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EFL Teachers' Conceptualizations and Implementation of CLT

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study that examined three EFL teachers' implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in a secondary school in Benin in the light of the characteristic features of CLT outlined by literature in the field. The study also explored the meaning that these teachers make of Communicative Language Teaching in EFL classrooms in order to gain insight into their pedagogical practices. Data collection operations consisted of classroom observations of the participant EFL teachers' pedagogical practices and of follow-up semi-structured interviews in which they described their understanding of CLT and commented on aspects of their teaching. The findings reveal what follows: while the participant EFL teachers show awareness and understanding of the CLT principles through their descriptions, they exhibit classroom practices that are not congruent with the characteristic features of the approach.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), teacher understanding, teacher mental frameworks, teacher pedagogical practices.

Résumé

Cet article présente une étude de cas qui a examiné la mise en oeuvre de l'approche communicative par trois professeurs d'Anglais dans un établissement secondaire au Bénin. Le but de l'étude est de déterminer le degré de compatibilité entre leurs pratiques pédagogiques et les principes de l'approche d'une part, et d'autre part, entre leurs conceptions de l'approche et leurs comportements pédagogiques. L'analyse des données collectées à partir des observations de classe et des commentaires faits par les participants sur l'approche au cours des interviews qui ont suivi ont permis de découvrir que leurs pratiques pédagogiques ne reflètent pas l'approche communicative bien qu'ils soient conscients des principes de ladite approche.

Mots-clés: Approche communicative, Enseignement de l'Anglais langue étrangère, conceptions de l'enseignant, représentations de l'enseignant, pratiques pédagogiques.

Introduction

This study examines how three EFL teachers implement CLT in a secondary school in Benin, uncovers their understanding of the approach, and sheds light on the influence of their perceptions on their instructional decisions and practices.

Since the 1970s, there has been a growing interest in communicative language teaching in ESL as well as in EFL settings. The goal of language teaching is, therefore, to develop "*learners' communicative competence*" (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p.69). This shift in the way language should be taught starts from a theory of language as communication. However, while the implementation of CLT has been easy in many ESL settings, studies

indicate that it has encountered some difficulties in EFL contexts. These difficulties often relate to the status of the language in EFL social and educational contexts, to teachers' beliefs about EFL teaching and learning, to their beliefs about the language, and to their past learning experiences as EFL students.

Nonetheless, CLT, as a language teaching approach, is still promoted through many EFL curricula in a number of EFL settings where the EFL syllabus has a similar approach; for example, a skill-based syllabus, a task-based syllabus, a notional/functional syllabus, a competency-based syllabus. That is the case of secondary schools in Benin where CLT is promoted through competency-based syllabi. The main goal of these competency-based syllabi is to develop in EFL learners the skills that they need to communicate in the English language in a variety of real-life situations. Therefore, in EFL classrooms, a special emphasis is put on the use of CLT to help learners develop communicative competence.

The competency-based EFL curriculum was introduced in Benin secondary schools in 2002. Its implementation started with an experimentation phase in a few secondary schools and was generalized in 2005. Following its introduction, several concerns were raised about its implementation. On the one hand, teachers were blamed for their lack of competence in implementing it. On the other hand, teachers often complained that they face difficulties while implementing this curriculum. However, little attention has been paid to the way teachers have implemented the curriculum and to the realities and constraints they have been confronted with so far. Pointing to the lack of attention to how teachers implement curriculum innovations, Carless (2004) posits that *“how teachers implement changes in pedagogy is an important area which does not receive sufficient attention”* (p. 640). To highlight the need for a research focus on that area, Ramanathan & Morgan, (2007) argue that *“research on individual beliefs, everyday contexts, and practices, casts an instructive light on potential obstacles to policy initiatives and reforms”* (p. 449).

Therefore, investigating teachers' actions in the classroom with a view to uncovering their mental frameworks will help educational agents at various levels gain insights into their visions and actions.

1. Theoretical overview

1.1. Teachers' conceptualizations of language teaching

Research in language classrooms shows that the way teachers go about language teaching is influenced to a great extent by their theoretical knowledge, values, beliefs, and past learning experiences as students in language classrooms. These variables also play a

crucial role in determining the meaning they make of classroom events, their perceptions of how language is learnt, and their attitudes to curriculum innovations (Ellis, 2006; Kubanyiova, 2006; Patinvoh, 1999, 2011; Richards, 2000; Van den Berg, 2002).

