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Articles

ESL teacher and department autonomy in English-medium international schools

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Abstract: Although the English-medium international school market continues to grow and primarily enroll English language learners, the autonomy of ESL teachers and the ESL department appears to be eroding, as some schools have already combined ESL with the English department or Special Education Needs (SEN). This quantitative survey-based study with 279 participants explored and compared the opinions of 80 ESL, 119 Primary, and 80 Secondary English teachers concerning ESL teacher and ESL department autonomy in English-medium international schools. Data from the study showed that many participants believed that decision-making processes concerning ESL support should be distributed beyond the ESL teachers and ESL department. Further, data showed there was a statistically significant difference between ESL and Secondary English teachers concerning the combination of ESL provision with the department of English language arts or literature. However, there was no statistically significant difference between ESL and Primary teachers concerning whether ESL should be combined with SEN. Overall, the findings of this study revealed that many teachers in international schools could not differentiate between ESL support and English Language Arts and Literature and ESL and SEN, and as a result, ESL teacher and ESL department autonomy is in peril.

Keywords: ESL department, ESL teacher, International school.

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Introduction

English language acquisition is an essential element of study for most students attending English-medium international schools. With the rising numbers of English language learners enrolling in English-medium international schools (ISC Research, 2019), the assumption that English as a second language (ESL) teachers and ESL departments would be integral parts of these schools would appear logical. However, this assumption can be a fallacy, as some ESL teachers and ESL departments are being subjected to irrelevance as they are combined with other departments, such as the English and Special Education Needs (SEN) departments, thereby suffering the loss of autonomy. Ultimately, the problem is when ESL provision stops being recognized as an independent area of study (Carder, 1991) and is considered a set of strategies or skills (Harper et al., 2008). When ESL teachers and ESL departments are marginalized (Arkoudis, 2007; Carder, 2014), English language learners are usually marginalized, affecting their academic performance (Carder, 2013; Creese, 2005).

The terms international school and English-medium international school are used interchangeably in this study. While there is considerable confusion in what constitutes an international school (Bunnell, 2016),

the participants in this study were teaching at schools that used a non-host country curriculum and English as the medium of instruction. The term ESL teacher is used for teachers who provide direct support for English language learners. For example, English as an additional language (EAL) and English language development (ELD) teachers are designated as ESL teachers. The term Primary teacher is used for foundation, early years, and Primary/Elementary classroom teachers. The term English teacher is used to represent Secondary English teachers who are English Language Arts and Literature teachers, not teachers working with English language acquisition, as the primary purpose of their position. Lastly, the term exit depicts when students have satisfied some form of requirement(s) and stop receiving direct English language support from an ESL teacher.

This study aimed to explore what differences may exist between ESL, Primary, and English teachers concerning ESL teacher and ESL department autonomy in English-medium international schools. The researcher developed the following research questions to guide the study.

1. What differences in opinions, if any, exist between ESL teachers, Primary teachers, and Secondary English teachers concerning who should be involved when decisions are made to exit a student from being classified as an English language learner?
2. What differences in opinions, if any, exist between ESL teachers, Primary teachers, and Secondary English teachers concerning English language learner support as an autonomous entity within an international school?

Understanding current opinions and practice can enable school leaders and educators to make informed decisions concerning policy and practice. In essence, ESL teacher and department autonomy significantly influence an English-medium international school's culture and attitude towards students who receive English language learner instructional support.

ESL teachers and the ESL department

School leaders sometimes downplay the importance of ESL programs and think classroom teachers can do the same work as an ESL teacher and ESL department (Carder, 2011, 2013). Additionally, school leaders and teachers sometimes develop a misconception that ESL teachers use a set of strategies that can easily be acquired and used in a checklist fashion (Arkoudis, 2007; English & Varghese, 2010). Harper et al. (2008) asserted that "The 'ESL as strategy' view diminishes the impact of ELLs [English language learners]' specific linguistic and cultural needs on their language and literacy development, on curriculum content and sequencing, and on their instruction and assessment" (p. 272). Regardless, more and more school leaders are shifting the responsibility of English language learner support teaching to classroom teachers, and Carder (2013) cautioned school leaders against dissolving ESL programs in

the pursuit of progressive aims of mainstream inclusion because many mainstream teachers lack specialized training for working with English language learners. In summary, downplaying the importance of ESL programs and not recognizing ESL teaching as a specialism result in the loss of autonomy for ESL teachers and ESL departments.

