

Using DVDs to Introduce Multimodal Digital Literacy Practices into the Japanese EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Despite having the third largest economy in the world, Japan still lags behind countries like Malaysia and Korea in international tests of English proficiency, like TOEIC. Due to a number of factors, English language education in Japanese public schools continues to focus on the older, traditional literacy practices of reading and writing. This paper will explore the historical, cultural and structural reasons for the current state of the Japanese EFL classroom, and offer a simple, easily accessible technological solution to compensate for crucial areas of English language education that are often overlooked: DVDs. Using DVDs has been shown to improve listening skills, as the multiple modes of input, including aural, visual, and written (through subtitles or captions), give students opportunities to improve both bottom-up processing and top-down processing skills, unlike the simple audio recordings that are still ubiquitous in Japanese EFL classrooms. Most students already engage with multimodal digital media, like YouTube or the messaging app Line, so they are comfortable with interactive options like manipulating playback, freeze-framing and clicking on captions. Introducing DVDs into the classroom allows the instructor to train the students in how to utilize these options to decode the spoken English in TV shows. This makes it possible to study two aspects of English seldom taught in Japanese EFL classrooms: The adjustments made in connected speech; and the pragmatic aspects of English, like distancing language. And crucially, it also encourages autonomous learning outside the classroom.

Keywords: literacy practices, multimodal digital literacy practices, English prosody, pragmatics

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Introduction

When discussions of technology in the classroom arise, they usually focus on electronic whiteboards, C.A.L.L., or how to best utilize the internet. This paper will argue for the relevance of an older, much more ubiquitous form of technology, DVDs, and show how they can be used to compensate for certain areas in English language education often lacking in Japanese EFL classrooms, like the teaching of pragmatic aspects of English and the introduction of natural, connected speech. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to show all the various aspects of English that can be taught by using DVDs, the focus will be on the latter.

The very ubiquity of the technology also means that it is readily available to most students, especially since in Japan DVD rental stores are still popular. By training students in how to use the options on the DVD player to help them decode the stream of seemingly unbroken speech, we can also offer students a way to use DVDs to study outside the traditional learning space. And by recommending popular, engaging TV shows to study we can further encourage them to become autonomous learners.

As will be shown below, the Japanese learning context is dominated by a focus on older, more traditional forms of literacy, specifically reading and writing. This is a major determining factor for how English is taught in Japanese public schools, and also accounts for the deficits seen in the English communicative abilities of the vast majority of Japanese university students.

English Instruction in Japan

What follows is a brief overview of how historical and institutional factors have shaped English language instruction in Japan, and some of the deficits in education that are an inevitable by-product of the system.

WJT Mitchell writes of the “pictorial turn” in Western culture and academia. Broadly speaking, this refers to the shift in Western culture from communicating by written text to communicating through images (or in more contemporary terms, communicating through a new multimodal format that features both written texts and images). Mitchell (1993: 13) argues that the impact of this shift can be seen in how “pictures form a point of peculiar friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry.” After initially facing resistance, the study of images entered the Western academy through the field of semiotics, and film studies started to be introduced into the departments of modern languages by the early 70’s.

In Japan, just like in America (Thompson and Bordwell 2010: 29-30), the introduction of films in the first two decades of the 20th century led to criticism and calls for censorship, as film was seen as a degraded form of popular culture only suitable for the uneducated masses, who made up the bulk of the audience (Gerow 2010: 54-59). The difference is that film studies was never really accepted as a subject worthy of formal study in Japan. As late as 2006, an article could be published with the actual subtitle, “Why is There No Film Studies in Japan?” (Yoshimoto 2006).

Whereas American and European academics eventually capitulated to the “pictorial turn” in contemporary society, Japanese academics by and large ignored it, and

continued to focus on more traditional, written forms of literacy. Aloqaili (2016) writes of a parallel situation existing in Saudi Arabia. In the wake of nationwide administrative and curricular reform that eliminated faculties of liberal arts, Japanese English professors doubled down on the teaching of literature as a focus of university English courses (Yoshimoto 2006: 91).

