Towards Improved Efficiency in the Teaching of Reading Skill in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Implications for English Language Teachers

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Abstract

Reading is a fundamental skill critical for academic success and lifelong learning, requiring the integration of cognitive and perceptual processes to comprehend, analyze, and interpret text. Despite its importance, many students, particularly in public schools, transit from primary to junior secondary school with inadequate reading abilities. Compounding this issue is the insufficient emphasis placed on reading instruction by English language teachers at both primary and secondary levels, contributing to poor foundational skills that hinder academic achievement. This study examined strategies for enhancing the teaching of reading skills, focusing on the junior secondary level, where a strong foundation is essential for progression to higher education. Using a mixed-methods approach, including participant observation and percentage rating scale, the study assessed the reading abilities of randomly selected Junior Secondary School (JSS) students from four public schools in Ijebu-Ode Local Government. Findings reveal significant deficiencies in reading proficiency among the students. The study concluded that addressing these challenges requires professionally trained teachers capable of employing effective instructional methods tailored to students' needs, particularly at the foundational educational stages.
Keywords: Reading skills, students, teachers, English language, junior secondary education

Introduction

The National Policy on Education (NPE) (1981) recommends that a secondary school student should learn one of the major Nigerian languages other than his mother tongue at the junior secondary level. Evidently, the National Policy on Education aims at producing a multilingual secondary school graduate, who should be able to speak his/her mother tongue, English and any other Nigerian language (Unegbu, 2010).

However, as laudable as this policy is, it has failed to achieve its goal, even after more than twenty years in operation. What is obtainable in most primary schools (especially the government owned schools), is that the mother tongue predominates all through the six years. It is an exception to find a public school that implements this policy to the letter. In view of this, majority of the primary school products enter the junior secondary as illiterates, that is,

not able to read or write in English, thereby compounding the work of the secondary school teachers (Unegbu, ibid).

In Nigerian junior secondary schools, reading is recognized as one of the four core language skills essential for English language acquisition and overall academic performance. However, research indicates that many students struggle with basic reading comprehension, often performing poorly in reading assessments.

Teaching and learning of reading skills are fundamental to academic success and lifelong learning in Nigeria, where English serves as the primary language of instruction, administration, and economic activities. In junior secondary schools (typically grades 7-9), the teaching and learning of reading skills face both challenges and opportunities within the Nigerian educational context (Opoola, 2012).

Teaching the reading aspect of English in many schools in Nigeria has over the years not received the required attention. Learners and teachers in the recent time in Nigeria seem to have relegated the teaching of reading skill in language teaching and learning to the background, so much that materials for reading are not professionally selected and periods for teaching reading on schools' timetable are often times illegally appropriated for other things (Opoola, ibid). Reading as a concept has been misconceived to be for only reading comprehension passages where the teachers' emphasis has long been on identification and use of difficult words using flash cards or traditionally lifting of such words directly on the chalkboard.

Reading deserves special attention especially at the primary and junior secondary levels where solid foundation is supposed to be laid for student's educational success. A student who cannot read and interpret questions cannot achieve success in his educational career. It is from the foregoing that this paper sets out to analyze and discuss the techniques and appropriate methods for the teaching of reading skills in order to attain improved efficiency in the teaching and learning of this very important aspect of language skills.

Objectives of the Study
The specific objective of this study is to explore the the strategies and appropriate methods to enhance the teaching of reading skills focusing on the junior secondary level. Other objectives of the study are to develop students' basic literacy such as the recognition of letters, sounds, and words and build sight vocabulary for fluent reading as well as encourage students' critical thinking.

Theoretical Review
Reading has been variously defined by different authors and scholars. Reading according to Chuku (2003) is a form of communication that deals with the ability to understand and comprehend the information on a printed page. Chuku posits that reading requires concentration to be effective. It is a very important exercise, which is essential to a student's academic progress or one's professional or career development.

Maduekwe (2007) asserts that reading is a complex skill which requires a lifetime effort to perfect. It is skill that cannot be mastered once and for all, yet it is a basic tool for learning. Reading is an activity in which the eyes, the mind and the brain interact in the process of perceiving, analyzing, reasoning, interpreting and integrating. Stoodth (1981) defines reading as a means of obtaining meaning from the printed language. Akere (1993) says that in any good reading process, the eye decodes the written words while the mind absorbs the various ideas stated or implied in the passage read.

