

Promoting Language Learning and Social Inclusion in British and Irish Language Centres

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Abstract

As part of an integrated approach to promoting quality education, diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as inclusive modalities must be considered as key indicators and be incorporated into educational programs (Council of Europe, 2020). This paper investigates how British and Irish University Language Centres present their services, facilities, and language courses to university students and the community in general. The main focus of this study is to understand which factors University Language Centres are emphasizing to foster “inward” and “outward” inclusive education for an effective participation in society. For this purpose, the content and language of a corpus of University Language Centre websites are examined in order to understand how universities are working towards a more multilingual, inclusive, and integrated community. In particular, the data collected refer to specific issues which signal the openness of the centres to welcome diversity and provide learners with the skills and tools to enter a new and more respectful world. As part of the study, we explore the way facilities for students with learning differences and sign language courses are signposted in the context of a broader integration (Heslinga & Nevenglosky, 2012).

Keywords: quality education, social inclusion, language learning, multilingualism

1. Introduction

One of the purposes of Academic Communities is to facilitate and enhance good practices and innovation in language learning and teaching, and to promote University Language Centres both within and outside of university contexts. In the European context, linguistic diversity and language learning are critical goals set forth by the European Parliament. Through multilingualism the objectives are to avoid discrimination between citizens using widely spoken and less widely spoken languages, provide equal access to information, and advocate a multilingual economy. Despite its promotion of language learning, the EU has little influence over education and language policies, in terms of compulsory measures, as they are the sole responsibility of each member state. As stated by Rampton (2019, p. 2) we should not consider “multilingualism as a plurality of ‘named languages’ [...] we should approach it as: a repertoire of styles and linguistic resources, tuned to particular communicative settings and spheres of life, developed over the course of a person’s biographical experience”. The core issue of our study is to define how language centres contribute to the provision of necessary language skills and shape the future of learners in a globalized world.

1.1 Background to the Study

Following the Bologna process (1999), which paved the way for the dissemination of multilingualism and multiculturalism, multilingualism has become one of the main EU goals along with increased mobility and life-long learning. As stated by the European Parliament (2022, p. 2), “In the EU, multilingualism is understood as ‘the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives’”. The EU’s multilingualism policy has three goals:

- to encourage language learning and promote linguistic diversity;
- to give citizens access to EU legislation, procedures and information in their own languages;
- to promote a multilingual economy.

It is estimated that nowadays citizens of at least 175 nationalities live within the EU borders, thus linguistic

diversity is part of Europe's DNA. Alongside official EU languages, sign languages and minority languages brought by recent migrations complete the linguistic picture of the EU (2022, p. 4), highlighting that we live in a multilingual society. An understanding of the value and role of multilingualism in our globalized world is especially important in an age of increased and rapidly growing international mobility. Moreover, in academic settings, the impact of the Lifelong Learning and Erasmus programmes, strongly encouraged by the Bologna Accords, strengthened the need to promote linguistic, social, and cultural growth in academic societies (Argondizzo, De Bartolo, Fazio, Jimenez, & Ruffolo, 2020). Therefore, language policies which promote multilingualism are necessary in Higher Education to provide a deeper understanding of the varied linguistic repertoire as well as to ensure better actions which are meant to enhance inclusivity and more equitable access to high levels of education.

Higher academic institutions through their University Language Centres play an essential role for developing socio-cultural awareness. In other words, concepts such as intercultural communication, learning by doing, autonomous language learning, social inclusion, creativity and knowledge-sharing started to be implemented within academic communities. Therefore, investigations into European University Language Centres (EULCs) gradually became more frequent (Argondizzo, 2015; Bickerton & Gotti, 1999; CercleS, 2002; Ingram, 2001; Little, 1991; Little, 1999; Little, 2000; The Wulkow Memorandum on Language Centres at Institutions of Higher Education in Europe, 2009; Williams, 2015). One way to gain useful insights into academic contexts is through a careful examination and analysis of their websites. A number of studies have been conducted to examine how websites can be effectively designed by means of verbal and non-verbal communication delivered in a multimodal form (Colborne, 2011; Krug, 2013; McManus, 2014). As regards multimodal WebPages, Kress (2010) adopted principles of social semiotics for his analysis, whereas for the academic sector, Baldry and O'Halloran (2014) used multimodal corpus-based approaches to investigate university websites (in Argondizzo et al., 2020).