Writing in the journal *Eigo Seinen*, Professor Kishi Tesuo argued that since incoming students care more about school rankings and competitiveness than course content, Japanese English professors can and should make the students study the classics of English literature (usually read in translation) not just in spite of the fact that most students are not interested in it, but because of it (Yoshimoto 2006: 90). The continued focus on, and defense of, the more traditional literacy practices of reading and writing are the primary reasons for the lack of more contemporary multimodal literacy practices and instruction in practical English communication (including instruction in the sound system of spoken English) in the Japanese EFL classroom.

Teaching Natural Pronunciation

While it is uncontroversial that the reduced or “weak” forms of some words and phrases produced in spoken English differ significantly from their citation forms, even outside of Japan there is no widespread agreement on the degree to which these reduced forms should be taught in the ESL and EFL classroom. In a survey of ESL teachers (24% of whom were non-native speaker English teachers), 20% of the respondents said that they “often taught reduced forms as a system of linguistic rules and constraints; 48% often taught reduced forms as a system of pragmatic rules and constraints; and 75% often taught reduced forms within context, using common examples” (Rogerson 2006).

The respondents were given the option of adding their own opinion on the importance of teaching reduced forms, “So much depends on the purpose of their English classes. If the purpose is just conversational English, it is much more important than academic, formal English, where it is less important to stress” (Rogerson 2006: 93). As the author of the study points out, the word choice in this quote “*just* conversational” reveals an attitude towards connected speech as a corrupted form of “academic, formal English.”

This is simply not true, however, “The truth is that connected speech is commonly used in all registers and styles. Even the most formal pronunciation of a language will feature some aspects of these phenomena” (Brown and Kondo-Brown 2006: 5). Or, to quote another teacher in the study, “I have had students (who were never exposed to R.F.) [sic] tell me that for the first time, they felt they were truly learning, plus, the confidence factor is relevant. I’d see student faces after I talked with other native speakers, their confidence could be shattered. We didn’t use textbook English” (Rogerson 2006: 93). The link posited between the study of reduced forms and student confidence is a very important one, which will be explored further below.

This brings us to the EFL context in Japan, where the need for consciousness-raising among teachers may be even more important, as “the majority of English teachers are nonnative speakers, (and as) nonnative speakers (they) may not even be aware of the existence of reduced forms” (Ito 2006: 21). The deep-seated resistance to such

consciousness-raising is exemplified by an article from Rintaro Sato of the Nara University of Education. In the article, Mr. Sato argues that the communicative approach to teaching is an Anglo-American import that is inappropriate for Japanese students. He believes that there is “a huge mismatch between CLT or TBL and the learning situation in Japan” (Sato 2009: 12) and that English education should be in the service of test preparation, not communication. As will be shown below, the audio component of Japanese listening tests often feature, awkward, citation-style pronunciation, obviating the need to ever teach natural pronunciation and the reductions made in connected speech. Mr. Sato’s attitudes and beliefs are especially significant, as he is not just an English teacher, but also a trainer of future English teachers.

Instruction in reduced forms and connected speech is especially crucial for helping students develop the bottom-up processing aspect of listening. This is the active process of decoding the audio signals that are made available to the listener and stitching together individual phonemes to form words and phrases (Rost and Wilson 2013: 10). Training in the unique sound combinations of connected speech is necessary, due to the P400 effect, a lapse in processing that occurs approximately 400 milliseconds after encountering an unknown sound (Dien and Franklin 2010, cited in Rost and Wilson 2013: 10). Frequent lapses can have a cumulative, demotivating effect on the listener.

In spite of multiple attempts at top-down reform by the Education Ministry in Japan (MOMBUSHO), lessons at Japanese public junior high and high schools still tend to be teacher-centered, and written-text focused, with much class time spent directly translating passages from the textbook, and reading aloud from it, with careful, citation pronunciation (Locastro 1996: 49, Gottlieb 2008: 146). As pointed out above by Rintaro Sato, this approach is all driven by the necessity of preparing Japanese English students for the written high school and university entrance tests they must pass in order to be accepted to the best schools (Locastro 1996: 47, Gottlieb 2008: 145).

MOMBUSHO’s multiple attempts to bring Japanese English language instruction in line with international standards and practices were always doomed to failure, as they didn’t include reforms of high school and university entrance tests. Also, as many commentators have pointed out, the recommended changes were not accompanied by enough funding for retraining teachers in the new approaches and teaching techniques required to implement the changes (Tahira 2012: 5).