While many ESL teachers in international schools are fully qualified teachers, some international schools hire teachers to work with ELLs who do not have in-depth training for working with English language learners. Sometimes trailing spouses are employed as ESL teachers, although they may not have specific training for working with English language acquisition. Examining minimum qualifications for ESL teachers in international schools in East Asia, Lehman (2021) found that of 489 teacher and administrator participants, 21 (4.3%) reported that a Master's Degree or above in TESOL/ESL/Linguistics was required to be an ESL teacher in their school, and 169 (34.6%) reported that an education degree or a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) was the minimum requirement. The education degree or PGCE was not language acquisition specific; therefore, an education degree or PGCE in any area of study would have sufficed. Lehman (2021) further found that 143 (29.2%) of the participants revealed that a university degree and a TEFL certificate were minimum requirements; the remaining percentage consisted of ESL teachers having a TEFL certificate or no qualification at all. In short, ESL teachers should have qualifications that reflect education in second language acquisition (SLA) theory and pedagogy (Carder, 1991; Kalinowski & Carder, 1990; Shoebottom, 2009).

With the ever-increasing numbers of local students being enrolled in international schools, the provision of ESL support should be of primary concern, and some authors have written about this matter. According to Kalinowski and Carder (1990), ESL departments are to be considered a resource point in international schools concerning ESL support, and Gallagher (2008) presented ESL as a hub at the centre of a wheel in which many aspects of an international school are connected via spokes to the hub. Further, Shoebottom (2009) explained how ESL teachers and the department have roles that extend far beyond the primary role of ESL instruction. In summary, ESL teachers and ESL departments should be recognized as autonomous entities and not subjected to marginalization by being combined with the English or SEN departments.

Exiting ESL supportExiting ESL support

Parents of English language learners often expect their child to exit ESL support very quickly. According to Carder (2007), many parents of students in international schools believe their child will develop language ability within three to six months. Studying parent expectations of ESL study in an international school in Vietnam, Lehman (2020) found that 70% of 128 parents thought one year or less was the ideal time for their child to receive ESL support. Further, many parents wish to avoid extra fees that some international schools charge for the provision of ESL

support, which may impact English language learners and ESL teachers. Regardless of whether extra ESL study fees are involved, it is imperative that international schools develop a transparent ESL policy detailing how English language learners are assessed and the benchmarks required for them to exit ESL support.

There is no clear consensus in the international school market concerning how English language learners are assessed, the provision of ESL support, and what criteria should be met to exit ESL support. However, ESL teachers are often the most qualified to determine when students should exit ESL support. For some guidance, international schools and staff can look towards some government agencies in native English-speaking countries for information concerning ESL support. For example, in the United States, Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (20 U.S.C. § 6811, seq., 1965) allows schools and states to establish criteria for exiting ELLs. The Office for Civil Rights (n.d.) in the United States suggests developing a plan that specifies in detail how English language learners will be assessed and which instrument(s) and or methods will be used to assess language and academic ability. Additionally, the Office for Civil Rights (n.d.) holds that students should not exit ESL support until they are able "to participate meaningfully in the regular educational program" (OCR Memorandum, Special Education Programs). Further, schools should have a system for monitoring English language learners for two years after exiting (20 U.S.C. § 6811, seq., 1965). In conclusion, schools should hire ESL teachers based on their training, experience, and language acquisition knowledge and allow those teachers to determine when English language learners no longer require ESL support.

Special education needs and the English department

There are crossovers between ESL instruction and English instruction and between ESL instruction and SEN instruction; however, there are a number of teachers and schools that believe ESL teachers and ESL departments should be merged with the English or SEN departments. Because most English Language Arts and Literature teachers have little to no training in language acquisition, the ESL department should not be combined with the English department (Carder, 2007). Further, Carder (2011) declared that an ESL department "should certainly not come under the aegis of a SEN department," and reasoned that putting English language learners with students who have special education needs could have a "profoundly negative experience" for them; further, to do so, "shows the ignorance of those devising school structures" (p. 5). Additionally, the National Subject Association for EAL (NALDIC) (n.d.) reported that there is little likelihood of a difference in the percentage of English language learners who are also SEN compared to monolingual students who are also SEN. In England, the Department of Education (Department of Education, 2015) stated, "Difficulties related solely to learning English as an additional language are not SEN" (p.