Language Centres advertise themselves through the information they publish on their websites, by describing who or what they are, the services they offer and their main mission. In particular, the investigation into the language used to promote and enhance inclusivity, as well as the principles outlined by the Council of Europe, through the services and activities offered, provides a good amount of information. In fact, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in widening the access and participation of students with disabilities in higher education. Inclusive higher education is considered an issue of both equal opportunities and empowerment (Al-Hassan, Bani-Hani, & Al-Masa'deh, 2023, p. 3). As a result, the rights and needs of students with disabilities in higher education institutions have been officially recognized in many countries in the world (Fuller, Bradley, & Healey, 2004; Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004; Richardson, Marschark, Sarchet, & Sapere, 2010; Richardson, MacLeod-Gallinger, McKee, & Long, 2000). According to Osborne (2019) and Vickerman and Blundell (2010), the voices of students with disabilities in higher education must be heard and higher education institutions should acknowledge their roles and take strategic responsibility to meet their needs. It is widely acknowledged that one important method of communication that can facilitate inclusivity among students with hearing problems is Sign language, not only between people with hearing disabilities, but also between them and hearing people (Al-Jarrah & Halawani, 2001; Alzahrani, 2022; Jemni, Semreen, Othman, Tmar, & Aouiti, 2013). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) affirms that appropriate measures should be taken to enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their equal participation in education and the community. These measures include "facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community" (Article 24, paragraph 3b). It is therefore essential to investigate the extent to which University Language Centres take this aspect into consideration and promote activities which may facilitate the inclusion of students with hearing impairments through the provision of sign language courses.

2. Method

2.1 Sampling Procedure and Size

The list of Language Centres under investigation together with the URL of their website were directly retrieved from the website of the association of the language community, namely AULC (Association of University Language Communities), which comprises 72 language centres, including over 60 higher education institutions located in the UK, 7 from the Republic of Ireland and 3 other organizations.

2.2 Web Data Collection

Data were collected between March and April 2024 using a Google form specifically designed to gather relevant information. This form was chosen for its ease of implementation and user-friendliness. In particular, the form included general data about each university, such as the institution's name, URL, location, and type of website. The categorization of the website type distinguished whether the website of the language centre was independent

from the university website, embedded or as part of a university department. In addition, the form accounted for the number of language versions available on the website. Overall, the investigation encompassed a review of general sections and information typically found on a website, such as explanatory pages, contact information, and sections for news and events. Furthermore, a specific investigation was conducted on the languages taught by each language center along with a content analysis of the nature of the information provided. This included an examination of courses, educational materials, language centre and/or international certifications, international relations, projects, research, publications, lifelong learning opportunities, social programmes, multilingualism initiatives, and sustainability efforts. Moreover, we observed the types of language activities offered by these centres, including conversation groups, tandem language exchanges, workshops, and multimedia laboratories. Regarding the AULC corpus compilation, three universities were excluded from the linguistic analysis as they either did not offer any language courses or limited these courses exclusively to language students. The corpus consisted of texts only, thus images and videos were not investigated.

2.3 Corpus Design

The textual collection was executed using an automated crawling process within a Python environment and individual .txt files were created and saved in a folder for each university. The collected texts underwent manual cleaning to retain content related to specific sections, such as language centre introductions, language courses and activities offered, and course descriptions. Further to this process, extraneous elements such as links, personal names, and contact information were removed. The refined texts were then concatenated into a single file for each university. Every file was annotated with the university's name, country, and location before being merged into a single comprehensive file and was subsequently compiled and processed using Sketch Engine. As a result, the corpus consisted of 69 documents (England: 53, Ireland: 6, Scotland: 4, Wales: 4, Northern Ireland: 1; Foreign and Commonwealth Office: 1), and included 943.641 tokens and 22.936 unique word forms.