Another problem with the intense focus on written, text-based learning is that it fails to incorporate the kinds of multi-modal literacy practices that the students engage in outside the classroom, and which they will need training in for a wide variety of future jobs and circumstances (Kress 2003: 163-167). And crucially, the multi-modal nature of much new media makes it a perfect tool for training EFL students in the multi-modal process of face-to-face interaction.

Changes in technology have also changed the literacy practices of reading older, more traditional forms of media, like TV shows. With the ability to pause, rewind and playback any form of visual narrative, spectators have gained the ability to focus on details and analyze content in ways previously denied the consumers of traditional

mass media (Mulvaney 2006: 8). As the students are already conversant in these new interactive forms of literacy, it is the teacher's job to teach students how the same literacy practices they engage in when watching videos on YouTube can also be utilized to study English with authentic materials like TV shows.

A Technological Solution

By using DVDs of TV shows, teachers can give their students many opportunities to develop their bottom-up processing skills in class. Since these shows were created for native speakers, they are often intended strictly for entertainment purposes, meaning they are generally more intrinsically interesting than study materials. There are a number of reasons that DVDs of TV shows are a valuable teaching tool:

1.) Lowering The Affective Filter

Stephen Krashen hypothesized the existence of an *affective filter* that prevents learning (Brown 2014: 289). This is basically an acknowledgement that a student's emotional state can influence their ability to learn. If students feel anxious or panicked, it's said that their affective filter is high, and processing input becomes difficult to impossible. The entertaining nature of TV shows helps alleviate classroom anxiety, and lowers the affective filter, making it easier for students to learn (Wootipong 2014: 210).

2.) Developing Top-Down Processing Skills.

Since TV shows include visuals and dramatic context, they offer students a chance to improve their top-down processing skills, as they can make predictions and educated guesses about what the characters are saying or are going to say based on their background knowledge, and the context that the characters are interacting within. Comprehension is a function of understanding context, and predicting what sorts of language will be used, rather than just waiting for meaning to emerge (Rost and Wilson 2013: 8). For example, if you see a scene in a TV show where two characters see each other for the first time that day, you would naturally assume that the conversation would begin with greetings. Having made that prediction, you become more focused, trying to determine if your prediction was correct.

Face to face conversations require processing of multiple modes of information, from aural input to visual input, which can include gestures, facial expressions, spatial relations and even written text in the conversation. TV shows offer an opportunity to practice processing all these various channels simultaneously (D'Ydewalle 2002, Wootipong 2014), in an EFL context where interacting with native English speakers is not common or practical.

3.) Training Students in New Media Literacy Practices

This leads directly to the next point, which is the need to introduce into the classroom the sorts of multimodal literacy practices that have emerged in the age of new media. As Gunther Kress points out, "The screen is now the dominant site of texts; it is the site which shapes the imagination of the current generation around communication. The screen is the site of the visual, the image" (2003:166).

Many students already engage in these new forms of multimodal, digital literacy practice in their home life (Mills 2010: 35), through social networking sites, YouTube and other activities mediated through the internet. This is less about making fun, engaging lessons for the students (although that is often the result), then it is about helping them gain competency in these new digital literacy practices which have come to dominate many aspects of modern life (Mills 2010: 36).

It is a mistake, however, to assume all students are “digital natives”, and therefore already fluent in the new range of literacy practices; they may need training in them. As film theorist Laura Mulvey points out, new technology, like DVDs have changed the way we interact with old media, like TV shows and movies (2006: 22). The ability to control playback, freeze- frame, rewind, and add subtitles or captions gives the viewer many tools for decoding the sometimes complex interaction of the visual, aural and written modes.

In some cases, a creative feedback loop has been created, where content is designed to include information that can only be revealed in freeze-frame, or by slowing down playback. These very decoding skills can be employed by the students to use DVDs to study autonomously at home, outside the school learning space.

4.) Developing Autonomous Learners

Classroom study at the university is not sufficient for students to truly become proficient in English (Shiobara 2016). It is the teacher’s responsibility to instruct the students in how they can study on their own (Rost and Wilson 2013: 17). Again, with proper instruction in class, students can use DVDs to study at home, by choosing their own favorite TV shows, manipulating the playback of the show, and utilizing the options of subtitles or just-in-time English captions (Rogers 2014: 40).