85). Lastly, the Office for Civil Rights (n.d.) in the United States maintains the position that schools "may not assign students to special education programs on the basis of criteria that essentially measure and evaluate English language skills" (OCR Memorandum, Special Education Programs). In conclusion, the Office for Civil Rights in the United States and the Department of Education in England recognize and assert there are distinct differences between the needs of English language learners and the students with Special Education Needs.

Method

Data Analysis

The researcher used SPSS software (v. 27) to perform Pearson chi-square tests (χ^2) with an alpha level of .05. The Pearson chi-square test is a nonparametric test used to measure the distribution of frequencies (Salkind, 2013). Additionally, the Pearson chi-square test can evaluate nominal data (Creswell, 2012; McHugh, 2013). All of the Pearson chi-square test assumptions were met (McHugh, 2013). In addition to the Pearson chi-square test, the results of Fisher's exact test are also reported.

Participants

The researcher conducted random sampling through the online search of school websites for names, positions, and contact information for potential participants. For specific staff to be considered potential participants, the school website had to reveal that the school did not use the host country curriculum and that English was the medium of instruction. The researcher used a separate survey for each group of teachers and purposefully sent a survey specifically to each teacher; therefore, demographic information was not requested in the survey. Because each participant received a survey request sent to their school email address, all participants were working in an international school when they completed the survey. Participants were located in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America; most participants were located in East Asia. The researcher sent a survey request to 476 ESL teachers, 1,836 Primary teachers, and 1,294 Secondary English teachers. Overall, 3,606 teachers received a survey request. After participants with partial answers were removed, a total of 279 international school teacher responses formed the data set for this research study. Of the 279 participants, 80 were ESL teachers, 119 were Primary teachers, and 80 were Secondary English teachers. The surveys were completed during May and June of 2021.

Design and instruments

An observational quantitative research design using cross-sectional surveys was used to collect data. A cross-sectional survey does not manipulate a variable; instead, the survey collects data at a single point in time (Creswell, 2012). Each group of participants received a separate survey containing questions that applied to their group. When cross-comparisons were to be made, the questions were identical. The survey questions for this study were part of longer surveys that the researcher used to gather additional data for other research studies.

To establish content validity, three international school educators, who did not participate in the study, served as experts in the field (Creswell, 2012) and reviewed the research questions and survey questions. For this study, four survey questions were used (see Appendix). The first two questions were asked of all participants. Only ESL teachers and Secondary English teachers were asked the third question, and only ESL teachers and Primary teachers were asked the fourth question. In the introductory email, potential participants were informed of the intentions of the study. Additionally, potential participants were provided a website link to view the research questions and additional information about the study, including biographical information about the researcher. The website also provided a contact box so potential participants could ask questions before and after choosing to complete the survey. The potential participants were not promised any reward and were not coerced into completing the survey. Participation was voluntary, and when taking the survey, none of the questions were mandatory. The researcher used Survey Monkey to host the surveys; all data were stored via a password-protected laptop and password-protected external hard drive.

Results

Research question one

Participants were asked if classroom teachers have a role in deciding when students exit the classification of English language learners. Of the 279 participants who responded to the question, 196 (70.25%) answered yes, and 83 (29.75%) participants answered no. Further, participants were asked who should be involved in the decision-making process of when students exit the classification of being English language learners (see Table 1).

Table 1
Decision-making process for exiting ESL

Table 1. *Decision-making process for exiting ESL*

Teachers *N*=279	ESL Teachers *n*=80	Primary Teachers *n*=119	English Teachers *n*=80
Classroom Teachers	85.00%	85.71%	72.75%
ESL Teacher or ESL Department	97.50%	94.12%	92.50%
Principal or Administrators	32.50%	29.41%	38.75%
Parents	26.25%	43.70%	36.25%

Research question two

ESL teachers and Secondary English teachers were asked if the ESL department should be combined with the English department. The results of a Pearson chi-square test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in whether ESL should be combined with the English department in international schools between ESL teachers (Group 1: n = 80) and Secondary English teachers (Group 2: n = 80), #2 = 18.228, p < 0.001. Fisher's exact test reflected p < 0.001. Figure 1 reflects the percentages of ESL and English teacher responses.