3. Analysis

3.1 Data Collection

The first part of the study, the web data collection, included the 72 University Language Centres, among which 45 of them present an embedded website, 19 refer to a specific department, and 8 have a standalone website. The majority of university websites related to language courses are in English, only 5% are also in Chinese, 4% in Welsh. Only 1% of university present contents in Irish and Gaelic, and one university presents an audio version.

Regarding the languages taught at these Language Centres, approximately 40 languages are offered across their programmes.

Table 1. The most taught languages

Spanish	58	British Sign Language	27
French	58	Portuguese	23
German	55	Korean	22
Chinese	54	Greek	15
Italian	50	Dutch	9
Japanese	49	Polish	8
Arabic	44	Latin	7
English	34	Turkish	6
Russian	33	Ukrainian	5

Specifically, Table 1 showcases the 18 most commonly taught languages, highlighting the popularity and demand for these languages among students. Courses in European languages are particularly prevalent. Italian, French, German, and Spanish are taught by over 50 universities, reflecting their significant role in international communication, business, and culture. Chinese can also be regarded as a major language offering, with over 50 universities providing courses. This may indicate a growing interest in the Chinese language, which may enhance students' employability in the fields of international business, diplomacy, and tourism. In addition to these, Arabic, Japanese, and Russian are widely taught languages as well, signaling the cultural, geopolitical, and economic importance of the Middle East, Japan, and Russia, which has boosted interest in these languages. Moreover, British Sign Language (BSL) courses are available at 27 Language Centres, drawing attention to their commitment to inclusivity and accessibility in language education. These courses provide valuable skills for those willing to

enhance communication and foster greater inclusion.

Furthermore, 34 Language Centres offer a variety of English courses that can correspond to learning needs and career perspectives. Such options include English for Academic Purposes (EAP) designed to help students acquire language skills necessary for successful academic life and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which tailor language teaching to specific fields. In addition, some Centres offer Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) courses, as important qualifications for those seeking a career in the field of teaching the English language. As a matter of fact, 94% of these Language Centres provide an extensive list of language courses suitable for all levels of language acquisition.

In addition, 26% organize summer schools to augment their services. These are run over a short span of time with detailed training concurrently with cultural reinforcement, thus making them ideal for the students who are interested in having a short but effective language learning process. As far as resources are concerned, it was identified that 24% of the Centres present multimedia labs facilities. With advanced technology and interactive software into these laboratories, modern and engaging learning environments can be achieved. Moreover, 22% of the centres have a library, offering varied language learning materials including books, journals, multimedia resources, and online databases. These libraries serve as invaluable resources for students to carry out research and engage in self-study purposes. About 21% of the Language Centres have conversation and tandem programmes. Within these initiatives, students can be paired with proficient speakers of the same language or those who are learning the same language, for conversational practice in informal settings. Such programs play a significant role in increasing students' self-confidence when using their target languages in the right manner. In addition, 11% of the Centres organize workshops which typically focus on specific language skills such as pronunciation, grammar, writing skills or intercultural communicative competence. Overall, these offerings indicate that most Language Centres adopt a combination of formal teaching together with practical resources and practical educational experiences to meet students' personal needs based on their goals.

With reference to inclusive features of the websites, 16 Language Centres present guidelines and provide resources and support for students with physical disabilities. These resources include information on physical accessibility on campus and contacts for disability services. Specifically, 9 centres indicated their support for learners with specific learning difficulties, outlining provision of tailored support services and one-to-one tutoring, and availability of learning aids. In addition, 6 Centres address the needs of visually impaired students by providing access to screen reader friendly content and tactile learning materials. Similarly, 6 Language Centres provide support for students with hearing impairments by offering assistive devices, amongst other things, hearing loops, captioned video, and real-time transcription services. Only one Centre specifically references the availability of sign language interpreters, which may indicate a significant area for improvement. In another noticeable effort, 3 Centres offer tailored support for students on the autism spectrum. In terms of emotional and psychological support, 7 Language Centres have a program in place to support students' wellbeing with counseling. Moreover, many Language Centres emphasize their commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusivity. These commitments are reflected in various ways: 7 centres specifically state their support for ethnic minorities, 5 centres express inclusivity for LGBTQ+ individuals, and one center notably explicitly lists gender neutral toilets as part of their commitment to gender inclusion.