5.) Increasing Motivation

Interesting research done in Hungary suggests that L2 learners can experience an improvement in their perceived motivation to study by indirect contact with the L2 culture through the media (Csizer and Kormos 2008: 172-173). It is an important extension of the older, more established idea that contact with L2 speakers can improve motivation to study. Important, because in monolingual EFL environments like Hungary and Japan, the chances of significant contact with native English speakers (NSs) are slim.

Motivation and the Construction of the Self

For many years the dominant theory in the SLA study of motivation has been the notion of an integrative orientation. (Ushioda and Dornyei 2009: 2). While there are many arguments about the exact definition of the phrase, for the purposes of this paper it will be defined as the desire of learners to integrate themselves into the culture of the second language group and to interact socially with that group (Brown, H. 2014: 162). This orientation was put forward as the most powerful motivating factor behind L2 learners’ motivated behavior.

The idea has come under attack on both theoretical and research-based grounds. There have been a lot of conflicting results from research into the influence of the integrative orientation on learners' motivated behavior, but the biggest objection raised seems to be definitional and theoretical. Many writers argue that since English has become an international lingua franca, it has been separated from its cultural roots to the extent that L2 learners don't see it as having any sort of a monocultural background that they could integrate into (Pavlenko 2002: 279, cited in Ushioda and Dornyei 2009: 5).

Poststructuralist theories on the construction of self also undermine this version of integration. Coetzee-Van Rooy argues that the idea of integration rests on the incorrect assumption that, "learning a second language somehow results in the loss of the first language and the establishment of a new 'simple' identity as monolingual speaker of the target language (Coetzee-Van Rooy 2006, as cited in Ushioda and Dornyei 2009: 5).

Arnett (2002) argues that the pressure in the new globalised world is for people to develop a "bicultural identity" that incorporates elements of their L1 cultural identity with elements of the more international identity now associated with English (Dornyei 2009: 24). This reflects the poststructuralist idea that people construct their own identity by choosing from the different options available to them.

The idea that integration is an external phenomenon, where a person seeks to become a member of a different cultural group, has been transformed into the idea that it is actually an internal process. On this view, L2 learners decide which aspects of the L2 culture they want to integrate into their own sense of self. Bear in mind that the L2 English culture is now characterized as a global community comprised of people from many different nations, with no single dominant culture. The internalization of integration leads to the next important development in L2 motivation theory: Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self System.

Dornyei proposes the notion of the *ideal self*. The ideal self is a goal, as it is the image of the person one wants to be in the future (Dornyei 2009: 13). Referring to self-discrepancy theory, Dornyei posits that people are motivated to lessen the difference between their current self and their ideal self (Dornyei 2009: 18).

An important element in the L2 Motivational System, is the notion that images can in fact have a powerful effect on learners' motivated behavior. Dornyei (2009: 16) cites research (Kosslyn, et al. 2002) that confirms that humans respond to mental images in a way similar to the way they respond to visual ones. The image of one's future ideal self creates a very real emotional and mental state, one that is hypothesized by some psychologists (Markus and Ruvalo 1989: 217, cited in Dornyei 2009: 13) to be very similar to the very states one experiences when actually in the process of trying to achieve the goal.

Dornyei ties this together with research done into the motivational power of mental imagery in sports psychology (Dornyei 2009: 16-17). So, in addition to giving learners indirect exposure to the L2 culture (as a means of increasing motivation), using DVDs as instructional materials, as well as showing students how to use DVDs to study on their own, gives students the experience of engaging with authentic

materials in a meaningful way, thereby making it more possible for them to envision themselves as consumers of authentic materials in the future.

Using DVDs to Teach Natural Pronunciation

Before showing how DVDs can be used to help students improve their listening skills by becoming familiar with natural pronunciation, it is first necessary to clarify the terminology needed to discuss it. The literature features many different terms and phrases to refer to natural pronunciation, but for the purposes of this paper, *connected speech* will serve as the umbrella term under which *reduced forms* are categorized.

Connected speech here will be used to refer to the more general prosodic features of English, like rhythm and intonation patterns. Reduced forms refer to the spoken forms of words and phrases that have undergone phonological processes like assimilation, palatalization, deletion, and more, that make it possible to maintain the natural rhythm of spoken English.