Most of the studies that inquired into teachers' actions have in common the notion that teachers' beliefs strongly affect their behaviour. It is therefore necessary for research to uncover the beliefs that teachers hold about teaching and learning with a view to understanding how they conceptualize their work, and the cognitive processes underlying their instructional practices.

However, some research studies have been carried out in the field of ELT to investigate EFL teachers' implementation of CLT (e.g., Choi, 1999; Farrell & Lim Poh, 2005; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Li, 1998; Wang, 2000; to name a few). The findings have shown that though the EFL teachers who participated in the studies revealed beliefs that were congruent with the CLT principles, there was a discrepancy between their pedagogical practices and these CLT principles. Such a discrepancy is often due to the constraints associated with the implementation of CLT in an EFL context: teachers' lack of confidence in implementing CLT, the inappropriateness of the EFL context due to large class size, and student factors.

1.2. The characteristic features of CLT

Researchers in the field of English Language Teaching have pointed to a variety of features as being the characteristics of CLT. According to Larsen-Freeman (1986), in CLT, "*almost everything is done with a communicative intent*" (p.132), that is, language is taught through communicative activities such as games, simulations, role-plays, problem-solving tasks, with students working in small groups, interacting with one another, and trying to negotiate meaning. The rationale underlying the use of such activities is that they enable the learners to develop adequate strategies to deal with real life communication and to understand authentic English (Canale and Swain, 1980). Also, communicative language teaching requires the use of authentic materials (Long and Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 1991; Widdowson, 1996).

Richards and Rodgers (1986), on their part, point to meaning and contextualization as being the most common features characterizing CLT. They also point to the learners' central role during the learning process, to a consideration of their individual interests, needs, goals, and styles in the design of instructional methods, and to a classroom atmosphere that fosters effective learning. Basing on these features, communicative language teaching can be considered as a language teaching approach that involves learners in carrying out learning tasks, more specifically communicative tasks that are meaningful to them, realistic, and engaging in a non-threatening and motivating environment.

2. Methodology

This study aims to examine EFL teachers' pedagogical practices in the light of the characteristic features of CLT outlined by literature in the field and to determine the impact of their conceptualizations of CLT on the way they go about its implementation in EFL classes.

To identify the features of the EFL teachers' pedagogical practices, and to determine the meaning that they make of CLT, the following questions directed the study:

- 1- How do the EFL teachers implement CLT in their classrooms?
- 2- What meanings do they make of CLT?
- 3- Do their meanings of CLT inform their teaching?

These questions above attempt to uncover what follows:

- a- What are the features of the teachers' classroom practices?
- b- What are the CLT features in the teachers' classroom practices?
- c- How do they interpret their classroom practices?
- d- What meanings do they make of CLT?
- e- What is the influence of their meanings of CLT on their classroom practices?

The participants are three experienced secondary school EFL teachers. All three have knowledge of communicative language teaching. The table below presents background information about each of them with pseudonyms.

Table 1: Information about the Participants

Pseudonym	Qualification/degree	Years of EFL teaching experience
Maggie	Junior secondary school teaching certificate (BAPES)	15
Fred	Senior secondary school teaching certificate (CAPES)	12
Michael	Senior secondary school teaching certificate (CAPES)	8

« BAPES : Brevet d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement Secondaire »

« CAPES : Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement Secondaire »

To collect data for this study, non-participant observation of classroom events was carried out four times over a period of one month for each participant from mid-October 2013 to mid-November 2013. The field notes taken during the observation served to make expanded accounts of the teaching/learning events. These accounts were analyzed inductively

following Bodgan and Biklen's (1992) inductive analysis procedures. This has helped to identify the salient features of the participant teachers' pedagogical practices. To have a deeper understanding of their classroom practices, a follow-up semi-structured interview was carried out with each of them in order to inquire into the meaning they make of CLT, to have them comment on aspects of their teaching and provide the rationale for their actions basing on the written accounts of the observed teaching/learning events provided by the researcher.