Furthermore, a few websites extend their inclusivity efforts to care leavers, refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced individuals, which indicate a more widespread societal support contextualized in some of the centres. For instance, one Language Centre in particular offers complementary English classes to members of the local community, emphasizing the link between community integration and language learning. Moreover, age inclusivity is another focal point, with 13 Language Centres explicitly welcoming both elderly individuals and young learners, demonstrating a broad age range in their target demographic.

Focusing on outreach efforts, some Language Centres have taken significant steps to make language education more accessible by offering free access and enrollment to their language courses. This type of initiative increases the level of community involvement and fosters lifelong-learning. In particular, only 3 Language Centres offer free courses to community members, emphasizing the importance of language learning especially by removing financial barriers which facilitate a larger portion of the population to benefit from language education. In addition, 6 Language Centres extend their free courses to schools. Thus, it is possible to state that such cooperation can contribute to the development of language knowledge from an early age, providing young students with the adequate enrichment of the educational process. Furthermore, 9 Language Centres provide free language courses for their own staff members, providing professional trainings and improving the multicultural context in the workplaces. Many of these classes have flexible schedules, a large variety of languages, and different levels of proficiency, which will appeal to different needs and interests of community members. Also, 33 Language Centres

offer paid language courses to staff. These courses are regarded as a kind of investment in the human capital of the company, as the personnel can make better use of the offered positions with appropriate language tools. Finally, 5 of the Language Centres provide language courses for the schools with a fee. They can indeed fill gaps in school curricula, implementing specialized language practice, and extracurricular activities to improve students' language proficiency.

3.2 Corpus Analysis

By combining quantitative and qualitative research, we provided a multilevel analysis through a more robust and context-sensitive interpretation of the findings. First, we considered the list of the 1500 most frequent words in the corpus and then selected those words that we postulated would be commonly used in representations of our topics, i.e., multilingualism and social inclusion, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Most frequent words

language	10599	opportunities	299
skills	2435	awareness	295
cefr	990	disability	262
international	680	self-assessment	220
world	541	inclusive	179
global	536	difficulty	172
cultural	523	differences	90
social	516	supports	90
foreign	397	deaf	77
sign	381	employability	75
autonomous	372	accessible	72
opportunity	350	diversity	68
cultures	336	diverse	63

In addition, five more words were included in the list as relevant to our research: difference (frequency: 29), difficulties (*f*: 23), disabled (*f*: 15), inclusivity (*f*: 10), multilingualism (*f*: 5).

In particular, we decided to focus on words such as *CEFR*, *sign*, *difference*, *difficulties*, *disability*, *disabled*, *inclusive*, *inclusivity*, and *multilingualism* as they are crucial in contemporary discussions about language education and social inclusion. The *CEFR* (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) has become essential as an international standard for describing language proficiency levels for different languages and educational contexts. Through the use of this framework, it is possible to foster a shared understanding of language competence and facilitate communication and collaboration within multilingual and multicultural settings. Not surprisingly, the word *sign* plays a key role in referring to sign languages, which are vital for the deaf and hard-of-hearing population. Therefore, through the analysis of its usage, we aim to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities related to sign language recognition, inclusion, and promotion. Moreover, a better understanding of how the words *difference* and *difficulties* are employed can help reveal barriers to language acquisition and the need for personalized support. *Disability* and *disabled* are key to addressing the needs of students with disabilities, and, by focusing on these terms, we aim to understand how Language Centres encourage inclusion. Also, the concepts of *inclusive* and *inclusivity* are fundamental to create environments for learners that embrace diversity. These words are significant in educational settings to understand whether inclusive practices are effectively communicated and implemented. Finally, since linguistic diversity is both a fact and a valuable resource in contemporary society, this study aims to highlight the importance of *multilingualism* not only to improve students' language skills, but to promote social inclusion as well.