Theoretical Background

The difficulty L2 learners experience trying to understand the reduced forms in connected speech are reported in Bley-Vorman & Kweon, 2002; Bowen, 1976; Brown & Hilferty, 1986a, 1986b; Henrichsen 1984; Ito, 2001; Kim, 1995; and Kweon, 2000 (Brown and Kondo-Brown 2006: 5-6). But previous studies have also demonstrated that improving learners' ability to understand reduced forms is possible.

A problem that persists in Japan is that most EFL listening materials feature graded speech, with slow, careful citation pronunciation. As will be explained in more detail below, public school English lessons in Japan still tend to be teacher-centered, and focused on reading and writing (Tahira 2012:6, Gottlieb 2008: 146). Even with all the attempts at top-down reform, many classes are still taught according to the grammar translation method. This involves the teacher giving a line-by-line translation of an English passage in the textbook into Japanese, with extensive commentary on the grammar. Students often spend a large amount of class time translating sections from the textbook into Japanese themselves, and reading aloud from the textbook.

Many experts in reading point out that reading aloud is actually counter-productive to comprehension, as the student becomes focused on producing individual sounds, preventing them from processing the global meaning of what they are actually reading (Locastro 1996: 51). The result of this focus on reading and writing is that spoken English is often just an aural version of written English with each word carefully enunciated, citation-style.

An example of the kind of pronunciation students are exposed to can be found in the national English proficiency test known as the STEP test. This test is taken by Japanese elementary, junior high, and high school students, and the results can help them gain admission to high schools or universities. A close examination of the listening section of the 2015 level 1 test (the highest level offered), reveals almost a complete lack of the sorts of reductions and adjustments native speakers make in their pronunciation of words when speaking naturally. The spoken English featured is nothing more than an aural version of written English, with careful citation

pronunciation of each word. The one exception was some occurrences of the process of palatalization, whereby *did you* is pronounced *didju*.

This is significant, because English teachers are only expected to pass the pre-1 level test, which is the next level down from level 1. This shows that even teachers aren't expected to be familiar with natural pronunciation. The STEP test is not so much a test of English proficiency as it is a test of whether the students have learned English as it is taught in Japanese schools. This is not surprising, as the main driver of how English is taught in Japan is the importance of high school and university entrance exams (Gottlieb 2008: 146). Most of the tests are written by academics, who view spoken English as a degraded, ungrammatical form of the language, and not worthy of study (Locastro 1996: 47).

The good news is, however, that Japanese L2 English learners have proven especially capable of learning reduced forms (Rogerson 2006: 86-87). This is possibly due to L1 influence, "English consonant clusters are difficult for Japanese learners, and they often tend to break them up by inserting short vowels, which also serve to 'round off' final consonants. So for instance, table may be pronounced /teberu/, or match /matchi/" (Thompson 2001: 298).

Many of the reduced forms in connected speech involve changes in pronunciation that are quite welcome to learners who are not comfortable with words that end in consonants. For example, *want to* changes to *wanna*, eliminating the troublesome final /t/ in *want*. This process of schwa reduction is very common in English, and means that the endings of many words are replaced by a schwa sound, the most common sound in English (Celce-Murcia 2010: 378). Something similar occurs in instances of consonant to vowel linking.

The very learnability of connected speech, and the success so many students have with it, can increase their motivation. "Clement, Dornyei and Noels showed that linguistic self confidence...contributed to foreign language learning situations where the learners had little contact with the L2 outside of class (Ellis 2008: 684)." Here self-confidence is defined as the belief that one actually has the ability to learn the L2 (Ellis 2008: 684).

Preparing the Students

Due to the lack of class time, it is necessary to give explicit instruction in the rhythm of English and the adjustments made in connected speech that help promote the regularity of the rhythm (Celce-Murcia 2010: 157). And it is believed that a more systematic approach to teaching reduced forms will help the students (Rogerson 2006: 86-87).

It's important to teach students the highest frequency adjustments made in connected speech, including schwa reductions, palatalization, consonant-to-vowel linking and consonant-to-consonant linking. All of the above blur word boundaries, and therefore make bottom-up processing more difficult.