The participants' comments were audio-taped, transcribed and analyzed inductively in order to identify the concepts that emerge from them. These concepts were compared with the patterns that emerged from the observation data as being representative of the salient features of their teaching in order to determine whether or not their meanings of CLT are compatible with their classroom practices.

The observation data as well as the interview data are displayed in a case-study format which presents the description of each participant's profile in terms of (1) the salient features of his teaching, (2) the concepts that emerged from his comments on CLT, and (3) the impact of his meaning of CLT on his classroom practices

3. Findings

3.1. Maggie's profile

3.1.1. The salient features of her teaching

Maggie was observed teaching a group of 45 beginning EFL students in the first form. She meets them twice a week. Both sessions are scheduled for 05:00 pm to 07:00 pm. The data gathered from the observation of the teaching/learning events reveal the following salient features characteristic of her teaching:

First, the teaching/learning events show no teacher effort to design tasks and materials that would involve learners in meaningful interaction. During her teaching she rather showed a heavy reliance on the textbook instead of restructuring the tasks proposed in the book to contextualize language use.

Second, there was an emphasis on learners' involvement in mechanical practice of language patterns. She conducted drills and got the learners to carry out the role play of dialogues, a task for which they rather read out the sentences from their books. Though the learners were given opportunities to be involved in pair conversations, the speaking tasks showed no communication purpose as much of the student-student interaction was intended to make learners practise saying new language patterns in dialogues rather than communicating real information about themselves.

Third, there was an over-emphasis on student-teacher interaction during the lessons with the students involved in oral reproduction of the forms modeled by the teacher, and in answering the teacher's questions. In both types of activities, errors were corrected by the teacher when they occur. The fourth salient feature of her teaching relates to her overt explanation of grammar rules during the lessons.

As the data indicate, Maggie's teaching does not show the characteristic features of CLT. Though the learners were involved in role playing dialogues in most of her teaching, the activity was purely manipulative as it focused on pattern practices as in the audio-lingual method. After conducting the repetition drill, she could contextualize the tasks intended for practice so that they meet the requirements of a communicatively-oriented design. This would enable the teacher to shift from the role of controller to the role of facilitator, and the learners would have the opportunity to take on a greater responsibility for their learning through self construction of their knowledge.

3.1.2. Her comments on CLT

For Maggie, CLT means the promotion of communication in the language classroom. She considers it as an approach which fosters communication in the target language. Here is what she said about it: "*By CLT, I understand the fact of teaching learners how to communicate.*"

According to her, CLT can be promoted through classroom activities such as group discussions on students' answers to reading comprehension questions, role-play of dialogues constructed by learners on the basis of a model provided, and even through oral reproduction of sentence patterns, and students' answers to the teacher's questions. She commented on these last two aspects in the following words:

When I ask them questions, for example, and they build their own sentences to give the answers, I can call that communication. It is not given to anybody to reproduce sentences that they heard. So this kind of reproduction is communication because you have to memorize and to reproduce what you have memorized.

As these two statements indicate, Maggie also holds some misconceptions about the nature of communication in CLT. Contrary to her understanding, CLT rather emphasizes student-student meaningful and purposeful interaction in the target language. It does not consider language learning as a process of mechanical habit formation occurring through the memorization of language patterns. It is true that with beginners, as is the case of Maggie's students, drills provide the learners with language patterns by means of teacher, tape, or book, but they should not be void of meaning or similar to drills in the audio-lingual method.

Commenting on aspects of her teaching, especially her explicit explanation of grammar rules, she pointed to some kind of 'eclecticism' she adheres to by making it clear to me that she need not stick to one approach or method in her teaching. She asserted as follows:

Normally in the competency-based approach, we should go from tasks to make students draw the rules, but it sometimes happens that maybe because of the time, the teacher is obliged to teach them grammar in the old way. In fact, it is not because we are using the competency-based approach that I am obliged to be tied to this approach. I can refer to the traditional method or to other methods to teach my lesson, provided they understand.

Maggie acknowledged that her approach to grammar teaching shows features of the traditional method, and that it does not show any feature of CLT; yet she considers that she cannot be "*tied*" to one method. Her rationale for such an attitude does not, unfortunately, relate to any concern for variety in her teaching, but to time constraint. In her opinion, time constraint constitutes a hindrance to communicative grammar teaching in a competency-based language teaching context.