A manual analysis of all their co-texts and contexts was not feasible due to their high frequencies, thus we opted for a semi-automated method to identify salient patterns using the corpus linguistics techniques with the software Sketch Engine. The first analyzed word with the concordance tool is CEFR which occurs 990 times. The Language Centres provide a definition and explanation of the term to enable learners to understand their language learning progress and their objectives useful for both instructional design and learner self-assessment and autonomous learning. In some cases, CEFR levels are made comparable with other language learning stages signifying its importance as a common reference point among different educational systems. The CEFR is presented as a valuable tool for both academic and professional development boosting learners' employment prospects and educational opportunities.

Focusing on the collocate *Sign Language*, which occurs 265 times in the corpus, the contextual analysis emphasizes several aspects about sign language, such as:

(1) The course offerings and enrolment, related to learning opportunities, such as courses on British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL). These courses aim to enhance employability, provide accreditation, and increase communication skills for both students and staff.

(2) Cultural and linguistic significance, as this language is presented not only as a mode of communication but also as a rich cultural heritage. In addition, it is described as a visually expressive form of communication highlighting its artistic potential. Accordingly, it is described as a “real, full, living language” with its own grammar and structure, highlighting its importance and legitimacy.

(3) Community and usage facts with clear estimate of the number of people using sign language in the UK. These figures reinforce the importance and social usefulness of learning it in order to engage with a large community.

Moreover, (4) the inclusion of sign language courses as part of extracurricular activities beyond educational settings, for example taking part in online communities such as TikTok, proves the efforts to make sign language more engaging and accessible.

As for *disability* and *disabled*, several websites refer to the existence of *ad hoc* support services for students with disabilities, dyslexia, and mental health issues. Specifically, these services offer information, advice, guidance, and tailored support, such as materials in alternative formats, to help prospective and current students during their academic paths. The Centres are also attentive to exam adjustments for students with disabilities or specific learning differences ensuring equitable access to assessments and provide specifically tailored learning materials. The word *inclusive* occurs frequently signaling a constant commitment on diversity and put specific emphasis on inclusive environments and educational experiences. Their objective particularly focuses on providing support to all students regardless of background or disability, while integrating diverse cultural perspectives. Moreover, inclusivity also appears with reference to other contexts, i.e., extracurricular activities and support services such as career guidance and employability. However, some occurrences refer to pricing structures and course offerings being “fully inclusive”.

The lemma *difficulty* is observed in several contexts. In many concordances it appears in relation to support services for students with disabilities, mental health issues, or learning difficulties which infer an inclusive approach within the Language Centres. Furthermore, it is used to describe language learning challenges learners may face during their educational path. Similarly, the analysis of the concordances of the word *difference** shows different usages of the term. For instance, it is employed with reference to understanding cultural nuances, such as dialects, cultural traditions, and differences between languages. It also appears in defining socio-cultural differences related to language learning. Further to this, it is found in relation to educational support services for students with specific learning differences and disabilities. In addition, it occurs to emphasize the impact of specific actions meant to address sustainability challenges. Surprisingly, the word *multilingualism* only appeared 5 times, yet, the results reflect the promotion of multilingual events, such as the XVIII CercleS International Conference 2024, and language planning and multilingual education among students and staff to improve global communication and cultural understanding.

4. Discussion

Generally speaking, the wide range of courses offered by Language Centres across the UK and Ireland enable students to choose from a large number of languages, aimed at both individual and career-oriented interests. In fact, the breadth of languages available is indicative of a solid and comprehensive approach to language learning, catering to a wide array of student interests and preparing them for the multicultural and interconnected world of today. The options of languages offered are not limited to the most commonly taught languages, with many centres also providing courses in less studied languages. This entails languages from different regions of the world, such as African languages, South Asian languages, and Indigenous languages. Such diversity supports a more global perspective and appreciation of different cultures, enabling students to better understand diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes.