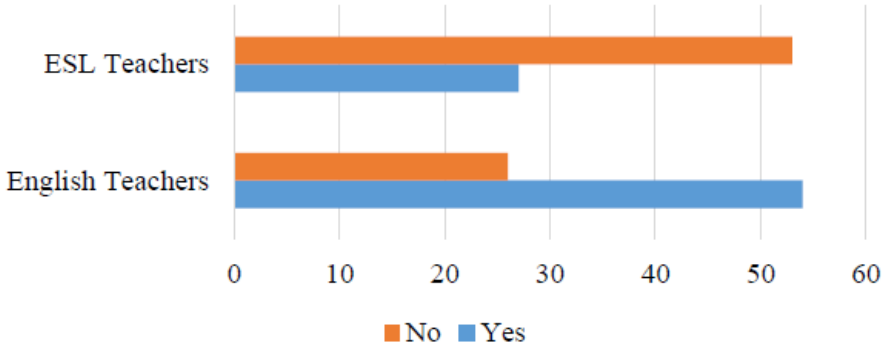

Figure 1
Combine ESL with the English department (in percentages).

Of the 160 ESL and English teachers combined, 81 (50.63%) answered that ESL should be combined with English, while 79 (49.37%) answered that ESL should not be combined with the English department. Additionally, 27 (33.75%) of the 80 ESL teachers believed ESL should be combined with the English department, while 53 (66.25%) answered that it should not be combined. Finally, 54 (67.5%) English teachers answered that ESL should be combined, while 26 (32.5%) answered that it should not be combined.

ESL teachers and Primary teachers were asked if the ESL department should be combined with the SEN department. The results of a Pearson chi-square test revealed that there was not a statistically significant difference in whether ESL should be combined with the SEN department in international schools between ESL teachers (Group 1: n = 80) and Early and Primary teachers (Group 2: n = 119), #2 = 2.165, p = 0.141.

Fisher's exact test reflected p = 0.173. Figure 2 reflects the percentages of ESL and Primary Teacher responses.

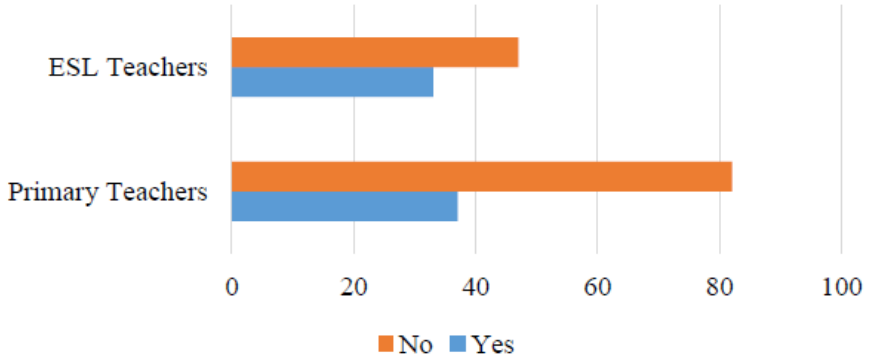

Figure 2
Combine ESL with the SEN department (in percentages).

Of the 199 ESL and Primary teachers, 129 (64.82%) were against combining ESL with SEN, and 70 (35.18%) were for combining ESL with SEN. Additionally, individual groups show that of 80 ESL teachers, 47 (58.75%) were against while 33 (41.25%) were for combining ESL with SEN. Lastly, of the 119 Primary teachers, 82 (68.91%) were against, and 37 (31.09%) were for combining ESL with SEN.

Discussion

Exiting ESL support

Participant responses revealed that a sizeable percentage of classroom teachers in international schools should have a voice in the process of exiting students from ESL support. The responses by the respondents show that many teachers believed the decision-making process for exiting students from receiving ESL support should involve multiple stakeholders. ESL teachers and Primary teachers held similar views concerning classroom teachers, ESL teachers or ESL department, and principals and administrators being involved in the process of when students exit from receiving ESL support. An interesting departure in the similarity between ESL teachers and Primary teachers was the involvement of parents. This difference warrants discussion.