Generally, reading is a language process. It forms parts of a complex information processing system like other related language skill- listening, speaking and writing. As a language process, it involves the sense, eyes, and totality of a reader. Hence, Opoola (2002) viewed reading as: "the vocalization of the mind and interpretation of graphic representation on paper, slates, boards, walls and other objects".

Treating reading as an essential skill, Alabi (2005) cited Heilman (1972), Dorothy (1982), and Ajani (1999) gave impressions of reading thus: "decoding arriving at a meaning of written scripts" (Heilman 1972), "the getting of meaning and bringing of meaning to the printed-page" (Dorothy, 1982), and "getting information from print" (Ajani, 1999).

Reading is a pertinent skill of the four basic language skills, hence its efficient and effective teaching become imperative. Generally, the teaching of English should be given all special attention since it is the major language of administration, economics, religious propagation, and others in the nation.

Purpose of Reading
The purpose of reading includes the following:
i. To understand the main ideas embedded in a passage or any written text.
ii. To follow the trend of thought of the writer.
iii. To understand detailed information.
iv. To follow given directive or instruction.
V. To derive pleasure.
vi. To acquire general knowledge.

b. Types of reading:
Focusing on reading as a language skill, Chuku (2003) identified the following types of reading:

i. **Skimming:** this is an extremely fast mode of reading which involves glancing through a text to search for a specific piece of information or to get initial impression of whether the text is suitable for a given purpose. It also involves location of main ideas in order to extract the main ideas in a passage or a selection rather than details. It differs from regular or rapid reading in that reader who is skimming superficially covers the book, because, he is not looking for any specific information. An example of skimming is glancing through a newspaper headline to have a general idea of the content of that particular newspaper.

ii. **Scanning:** by scanning, we mean searching for a particular information in a text. It is a technique for finding specific information quickly. Scanning enables the reader to zero in on particular point or ideas. The person who is scanning has particular information in mind; therefore, he ignores all others which might be a sort of distraction and goes straight to the section of the pages or book containing the information he is looking for. For successful scanning, a student needs the following skill:

- A proper mental attitude
- Concentration
- Close attention to the printed page
- A purposeful thought
- Awareness of time limit
- Technique - identifying the information you want to locate.

iii. **Study reading**: this unlike skimming and scanning is an intensive kind of reading, which deals with a detailed study and critical analysis of a text or a topic. Study reading involves critical thinking and a proper organization of thoughts and ideas.

iv. Intensive Reading: This is reading for a particular purpose like examination. The reader is guided by a particular syllabus and directed to read specific texts.

v. Extensive Reading: This form of reading exposes learner to a variety of materials. The reader indulges in extra curriculum reading, thus reading for pleasure and not for particular purpose. This kind of reading is usually recommended for student so that they can improve their knowledge on various subjects and more important to master structural essentials of language. We shall discuss later the roles of teacher in extensive reading program because of its importance.

vi. Pre- reading: This comprises the many activities used to develop the attitude and skills that the child will need before the reading process can begin.

vii. Silent reading: It is at times called comprehension reading or reading for understanding. The skill is employed when reading for examination purpose. The nature of the silent reading is not uniform. It varies according to the use to which it is being put. Some of the important uses of silent reading include: promoting fast reading and maximizing full attention.

viii. Aural reading: This type of reading is useful for reading poetry in order to get a clear rhythm and appreciation of its aesthetic values. Emphasis is usually laid on student's pronunciation when reading.

ix. Oral reading: It is otherwise referred to as reading aloud. The skill is employed in debates, campaigns, symposia and recitation. Oral reading is indigenous to poetry. Rendition of a poem can be improved through reading aloud. It is the only way in which information about the appropriate information pattern, articulation etc, all of which are unmarked in the visual surface structure can be deduced. It involves vocalizing the written material. This type of reading is used for those still learning to read. However, it impedes high reading speed and also retards comprehension. We shall now briefly examine the roles of teachers at the junior secondary in the teaching of extensive and oral reading because of their importance among the other types of reading.

Methodology

Research Design: The descriptive survey research design was used for the study. Fifty students were initially selected from four junior secondary schools in Ijebu Ode local Government, Ogun state using simple random sampling technique while twenty (20) of them were finally selected for the study.