Alluding to other hindrances to the implementation of CLT in her classroom, she pointed to the inadequate working conditions. These include the large class size, the inconvenient time period allocated for English classes in the time-table, the insufficient material supply, and the uncomfortable physical conditions of the classroom. Here are her comments on these issues:

Some of them chat in French. They discuss about other things. That is why the classroom is always noisy. If it were not the overcrowded classrooms that we have, we could check if everybody really participates in the task. If all of them had the book, it would better the situation. Another thing relates to the period scheduled for the English lesson which is not appropriate at all. It is after the break. It is also the last class of the day. The students, at the end of the day, are tired for English. Sometimes there is no electricity, so we are obliged to stop earlier at half past six.

3.1.3. The impact of her meaning of CLT on her classroom practices

The trends in Maggie's comments reveal a lot of discrepancies between the meaning she makes of the approach and her classroom practices. She believes that CLT is promoted through activities such as group discussion in English, cooperative construction of dialogues, meaningful role-play, and inductive grammar teaching. However, she resorts to a teacher-dominated pattern of teaching characterized by overt explanation of grammar rules, an over-emphasis on student-teacher interaction and on mechanical oral reproduction of language

patterns, features which are due to the context-related hindrances she alluded to and which also reflect the misconceptions she holds about the nature of communication in CLT.

3.2. Fred's profile

3.2.1. The salient features of his teaching

Fred was observed while he was teaching a group of 42 EFL students in a fifth form. The salient features of his teaching are the following:

There was an over-emphasis on student-teacher interaction during the lessons, with the teacher calling on individual students for answers to his questions. Group work was introduced on occasions during the lessons to have the students compare answers to the tasks assigned to them. Interactions within the different groups were mostly carried out in French despite the teacher's prompts to have the learners share ideas using English. There were no genuine communicative activities during the lessons. Fred's teaching shows almost the same features as Maggie's as regards the nature of pair work activities. Student-pairs read out the sentences from their books when they were called on to role play a pair conversation. The learners were invited on occasions to get into groups to compare their answers to reading comprehension questions.

The data from Fred's teaching show the features of traditional classroom practices. During the lessons, he did not emphasize interaction between the learners, neither did he give them the chance to complete tasks that require collaborative problem-solving, or real communicative activities for which they would have to negotiate meaning. Most of the teaching /learning events in which he was observed were teacher-centered.

3.2.2. His comments on CLT

In his attempt to describe his understanding of CLT, Fred compares the approach to the competency-based approach. He defines it as an approach which emphasizes learners' interaction through group work activities, and which gives attention to their needs, interests, and autonomy. He stated his opinion in the following words:

Communicative language teaching means that in a classroom we have to give them the opportunity to express themselves freely. We have to motivate them by taking into account their interests. In CLT, it is very important to get learners into group work to exchange, to share. The approach we use today is the competency-based approach, and it has some principles. The first one is that the students be at the center of the learning. We have to give them some responsibilities so that they be actors of their own learning.

However, he too acknowledged that there are aspects of his teaching that do not reflect the characteristic features of CLT. For example, he pointed to his approach to teaching grammar, vocabulary, and language functions, which in his opinion, still reflects the traditional method. He also pointed to the fact that he pays no attention to students' needs and interests, and to his emphasis on student-teacher interaction. He confessed what follows:

When I tackle the grammar, the function, or vocabulary aspects, the presentation phase reflects the old method. It doesn't reflect CLT. I go straight by presenting the idea or the concept to them instead of giving them time to discover the rule by themselves.

I don't consider the students' real needs because of the time. Sometimes, there are inspectors who come to visit. They want to see where you are, the level of implementation of the curriculum. So I have to speed up. I don't take into account their interests, their real needs.

In his explanation of the incongruence between his understanding of CLT and what he actually does in his classroom, he pointed to the following factors that he considers as major hindrances to his implementation of the approach: time and curriculum-related constraints, learners' low level in English and their attitudes to EFL learning, and the learning conditions. Here is what he declared about each of these issues:

The level of our students is too low. It happens that they believe that English is difficult, and no matter what you do for them, they neglect." "The time factor prevents me from giving them time to come up with their own answers. We have to speed up, we have a curriculum." "There is also another matter related to the conditions of learning. For example, the large number of students in the classroom, discipline problems. It is very difficult to go through this situation." "I don't think the goal of CLT is reachable because of these conditions, and students' speaking French. They have the language in common, which is a handicap.