Moreover, it is useful to point out that English has become the global lingua franca for intercultural communication between multilingual speakers. Therefore, using English in multilingual contexts is a social practice which entails linguistic encounters which are not fixed and static, rather they are dynamically created and recreated through fluid and flexible interactions (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021), with multilingual resources and repertoires emerging in intercultural communication. According to some ELF researchers, English as a lingua franca (ELF) can be defined as a ‘multilingua franca’ (EMF) (Jenkins, 2015; Cogo, 2018; Ishikawa, 2017), which highlights the use of English

as “a dynamic process whereby multilingual language users mediate complex social and cognitive activities through strategic and creative employment of multiple semiotic resources” (Li, 2016). Within this framework, we need to look at the complex and dynamic nature of English, a language which is not owned by its native speakers any longer and that cannot be viewed as one fixed entity with well-defined borders.

Furthermore, most of the analyzed websites show how Language Centres implement a rich range of outreach activities and represent an orientation on a diverse approach to language education in terms of both free and paid classes for different segments of the population. Such efforts highlight the significance of Language Centres in raising awareness on language and continuing education, and the promotion of cultural interchanges in their respective societies and organizations.

Based on the analysis of specific words, with reference to *sign language*, the findings show a strong institutional commitment to encourage students to become more inclusive by understanding diverse modes of communication. Hence, it can be said that Language Centres are actively broadening their educational programs, promoting cultural heritage, and implementing inclusive communication strategies, for both personal and institutional contexts. The analysis of the word *disability* clarifies the attempt of Language Centres to create welcoming and inclusive environments. In a similar vein, with reference to *difficulty*, Language Centres’ concrete commitment emerges to help and support learners overcome their issues. The corpus presents many examples of *difference* mainly centered on education, whether it is learning languages, supporting diverse learning needs, emphasizing the benefits of educational initiatives, or comparing educational and cultural approaches. Moreover, the consistent use of *inclusive* indicates an institutional dedication to providing an inclusive, equitable, and accessible learning environment for all students. As for *multilingualism*, from an initial analysis it would appear that more could be done to promote and support multiple language environments. A broader perspective to exploring multilingualism is therefore suggested, one in which cultural borders, boundaries and categories lose their prominence, and are transcended into new meaning-making processes, simultaneously developed across and through cultures and languages (Baker & Ishikawa 2021).

5. Conclusions

Through a preliminary analysis, this paper aimed to identify how the analysed Language Centres display their offer to the wider academic community, in the hope to gain insights into how language academic communities attempt to raise awareness and promote issues of intercultural communication, multilingualism, multiculturalism, social inclusion, and language development. In particular, the examination of AULC Language Centres, revealed that 36% of them offer British or Irish Sign Language courses. These figures are reassuring and show an important commitment to providing resources for people with hearing impairment. However, this area could be improved to a greater extent. De facto, the availability of sign language courses would represent a good opportunity for students by fostering a more tangible linguistic diversity and facilitating greater social inclusion, as it could provide prospective professionals with stronger interpersonal skills, breaking down barriers and increasing mutual respect. Along with sign language courses, a further indicator of progress could be the inclusion of more resources and support services for students with hearing impairments, such as the availability of sign language interpreters, tutors, specific tools and adequate learning materials. As for disabilities, although students are encouraged to disclose disabilities and difficulties so as to receive the right support, only sixteen Language Centres specifically use this word on their websites. Thus, following these examples, more could still be done by other Language Centres to highlight their positive approach to this issue and better address students’ needs and align with the aims of inclusivity. Despite some commendable efforts, it is noteworthy that 42 Language Centres do not mention any of the inclusive elements listed in our research, which speaks to the scale of the required intervention in inclusivity. More explicit reference to inclusivity in these centres could present an opportunity for them to engage with inclusivity more deliberately and in a broader way, which could have a positive impact on the educational setting and the diversity of students who they are anticipating to enroll.

To conclude, the initial analysis of the websites under consideration is meant to draw attention to the importance of continuing to develop a more efficient social-linguistic oriented society in order to better convey messages of respect, knowledge and awareness of cultural, social, and linguistic diversity and inclusivity. Further investigation is needed to identify strategies aimed at enhancing a quality growth of our academic and territorial communities as related to the wider community. Indeed, through an ongoing research project which regards investigating other European University Language Centres, we aspire to contribute to the current discourse on the creation and implementation of more inclusive academic settings.

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Authors' contributions

Although the authors have collaborated in the research work and in writing the paper, they have individually devoted

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No additional data are available.

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