Population/Participants: The subjects for this research were a group of JSS students randomly selected from four public secondary schools in Ijebu-ode local government.

Research Instrument: The instrument for the study was a self-designed reading passage tagged "Teaching and Evaluation of Reading Skills in English language to Enhancing Students Reading proficiency". The passage was given to the students to read why the researchers listened and observed the participants and record the results of their observations. Results were analysed using simple percentage scale.

Validity and Reliability of the instrument: The instrument was tested before been administered to the students and found suitable for the study.

Procedure for data collection: Data were captured by listening and observing how the students read the passage given to them and they were scored on the core areas tested.

Data Analysis, Findings and Discussion
Table 1:
Reading Ability of the Students

Area Tested	No of Students	Correct (%)		Wrong (%)	
Reading accuracy	20	8	40%	12	60%
Proper mental attitude	20	8	40%	12	60%
Slowness in word recognition	20	9	45%	11	55%
Vocalization	20	8	40%	12	60%
Regression	20	8	40%	12	60%
Concentration	20	9	45%	11	55%
Finger pointing	20	8	40%	12	60%
Word by word reading	20	7	35%	13	65%
Adherence to time limit	20	8	40%	12	60%
A purposeful thought	20	7	35%	13	65%
Close attention to the printed page	20	7	35	13	65%
Head movement	20	11	55%	9	45%

Findings

Table 1 above shows the core areas in which the reading ability of twenty randomly selected students were tested, and the following points are revealed through a careful analysis of the data gathered.

First, out of twenty students tested, twelve of them failed to read accurately. Then what does it mean to read accurately? It means to recognize words correctly. That is, spell and pronounce words seen on the page correctly. As reading progresses, a reader must be able to sound out unfamiliar words using phonics and word structure knowledge such as prefixes, suffixes and syllables. In addition, as part of reading accuracy, the tested students also failed to demonstrate appreciable self-correction, appropriate pacing and intonation to show accuracy – sometimes stuttering, omitting or replacing words during reading exercises.

Equally, it not inappropriate to state that dearth of proper mental attitude contributes to their poor reading ability. Just eight of the sampled population of students tested exhibited adequate mental readiness. The remaining twelve were not readily motivated, were not purposeful and lack the right confidence to engage the written texts even when they encountered reading challenges such as making out unfamiliar words and strange pronunciations. Essentially, they easily gave into distractions which make their eyes drift off the pages of the reading passage. Again, this lack of mental attitude paved ways for lack of open-mindedness needed to absorb themselves in the passage being read as well as take time to reflect on what is being read with a view to drawing connections and asking questions.

More than half of the students demonstrated slowness in reading. That is, they paused too often while reading. This cause a serious disruption to the flow of reading. They indulged in word-by-word reading and frequent hesitation which slowed down reading pace. This degenerated into boredom, frustration and poor understanding. Additionally, it is observed that the students could not maintain fast reading pace because of vocalization – they were verbalising the words when they were expected to read silently or just moving their lips. By this, they focused more attention on the spellings/pronunciations of the words rather than their meanings, which, in turn, affects comprehension.

There is also frequent regression and finger pointing. Twelve of the sampled students engaged in going back to reading the previous words or sentences they had already read. They did this to reveal their struggle in making sense of the words and how the meaning of the individual word contributes to the overall meaning of the passage. They employed their fingers to track the words as if the words would disappear if they did not do so. Again, this slows down reading, hinders eye movement development, prevents grasp of meaning in context and overly affects reading comprehension. Surprisingly, the only area where the sampled students appear to have performed above average is head movement. Only nine of them moved their heads while reading. To the rest, their problem may be associated with tracking with eyes. Instead, they used their heads to track the words. This may be due to vision problems.

In all, poor performance in the areas of concentration, adherence to time limit, purposeful thought and close attention to the printed pages are the highlights of the students' reading challenges. In other words, students bereft of the right mental attitude to reading, or students who vocalize or track words with their heads rather than with their eyes, and whose eyes wander off the printed pages often resulting in regression will definitely experience slowness in reading, demonstrate lack of comprehension, misspell or mispronounce words.