3.2.3. The impact of his meaning of CLT on his teaching

The main point about Fred's comment on CLT and on his teaching that is worth pointing out here relates to his full understanding of what CLT is and of what its implementation entails. He is also aware of the gap between his classroom behaviours and the CLT principles, as well as of the fact that an effective implementation of the approach is not possible due to the constraints he pointed to. His awareness translates into the reality of his classroom as the teaching he carried out does not reflect the features of CLT, but it rather exhibits his belief that the goal of CLT is not reachable.

3.3. Michael's profile

3.3.1. The salient features of his teaching

Michael was observed teaching EFL to a group of 24 students in the fifth grade. The analysis of the observation data reveals the following features characteristic of his teaching.

Most of his teaching consisted in relying totally on the textbook and in covering its content step-by step. His students were not given exposure to real communicative tasks as is the case with the students of the other two teachers. When they get into pairs or groups on occasions, they were asked to cross-check the answers they got after completing a task individually. No effort was made by the teacher to get them involved in thought-provoking tasks for which they will have to carry out discussion in English and come up with solutions to a problem. For example, during one of the lessons, the learners were asked to get into groups of four members to cross-check their answers after they have labeled (in individual work) the sentences in a paragraph. Moreover, the students resort to French very often during the exchanges within their groups.

The other aspect of Michael's teaching relates to the types of interactions that took place during his teaching. Most of his teaching was teacher-centered, which explains his deductive approach to grammar teaching. In CLT, grammar teaching should be carried out through inductive or discovery learning of underlying rules of language use and organization. It appears from the data presented that Michael's teaching does not reflect communicative language teaching. Though he attempted on occasions to get learners involved in pair and group work, the tasks he assigned to them did not prove to be engaging and communicative.

3.3.2. His comments on CLT

The data gathered from Michael during the follow-up interview indicate the following trends in his understanding of CLT:

First, he considers that CLT helps learners to develop communication skills through exposure to communicative activities that promote speaking and self-construction of knowledge. He described his understanding as follows: *"CLT, I think that it is an approach that can help learners to be communicative. The lessons will be based on communicative activities. These are activities that help the learners to speak. It is a way to make the learners to construct their knowledge."*

He also sees CLT as an approach which focuses on oral communication, and he considers as a failure any EFL learning that does not meet this goal. He stated his opinion in the following words: *"The goal of EFL learning is communication. If the students cannot do this, there is a problem with the teaching."*

In his comments on aspects of his teaching, he pointed to the mismatch between his teaching and the meaning he makes of CLT. He said: *“I think that there is a gap between what I have just said about CLT and what happens in my class. The majority of the students are not able to speak. I think there will always have problem to express themselves.”*

In an attempt to explain what accounts for this situation, he pointed to the status of the language in Benin educational system and to other factors, namely, the amount of time allocated for EFL teaching in the school, to a time-based syllabus, to the evaluation system, and to the physical conditions of his classroom. Here is what he said about these aspects:

We have to know that the time allotted to EFL teaching cannot allow teachers to go beyond most of the time because there is a program to cover. Also, there is a test every five weeks. Then, I should reach a level before the test. This aspect of the situation makes me stick to the book, and sometimes I forget that the purpose of learning a language is to speak it.

It is sometimes difficult for me to make them work in group. If the classroom were spacious, I think there will be more interaction. Another handicap is the time factor. Managing group work is time-consuming because the students lack vocabulary to handle the task.

3.3.3. The impact of his meaning of CLT on his teaching

As Michael himself pointed out in his comments, his teaching does not reflect the meaning he makes of CLT. His understanding of CLT as an approach that emphasizes student-student interaction in the classroom and promotes learners' active involvement in communicative activities does not translate into his teaching which, for the most part, is teacher-centered.