A possible reason why only 25.53% of ESL teachers believe that the parents of English language learners should have a voice in the exiting process could be that some schools are charging ESL fees in addition to tuition (Lehman, 2020), which may provoke some parents to put pressure on their children and ESL teachers. Additionally, some parents of English language learners have unrealistic expectations concerning the length of time needed for their child to acquire English language abilities that would allow them to participate meaningfully in the mainstream classroom as independent learners. Many parents of English language learners believe their child will develop English language ability within

three to six months (Carder, 2007), and according to Lehman (2020), a sizeable percentage of parents of English language learners think one year or less is the ideal time for their child to receive ESL support. The information and findings reported in the above-cited sources could show how parent expectations may have influenced ESL teacher answers concerning whether or not parents should be involved in the process of exiting English language learners from receiving ESL support.

Additionally, 72.09% percent of English teachers thought that classroom teachers should have a voice in the exiting process for English language learners from ESL support as opposed to ESL teachers (86.17%) and Primary teachers (85.24%). Although this difference is relatively small, it is noticeable, as were the percentages of English teachers concerning ESL teachers or the ESL department being involved in the process and the desire for more participation from a principal or administration. Overall, ESL, Primary, and Secondary teachers overwhelmingly supported classroom teachers and ESL teachers or the ESL department being involved in the decision-making process but did not support the involvement of a principal and administration or parents to the same degree.

Regardless of which criteria are used to evaluate English language learner readiness to exit ESL, international schools should have an ESL plan that specifies how students will be assessed, who is involved in the assessment, and to what degree. According to the Office for Civil Rights (n.d.), the following are some suggested examples for evaluating English language learners and ESL programs.

- standardized tests;
- teacher observation measures and checklists;
- portfolios;
- grade-point averages;
- graduation/promotion rates;

While working in different international schools as an ESL specialist and coordinator, the researcher observed how subjectivity without documented evidence sometimes kept English language learners from exiting, even when benchmarks were reached on school-approved language assessments and when parents were paying extra fees for ESL support. As the international school market becomes more motivated for profits, some school administrators may have a conflict of interest in exiting English language learners from support programs that charge fees for additional ESL support. While allowing classroom teachers and administrators to have a voice in the decision to exit or retain English language learners can be seen as a positive process, not having a clear and transparent process for exiting or retaining students in ESL programs can have ethical implications that may lead to disastrous outcomes.

The autonomy of ESL teachers and the ESL department

Although there was no statistically significant difference between ESL teachers and English teachers about whether ESL should be combined with English Language Arts or Literature, a point of concern is when the two groups are combined and when examining the ESL teacher responses. It is further concerning that slightly more than one-third of the ESL teachers support combining ESL with English Language Arts or Literature, thereby surrendering ESL department autonomy.

While there was no statistically significant difference between ESL teachers and Primary teachers about whether ESL should be combined with SEN, another point of concern is the percentages of teachers who support this combination, especially the percentage of ESL teachers. Once again, of concern are the number of teachers who believed ESL should be combined with SEN, especially the ESL teachers, which would result in a loss of autonomy for ESL teachers and the ESL department.

One possible reason why approximately one-third of ESL teachers supported combing ESL with English and ESL with SEN may stem from the lack of specific in-depth training that many teachers who support English language learners lack. According to data reported by Lehman (2021), of 489 teacher and administrator participants, only 4.3% reported that a Master's Degree or above in TESOL/ESL/Linguistics was required to be an ESL teacher in their school. While Lehman (2021) found that 34.6% reported that an education degree or a PGCE was the minimum requirement, the remaining 61.1% had a university degree and a TEFL certificate or less as their professional credentials. The above data shows that many English language learners in international schools are being taught by ESL teachers who lack specific and in-depth training in language acquisition. Overall, there needs to be an overhaul in the international school industry, and international schools should hire ESL specialist teachers who have qualifications that reflect education in second language acquisition (SLA) theory and pedagogy (Carder, 1991; Kalinowski & Carder, 1990; Shoebottom, 2009).