Discussion

Based on the findings of the study, it becomes imperative to discuss the implications of poor reading habit of students and the roles of teachers in improving their reading skills.

a. Techniques and Strategies for Learning Reading:

To study effectively as well as organized one personal study, a number of authors have come out with device and strategies that could help students. Chuku (2003) and Maduekwe (2007) summarized some of these strategies as follows:

i. Robinson's SQ3R: (Survey, Question, Read, Recall/ Recite and Review) – one first survey the test by skimming quickly over the test to get general impression of the materials to be studied.

ii. Paul's OK4R: (Overview, Key points, Read, Recite, Reflects, and Review) - a reader needs to have a general overview of what is to be read, note the key points and reflect on what he has read.

iii. Unoh's 3s3R: (Survey Read, Speed, -- Read, Study - Read, Recall or Record, Review and Reflect) - this technique also requires the reader to skim quickly over the printed material in order to have a general knowledge of its content.

iv Young's PQRST: (Preview, Question, Read, Select or Scan and Test) – a reader skims over the material and selects the relevant ideas.

v. Young's PERU: (Preview, Enquire, Read and use) – a reader goes through the test as quickly as possible before reading to grab and use the message of the printed materials.

The reader is free to adopt or modify any of them, as and when the needs arises. Apart from being flexible and methodical, these strategies are based on the sympathetic application of good reading in study type situation.

As earlier mentioned in the introductory section of this paper that majority of primary school products admitted to J.S1 cannot read or write, it is therefore mandatory for the teachers to teach and train students on the appropriate teaching technique that will enhance their reading ability. The usual practice of merely asking students to read a passage without guiding them properly should be discouraged.

b. Strategies for Effective Teaching of Reading:

For effective teaching of reading, Opoola et al (2012) outlined some strategies that the English language teacher could adopt as follows:

i. English teachers should use counseling technique to combat the menace of ineffective reading. Teachers should let their students know that reading before and during examination should not be given different perception more so that examinations are usually on laid down curriculum.

i. The fear of examination known as '**e**xamination phobia' is common among secondary school students as in other students of other educational levels, reading for examination has made many students lost their confidence and patience. It has made some students failed in subjects where they would have ordinarily performed better. The teacher should identify such students and help them to overcome this problem.

ii. Ocholophobia as a psychological concept that stands for "fear of crowd" is another factor that disturb students from reading effectively. The English language teacher handling reading skills lesson should prepare students adequately in combating this factor.

iii. Students should from time to time be asked to read comprehension passages and other literary materials aloud in the classrooms and in their different groups. We need to note that some good students for fear of crowd do perform below expectation when asked to read aloud. Feeling shy should be discouraged through *frequent* class reading exercises.

iv. Every student should be involved in reading aloud drilling exercises in which both the teachers and students should serve as responsible evaluators of readers pronunciation of the words in the texts.

v. The reading rate is also to be assessed coupled with reader's stability of mind.

vi. Poor reinforcement stimuli is another factor that inhibit good reading habit**.** Stimulus response which is the domain of psychological studies deals with reinforcement that could be in either positive or negative form. In applying this technique, English teachers should maturely, positively, or negatively reinforce the students' reading activities without too much focus on a single student. The entire class should be made to enjoy reading lessons through appropriate application of reinforcement strategy.

vii. In groups of 10, an English teacher can for instance make his/her students use relevant text book in teaching themselves. Each group is to choose a moderator with others serving as assessors of individual reading faults. Every participant should read silently and aloud in his/her group.

c. Other Appropriate Approaches and Methods of Teaching Reading

i. Synthetic approach: This approach is characterized by starting with small unit of writing, such as letters, and gradually building them into large unit such as words and sentences. The alphabetical phonetic method belongs to this language approach. This method is very appropriate at the primary level and the first year of the junior secondary.

ii. Analytic approach: This approach is characterized by starting with relative large unit, such as word phrases and sentences, which are later broken into smaller units. The whole - word or look - and - say method and the language experience method belong to this approach

iii. Alphabetical method: Teachers make people to learn the letters of English alphabet, both in capital form and in small letters. The letters are later combined into syllables and then words before sentences are introduced.

iv. Phonic method: This refers to the instructional method for teaching students to read. The method teaches sound to be associated with letters and combination of letters. Phonics is distinct from the linguistic terms "phoneme" and "phonetics", which refer to sound and the study of sound respectively. There are several different varieties of phonics:

*Embedded phonics: This is an instructional approach where letter sounds are thought opportunistically, as the need arises and in meaningful context, such as the reading of a whole story. Embedded phonics method is often associated with a whole language approach to the teaching of reading

*Synthetics phonics and analytic phonics: These are different and popular methods of teaching phonics. Synthetic and analytic phonic approaches generally involve explicit, carefully sequenced instruction that teach a large body of phonics patterns. Synthetic phonics emphasizes the one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes. In syntactic phonic programs, students say the sounds for the graphemes they see and orally blend them together to produce a spoken word. In analyzing phonics, students often learn phonograms, the part of words including the vowel and what follows it. Students are thought to generalize the phonogram to multiple words. The phonogram 'ail' can be used to read fail, trail, mail, wail, sail and other words. This method uses the assumed relationship between letters and sounds to teach a child to read. In this method, pictures are not used. This method also has two forms:

*Intrinsic phonics: teacher uses related words to teach relationship.

*Systematic phonics: teacher moves from sound represented by a letter to that of a syllable and finally to that of word.

v. Look-and-say method: Also referred to as whole - word method since that word is the unit of language used in teaching reading. The teacher makes the pupils to acquire some basic words by associating the words with pictures.

vi. Language experience method: This method stresses the use of sentence in the teaching of initial reading. This method is not suitable for beginners; it is more preferable at the later stage of the junior secondary. The method emphasizes the importance of other basic language skills such as listening, speaking and writing.

vii. The whole language method: This involves the teaching of reading skills and strategies in the context of aesthetic literature. Word recognition accuracy is considered less important than meaning accuracy, therefore there is an emphasis on comprehension as the ultimate goal of reading. In a whole language classroom, students are immersed in a literature rich environment, in which they are given the opportunity to appreciate real world purpose for reading.

viii. Native reading: Some methods of teaching reading are not easily categorized as either phonics or whole word, but are rather a mixture of each phonics and whole word techniques, but differs from both in that it emphasizes teaching reading beginning at a very early age, when the human brain is neurodevelopmentally most receptive to learning language. Native readers learn to read as toddlers, and at the same time they learn to speak, or very soon thereafter.

d. Teachers' roles in identifying reading problems in students: No single factor usually is sufficient to account for poor reading ability. Generally, each student is likely to exhibit a constellation of interacting factors, which taken together, have resulted in his reading difficulties. For the English language teacher to achieve success in his task of developing good reading habit among his students, he needs to identify what constitute reading difficulties in the students and device means of solving such problems. No matter how effective the teaching methods adopt are, nothing can be achieved if the reading difficulties in children are not identified and properly handled. Some of the causes of reading problems are highlighted below:

i. Faulty reading that slows reading speed:

A number of problems identified by Unoh (cited by Maduekwe 2007) as constituting poor reading or undesirable reading habits are:

1. Vocalization
ii. Sub- vocalization
iii. Poor eye fixation
iv. Poor visual perception
v. Regression
vi. Head movement
vii. Finger pointing
viii. Slowness in word recognition
ix. Word by word reading
x. Lack of concentration

ii. Physical factors:

1. Identification of visual defects:

Based on extensive research on the identification of learners with visual problems, the following behavioral symptoms are most useful for teachers in identifying learning with visual defects:

i. Facial concortions.
ii. Book held close to face.
iii. Tension during visual work.
iv. Tilting head.
v. Head thrusting forward.
vi. Body tense while looking at distance objects.
vii. Assuming a poor sitting position.
viii. Moving head excessively while reading.
ix. Dubbing eyes frequently.
x. Tendency towards avoidance of close usual work.
xi. Tendency to lose place in reading.

II Identification of auditory defects:

Hearing impairment may be suspected in a learner who shows behaviour such as:

i. Inattention during listening activities
ii. Frequent misunderstanding of oral direction at numerous requests for repetition of statements.
iii. Turing one ear towards the speaker's or thrusting head forward when listening.
iv. Intent gaze at the speaker's face or strained posture while listening.
v. Monotone speech, poor pronunciation or indistinct articulation.
vi. Complaint of earache or hearing difficulty.
vii. Insistence on closeness to sound sources.
viii. Frequent colds, discharging ears, or difficult breathing.