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that all three participant EFL teachers carried out teaching that is not congruent with the principles of CLT. They exhibited pedagogical practices that show the following traditional classroom features: teacher-centeredness, heavy reliance on the student book, overt explanation of grammar rules, the use of non-authentic tasks and materials, and the use of French. It is argued in this study that communication should be the primary focus of a language class, and it should be rooted in learners' needs. Therefore, language learners should be given the opportunity to do a variety of things with the language. To reach this goal, they need exposure to a range of authentic tasks and materials that will prepare them efficiently for authentic communication in real-life contexts.

Another aspect of the findings that deserves consideration relates to the teacher's and learners' roles. The observation data reveal that the participants find it difficult to shift from a teacher-dominated pattern of teaching to a learner-centered approach to EFL teaching. CLT adheres to the principle of learner-centeredness, which requires that teachers change their traditional role and become material designers and facilitators in a language class where learners are actively involved in meaningful interaction and collaborative construction of knowledge.

A third issue to be discussed in this study relates to the participant EFL teachers' familiarity with the competency-based approach (CBA), an approach which is referred to as an extension of the CLT movement in that it aims to achieve the goal of communicative competence in EFL learning, but it focuses on the outcomes of learning as its driving force to reach this goal (Richards, 2006). Though the participants are familiar with the principles of CBA, their classroom practices do not reflect the features of CLT expected in a competency-based language teaching context. The skills of communication that the learners are expected to acquire and be able to demonstrate in real-life situations are not emphasized in their teaching.

Besides, the findings from the interview data indicate that the participants are aware of the fact that the overall goal of CLT is to promote communication in the target language through communicative activities and student-student interaction in the language class. However, they failed to put this principle into practice in their teaching. The interview data also reveal their awareness of the fact that in the competency-based approach, language teaching should be communicative. Despite their awareness of the link between CLT and CBA and of the characteristic features of communicative language teaching, they still resort to a traditional pattern of language teaching.

All three teachers acknowledged the discrepancies between their understanding of CLT and their classroom practices. They all pointed to the same context-related constraints that account for these discrepancies, namely, a time-based curriculum, the evaluation system which emphasizes language learning for exams, the lack of materials, the status of the language, and large class size. Of these constraints, the fact that the curriculum is time-based and exam-oriented constitutes a major concern for the participants. CLT implies a view of learning as a lifelong process rather than something done to prepare students for an exam. With regard to this aspect, there is a need for reformulating curriculum goals in accordance with the requirements of communicative language teaching for an effective implementation of the approach in Benin. Moreover, EFL teachers need to be given the opportunity to reflect on

how they perceive CLT in the context where they teach, how it should work, and the conditions for its effective implementation from their perspectives.

5. Suggestions

Though the participant EFL teachers show understanding of CLT and awareness of what it entails, they consider its implementation as being problematic because of some context-related factors. With regard to this, the study suggests what follows:

First, in teacher education contexts, teacher educators in both pre-service and in-service teacher education should consider the gap between trainees' knowledge of the teaching theories and their practices. They may design and teach their course module following the principles of the teaching approach or methods they want to acquaint their trainees with. Having the latter experience a teaching approach or method as learners in the teacher education context will help to develop in them confidence in the approach and the ability to use it efficiently later in their classrooms.

Second, to help improve the teaching of English in the school investigated, a special emphasis should be put on listening and speaking activities along with the previous focus on writing and reading. This requires that teachers be confident in the approach and that adequate resources be made available by the school authorities.

Third, it is worth pointing out here that while competency-based curriculum designers expect EFL teachers to emphasize CLT in their classrooms, they are not aware of the issues related to its implementation. Therefore, there is need for a collaborative reflection on ways to adapt the approach to our secondary school contexts and on possible solutions to these issues.

Conclusion

The study raises crucial issues related to the implementation of CLT that educational authorities need to be aware of. Not all approaches can be easily applied in every context, and the implementation of CLT presents many challenges for EFL teachers in Benin. As a matter of fact, to expect a successful implementation of the approach, it is necessary to listen to the teachers' voices. This will help gain insight into the meaning they make of the approach and their perceptions of its implementation in their work environment in order to respond to their concerns. It is true that in an educational reform, teachers are the central agents of the change. Nonetheless, the work environment is a crucial variable to take into account in the change.

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