Both the Department of Education (2015) in England and the Office for Civil Rights (n.d.) in the United States have made it clear that there is a perspicuous distinction between English language learner needs and SEN. As such, international schools, school leaders, and teachers need to understand that there is a distinct difference between language learning and SEN and work toward ensuring that the ESL department is autonomous and independent of the English and SEN departments. There is no excuse for English language learners in English- medium international schools to be denied qualified teachers with the knowledge and training to facilitate acquiring the language they are striving to learn, especially when extra ESL support fees are required. Further, there is no excuse for English-medium international schools to continue marginalising the very teachers and departments whose job is to facilitate student acquisition of the language of instruction.

Limitations

The researcher assumed that the participants responded to questions with understanding and truthfulness. An additional assumption was that the researcher provided an appropriate array of responses from which participants were able to choose. While the researcher purposefully targeted the participants because of their teaching position as listed on school websites, the researcher assumed that the participants from each of the three groups formed representative samples. Although assumptions for the Pearson chi-square tests were not violated, a limitation of the study was the number of participants for each group. Another limitation was that the study only included participants from schools whose contact information was available on the school website or the Internet.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore what differences may exist between ESL, Primary, and English teachers concerning ESL teacher and ESL department autonomy in English-medium international schools. Firstly, the researcher sought to explore how ESL, Primary, and English teachers differ in their views of who should be involved when decisions are made to exit a student from receiving ESL support. The data revealed that ESL teachers and Primary teachers held similar views concerning classroom teachers, ESL teachers or ESL department, and principals and administrators being involved in the process of when English language learners exit. However, there were differences between the two groups concerning the involvement of parents in the process. Secondary English teachers tended to favour the involvement of a principal or member from administration in the process. Overall, ESL, Primary, and Secondary teachers supported classroom teachers and ESL teachers or ESL departments being involved in the decision-making process.

Additionally, the researcher sought to explore how these groups of teachers differ in their views of the ESL department as an autonomous entity within an international school. The data revealed a statistically significant difference between ESL and English teachers about whether the ESL department should be combined with the English department. Of concern is that when ESL and English teacher responses are combined, slightly more than half favoured combining ESL with the English department. For the most part, the data showed that ESL and Primary teachers held similar views on not combining ESL with SEN; however, a number of ESL teachers supported combining ESL with SEN, which is concerning since it diminishes the autonomy of ESL teachers and ESL departments.

International school leaders should ensure a transparent ESL plan exists in their school that specifies how students are assessed and who is involved in the assessment and is involved in the decision whether students exit ESL support. Additionally, international school leaders should ensure that ESL teachers have the necessary qualifications

and training for working with English language learners. Further, international school leaders need to understand that ESL is not SEN (Department of Education, 2015; Office for Civil Rights, n.d.) and that there is a difference between ESL and English Language Arts and Literature.

The researcher suggests future research exploring the beliefs of stakeholders involved in the process of exiting students from receiving ESL support and why ESL teachers and departments in international schools, as hired specialists in the field of language acquisition, appear to be experiencing a diminishing role in the process. Further research is suggested studying the potential conflicts of interest that school administrators may have in the decision- making process for exiting English language learners from ESL support, especially in schools that require an additional fee for ESL support. Lastly, the researcher suggests future research into why ESL teachers support combining ESL with SEN or the English department, which results in the loss of autonomy for ESL teachers and ESL departments.

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Appendix

Survey questions

1. Do classroom teachers have a role in the process of when ESL/EAL students exit the classification of being ESL/EAL students?

    - Yes
    - No

2. Who should be involved when decisions are made to exit ESL/EAL students from being classified as ESL/EAL students? Check all that apply.
    - Classroom teacher or classroom teachers
    - ESL/EAL leader, ESL/EAL, teacher or ESL/EAL department
    - Principal(s) or other administrator(s)
    - Parent(s)
3. Should ESL/EAL be combined with the English Department? (No Primary Teachers)
    - Yes
    - No
4. Should ESL/EAL be combined with SEN/Special Education? (No Secondary English Teachers)
    - Yes
    - No

Declaración de intereses

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Información adicional

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