Remedial actions are:

- The teacher should be prompt in observing students who show Any of these symptoms.
- Inform the pupil's parents and school authority then follow up to see that something is done medically.
- A change in seating arrangement should be made by the teacher.

III. Speech/Articulators disorders:

Defective speech is associated with reading difficulty. Speech defects, according to research, can be due to physical causes. The mouth palate and teeth may be deformed. Since problems

are so diverse and the problems of any one student may be entirely unique, general recommendations for the treatment of speech problems would be inappropriate. The teacher and the speech therapist can combine efforts to plan a dual program of remediation.

IV. Chronic illness, malnutrition and lack of sufficient sleep:

Learning to read is a difficult, even arduous task and to succeed, the learner must be an attentive, active participant in-the learning process; hence any physical condition that reduces or lowers a child's vitality makes it difficult for him to sustain active attention to learning.

The teacher should endeavor to identify and invite parents of learners with any of these physical conditions and even the school authority in order to take appropriate step towards providing solution to such problems.

*Emotional factors: These include personal and emotional maladjustment. Successful reading requires application and sustained concentration. So, whatever emotional problem that prevents a student from paying attention and concentration also interferes with his learning to read.

Remediation involves:

i. The teacher should avoid unfavorable comparison with other students. This breeds antagonism and kills motivation.

ii. The teacher should also provide a friendly atmosphere in which students feel free to express themselves and their opinions.

iii. The teacher should be a role model and be consistent in his behavior towards the students. Few things bother them (regardless of age) and should therefore endeavor to assist them to overcome any emotional problems that can inhibit effective reading.

*Environmental factors:

These include:

i. Home environment

ii Socio-economic environment

iii. School environment

iv. Cultural and language differences

Remediation involves:

i. The teacher can invite parents of children from broken homes for a chart and assist such learner to overcome nervous tension and feelings of insecurity.

ii. Inefficient teaching methods can impede progress in reading and this inefficiency can actually develop the growth of undesirable habits in reading. The teacher should therefore design appropriate teaching methods that will enhance good reading habit.

Recommendations

For the attainment of effective teaching of reading skills, the following recommendations are provided:

English language teachers are expected to provide unique experiences to students in the classroom at all times. This implies that teachers must be up-to-date and innovative. They are expected to demonstrate a high degree of initiative in the teaching and illustration of the various concepts and principles of the reading skills. For any English language teacher to achieve success in his task of developing good reading habit among his students, he needs to identify what constitute reading difficulties in them and device the means of solving such problems. The teacher should note that no matter how effective the teaching methods adopted are, noting can be achieved if the reading difficulties in children are not identified and properly handled.

English language teachers should also endeavor to improvise reading materials for effective teaching of reading skills, especially at the junior secondary level. The teacher should not take for granted that any new entrant into secondary school at this level must be able to read and write. Majority of public primary school products, as already mentioned, enter secondary schools as illiterates. The age long method of the teaching of reading in which students are asked to open a particular page and thereafter answer questions amount to testing reading rather than teaching reading and should therefore be avoided. The use of well conceived instructional materials such as flash cards, flannel graphs, charts on rhymes and songs, collections of excerpts and cuttings from magazines, journals, newspapers and text books at the primary and junior secondary levels would greatly enhance comprehension and improve the reading ability of the students.

Government as a major stake holder in the nation's educational system should provide conducive environment for learning as well as constant in service training and motivation for the teachers.

Parents should also play their complementary roles of providing the necessary reading materials and proper monitoring of their children at home.

Conclusion

The study highlighted significant reading challenges among the tested students, with 60% struggling in accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Key issues included poor word recognition, slow pacing, vocalization, frequent regression, and lack of focus. A major contributing factor was inadequate mental readiness, as most students lacked motivation and concentration. These deficiencies led to disjointed reading, hindered comprehension, and frequent errors.

In summary, the students' reading challenges stem from poor concentration, inadequate time management, lack of purposeful engagement, and ineffective eye movement. Those who vocalize, rely on head tracking, or allow their attention to drift tend to read slowly, mispronounce words, and struggle with comprehension. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions by English language teachers focusing on fluency development, mental readiness, and proper reading techniques to enhance overall literacy skills.

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