spoken, while standing on the stage." (F2)

The findings mentioned above suggest that most of the learners perceive themselves as being in a threatening situation while speaking English in front of others (MacIntyre & Thiverege, 1995). Five among seven participants shared their severe experiences of anxiety while speaking English in front of an audience. These participants had some presumptions about the audience in that they would laugh at them. This was followed by the self-criticism which made them feel scared of speaking English in front of others. This 'stage fright' caused the loss of self-confidence among them, blocked their mind, and they felt as though their lips 'glued', as one of the participants (F3) reported. They only start to feel normal again once they leave the stage.

4.3 Fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety
Four of the seven participants mentioned the apprehension of being negatively evaluated either by teachers or by their class fellows. As previously discussed in the literature review, one symptom of foreign language anxiety is that students

have a fear of negative evaluation and are scared that they will not to get good marks and grades from their teachers in the classroom; they also fear that they will have a bad social impression from others.

A female participant (F1) reported that she feared being considered 'weak and dull in studies' by her fellows. She said:

"I get scared if I speak wrong sentences and then [worry about] what other students will feel. They will consider me dull and weak in the studies and they will make fun [of me]. They will laugh at me." (F1)

When asked about speaking English in front of the teacher, another participant (F2) expressed a high level of stress and anxiety and her inability to speak English in front of the teacher in the classroom. She reported:

"I also cannot speak English in front of the teacher. Sometimes I can speak English in front of the other students because most of the students in my classroom are like us in their studies. But I can never speak if the teacher is the in the classroom." (F2)

Furthermore, a male participant (M3) explained that he felt hesitation and sometimes she was ashamed of not speaking accurate English in front of the teacher despite trying a lot. He stated:

"[…] the teacher will think that at this age and at the university level [I'm at] I cannot speak accurate English and [don't have a] good vocabulary. I feel shame at that time. This feeling makes me more anxious. Then I lose the confidence to speak English in the classroom." (M3)

Participant F3 reported the similar perception of being negatively evaluated if she spoke incorrect sentences. She said:

"When I speak English, I think that other people will look at me and will say about me that I am very weak in my studies." (F3)

However, participant F4 did not report of being scared of her teacher and showed a positive attitude towards speaking English in such a situation:

"I feel very good when the teacher calls me. I want to be [a] very active student in the classroom. I want to make my teacher happy with [my] performance. It feels good when the teacher calls me to speak. This means she is giving me importance in the classroom." (F4)

When asked about his feelings about speaking English in the classroom, a male participant (M2) expressed that at the moment it is very difficult for him when he is asked to speak English. He mentioned that:

"It is a very tough condition for me when a teacher asks me to come to the dice and speak English. So, at that time, I feel hesitation." (M2)

The results of this study agree with Jones' (2004) findings in which he noted that anxiety "has its origin in the fear of making mistakes and attracting the derision of classmates" (p. 33). Many participants in this study expressed the fear of speaking 'wrong sentences' (as reported by F1) and derision by others (as reported by F1 and F3). They felt themselves in "a fear of appearing awkward, foolish and incompetent in the eyes of learners' peers or others" (Jones, 2004,   p. 31).

This study also confirms the research of Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) in which Gregersen and Horwitz argued that such learners think about their impression/performance in front of their teachers and peers while speaking in a foreign language. They fear about making a negative impression that they may make through mistakes in their speech.

4.4 Fear of forgetting vocabulary

The findings of this study suggest that fear of forgetting vocabulary seems to be the main anxiety inducing factor, as reported by almost all the participants in the interviews. When asked about the difficulty they feel while speaking English in the class room, F1 and F2 reported their problems in vocabulary and accuracy. F1 and F2, for instance, stated:

"I feel difficulty in recalling the vocabulary, and I feel difficulty in speaking accurate sentences too. I feel conscious of my accuracy and grammar." (F1)

"I feel difficulty in using vocabulary." (F2)

For the same question, a male participant's (M3) response was:

"I think of many words which I should use at that time and the proper use of the grammatical sentences too. I feel difficulty in recalling vocabulary. My vocabulary is weak. I feel difficulty in recalling the words." (M3)

M1 also stated his feeling of hesitation when he felt a problem with using proper and suitable vocabulary, grammar and accurate sentences. He said:

"I feel confused. My heart [starts] thumping [and] becomes very fast. Sometimes I feel sweating and shivering too. I feel difficulty in using proper and suitable vocabulary and accurate sentences. My vocabulary is weak. If I knew more vocabulary, I would have spoken better English." (M1)

The fear of forgetting or lack of vocabulary is the feeling which was reported by another participant (M2) as well:

"I think my grammar is fine but I'm lacking in vocabulary. Though I know those words but when I speak English, I always forget words. The words don't come into my mind. However, when I leave the stage then automatically those words come into my mind." (M2)

As these findings reflect, the fear of forgetting vocabulary comes forth as the most anxiety provoking factor among the undergraduate students of the University of Sindh. Because of the fear of being unable to recall the words, students feel 'confusion, rapid heartbeat, sweating, shivering' as expressed by M1.