In addition to the schwa reductions mentioned above, there is palatalization, which involves a change in the place of articulation, and results in *did you* being pronounced

didju, and “*How about you?*” being pronounced “*Howbouchoo?*” (Celce-Murcia 2010: 171). Consonant-to-vowel linking results in erasing some word boundaries, so that “*What about it?*” becomes “*Whaddaboutit?*” in a process called intervocalic consonant sharing (Celce-Murcia 2010: 166). Another kind of linking occurs when two geminate consonants are linked, so that *start talking* becomes *startalking*, where the /t/ sound at the word boundary is elongated but only articulated once (Celce-Murcia 2010: 167).

When first encountering the changes made in connected speech, students need scaffolding and support from the teacher, and listening exercises that slowly increase in difficulty, allowing them to improve at a steady, comfortable pace. To that end, listening practice can start with simple cloze exercises utilizing native speakers reciting individual sentences, slowly leading up to a cloze exercise with a full dialogue. The instruction can also include production practice, using a customizable version of the previously mentioned dialogue. This is based on the idea that production is linked to listening comprehension (Ito 2006: 21).

Next, students are ready for cloze exercises with contemporary pop songs, which they can then sing along with for practice. By choosing songs that are popular with the students, their classroom anxiety can be lowered, which in turn lowers their affective filter. A conscious decision was made to forego the use of IPA symbols, as too much class time would be needed to teach them. Also, it is important for students to see how these changes in pronunciation are represented orthographically, as they will most certainly encounter them when reading dialogues in fictional works.

At this point, the students are finally ready to attempt listening practice with a TV show.

Teacher Preparation

TV shows are just another form of input, a particularly rich one that has been proven to be effective in promoting vocabulary acquisition (D’Ydewalle 2002) and improving listening comprehension (Birulés-Muntané and Soto-Farac 2016, Wootipong 2014). The problem for the teacher is that the TV show is just raw material, which must be carefully sifted through in order to find the teachable aspects of it. It usually takes at least two viewings to choose some good dialogue that features the kinds of reduced forms that have already been pre-taught. This is also an opportunity to pull any useful words or phrases that can be pre-taught prior to viewing, to facilitate acquisition.

The next point depends entirely on the teacher’s knowledge of her students’ culture: It is helpful to note any significant differences between the L1 and L2 cultures. Pre-teaching how exactly the L2 culture of the TV show differs from the L1 culture of the students will be invaluable when the students try to employ guessing and predicting strategies as a function of top-down processing.

And finally, it is important to remember that while L1 subtitles can generally be trusted to convey overall plot development, it should never be assumed that the subtitles provided are an exact translation for every sentence uttered. It is important for the teacher to prepare an explanation for any sentence that is isolated for study.

Viewing the TV Show

After all the preparation is done, it is finally possible to have the students watch the TV show. A handout with cloze exercises prepared for key sentences will help students focus on specific listening tasks, and the video can also be rewound to repeat the key sentences. Since one of the primary aims of using TV shows is to lower the affective filter, the first viewing of the show should be accompanied with L1 subtitles.

However, L2 captions have been shown to be more effective in promoting vocabulary acquisition and improving listening (D'Ydewalle 2002), so after showing an episode once, it is a good idea to change the subtitles and give the students another chance to practice their listening, this time accompanied by English captions which “provide just-in-time written lexical information that can help disambiguate and parse phonemic information” (Birulés-Muntané and Soto-Farac 2016), which means the written text helps the students determine word boundaries, and the combination of written text with the audio helps the student in developing their bottom-up processing skills.

Conclusion

Due to a variety of historical, institutional and cultural factors, English education in Japan has tended to focus on the acquisition of the more traditional literacy practices of reading and writing, with the results being that many students are unable to communicate in English, even after six years of study in junior high and high school. This paper has argued that through the introduction of new multimodal digital literacy practices into the classroom, this deficit in necessary English skills can be compensated for.

By acknowledging the cultural shift to communicating through multimodal new media, the pictorial turn, universities can help train students, who are not all “digital natives”, in these new literacy practices. Crucially, the use of multimodal content can motivate students to become more autonomous learners, as the technology and presentation give them tools to break down and analyze the English used. Second language acquisition is not possible if study is limited to the classroom environment.

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