In addition to 'forgetting' vocabulary, 'selecting' suitable vocabulary was also considered as the anxiety inducing factor by the participants (as reported by M1). It seems to support the findings of Shabani (2012) which concluded that "anxiety can prevent learners from applying the correct vocabulary and structures while speaking" (p. 2382).

4.5 Fear of opposite gender
Fear of opposite gender turned out to be a new theme in our data. Many participants expressed that they were scared of the opposite gender when speaking English in front of an audience. They reported their feeling of being almost unable to speak English in front of the opposite gender. As reportedly?? the girls got scared of boys, the boys also disclosed their fear of the girls. One of the female interviewees (F1) reported:

"My hands get pale and cold. I start sweating as well because at that time I feel high level of stress when I speak English in front of boys." (F1)

F4 reported that she spoke English by using simple vocabulary which she knew. She said:

"Yes, I can speak English at that time. Actually, I can speak English in front of girls; even some of my friends say that my English is not so bad when I talk. However, the problem is that I cannot speak English in front of the boys." (F4)

A male interviewee (M1) expressed his fear of the girls. According to him, when compared with speaking English in front of boys, he felt less confident while speaking English if it was before girls stating:

"I have many ideas but when I come in front of my class fellows, I feel confused. I can speak English in front of the boys because we are frank with each other, but I cannot speak English in front of the girls. I feel hesitation, especially because of the girls and because of that hesitation; I forget [my] vocabulary." (M1)

Furthermore, participant M3 reported:

"I cannot speak English in front of the girls. I feel hesitation [and this is] especially because of the girls and because of that hesitation, I forget [my] vocabulary… If there were only boys in the classroom they would not react negatively. However, if there are girls, they might make fun of me and laugh at me." (M3)

Accordingly, findings of this study highlight the 'fear of the opposite gender' among EFL learners not discussed in the literature review as one of the 'a priori' themes. However, five of the seven participants of this study expressed feelings of being scared of speaking English in front of the opposite gender.

5. Discussion

The findings above suggested that among all the factors of foreign language anxiety, fear of forgetting vocabulary was the most anxiety inducing factor (as reported by almost all participants) which led them to experience the highest levels of anxiety. However, many negative perceptions were reported about the fear of public speaking and fear of negative evaluation. As the students' self-perception plays an important role in learning and using a second language (Foss & Reitzel, 1988), the findings of this study suggested that the students had negative perceptions about themselves and their ability to speak English. Almost all of the participants reported to have anxiety in speaking English in front of others in the classroom. Thus, some of the participants' experiences are consistent with the report of Price (1991) that anxious language learners suffer from the "frustration of not being able to make themselves communicate effectively" and they perceive other fellows to be "better at speaking English" than they are (p.105). These findings also support the studies of Young (1990) who found the oral presentation to be the most anxiety producing factor in the classroom.

A number of the participants reported their fear of making mistakes which restrained them from speaking English in the classroom. This may reinforce Jones' (2004) findings that "language anxiety, for an untold number of learners,

has its origin in the fear of making mistakes and attracting the derision of classmates" (p.33). The participants of this study narrated the similar feelings. Some felt ashamed (as reported by one of the speakers in an interview) because of speaking wrong "fear of appearing awkward, foolish and incompetent in the eyes of learners, peers or others" (Jones, 2004, p. 31). Apart from foreign language anxiety, the teachers' perceived expectations were also reported as the debilitating factor of anxiety as reported by some participants. As F2 expressed her feeling that she could never speak before her teacher because her teacher might be disappointed if she spoke any incorrect sentence.

6. Conclusion

This study explored that communication apprehension, fear of public speaking, fear of negative evaluation and the fear of forgetting vocabulary are main factors which created high levels of anxiety in the English language learners. The literature review suggested that some similar factors were already investigated by different researchers in their contexts. Yet, this study found few new factors such as 'fear of forgetting vocabulary' in EFL learners.

The findings of this study are based on some aspects of foreign language anxiety. First, most of the EFL learners have negative perceptions about speaking in the target language that lead them to be anxious about speaking the English language. Second, most of the students feel fear when they have to speak English language in front of the opposite gender.Based on these findings, it may be suggested that the language teachers should be conscious of and sensitive to the physiological, emotional and cognitive states of the learners. This implication is in line with Phillips (1992) who proposed that teachers need to know the emotional and the linguistic needs of the learners for creating a positive atmosphere. The teacher should pay attention to the individual needs of the learners as there are some students who are highly willing to express the knowledge that they have about a given topic but they cannot express it because of their anxiety. Teachers should give encouraging comments to the learners rather than making criticisms about the learners. Preference should be given to the interactive teaching method so that every student could participate in the foreign language classroom.

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