# When AI Becomes Personal: Critical Emotional Incidents and Identity Negotiation among Novice English Language Teachers

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Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) raises questions about language teachers' expertise, authority, and distinctive contribution to learning. This study explores how AI-related critical emotional incidents become sites of professional identity negotiation among six novice English language teachers in Vietnam. Guided by an interpretivist approach, the study drew on incident-focused interviews, follow-up exchanges, and participant-provided artefacts. Thematic analysis was supported by a narrative orientation and attention to individual meaning-making informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) before comparison across participants. Three themes captured vulnerable professional credibility, retaining responsibility while reworking AI use, and changed practices alongside continuing identity tensions. Participants described verifying generated materials, redesigning assessment, reducing dependence on live technology, and clarifying their contribution to AI-assisted feedback. These adjustments coexisted with concerns about workload, fairness, institutional expectations, and authenticity. Contrasting accounts of routine AI use showed that positive emotion and practical usefulness did not necessarily prompt identity change. Emotionally salient encounters could also affirm existing professional commitments without resolving uncertainty. The findings locate identity negotiation in how teachers interpret competence, responsibility, recognition, and care within particular relationships and working conditions. For TESOL, the study suggests that AI-related professional development should create space for reflection on emotional experiences and professional commitments alongside the development of technological competence.

***Keywords:*** *generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), novice English language teachers, critical emotional incidents, professional identity negotiation, teacher emotions*

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# Khi AI chạm đến cái tôi nghề nghiệp: Những tình huống cảm xúc trọng yếu và thương lượng bản sắc nghề nghiệp của giáo viên tiếng Anh mới vào nghề

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Trí tuệ nhân tạo tạo sinh (GenAI) đặt ra những câu hỏi về chuyên môn, thẩm quyền và đóng góp riêng của giáo viên đối với việc học ngôn ngữ. Nghiên cứu tìm hiểu cách các tình huống cảm xúc trọng yếu liên quan đến AI trở thành nơi thương lượng bản sắc nghề nghiệp của sáu giáo viên tiếng Anh mới vào nghề tại Việt Nam. Theo định hướng diễn giải, nghiên cứu sử dụng phỏng vấn tập trung vào tình huống, trao đổi bổ sung và tài liệu do người tham gia cung cấp. Phân tích chủ đề được hỗ trợ bởi định hướng tự sự và việc chú trọng quá trình kiến tạo ý nghĩa cá nhân, tham chiếu phân tích hiện tượng học diễn giải (IPA), trước khi đối chiếu giữa những người tham gia. Ba chủ đề phản ánh uy tín chuyên môn dễ bị tổn thương, việc duy trì trách nhiệm khi điều chỉnh cách sử dụng AI, và những căng thẳng bản sắc tiếp diễn dù thực hành đã thay đổi. Giáo viên mô tả việc kiểm duyệt tài liệu, thiết kế lại đánh giá, giảm phụ thuộc vào công nghệ trực tuyến và làm rõ đóng góp của mình trong phản hồi có AI hỗ trợ. Những điều chỉnh này vẫn đi cùng trăn trở về khối lượng công việc, sự công bằng, kỳ vọng thể chế và tính chân thực. Các trải nghiệm AI thường nhật cho thấy cảm xúc tích cực và lợi ích thực tiễn không nhất thiết dẫn đến thay đổi bản sắc. Những tình huống giàu ý nghĩa cảm xúc cũng có thể củng cố cam kết nghề nghiệp mà chưa giải tỏa sự bất định. Kết quả làm rõ quá trình thương lượng bản sắc qua cách giáo viên diễn giải năng lực, trách nhiệm, sự công nhận và sự quan tâm đến người học trong các mối quan hệ và điều kiện làm việc cụ thể. Đối với lĩnh vực giảng dạy tiếng Anh, nghiên cứu gợi mở việc tạo không gian phản tư về trải nghiệm cảm xúc và cam kết nghề nghiệp song hành với phát triển năng lực công nghệ.

***Từ khóa:*** *trí tuệ nhân tạo tạo sinh (GenAI), giáo viên tiếng Anh mới vào nghề, tình huống cảm xúc trọng yếu, thương lượng bản sắc nghề nghiệp, cảm xúc giáo viên*

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## 1. Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) contributes to lesson planning, materials development, feedback, assessment and language explanation, raising questions about teachers' competence, authority and distinctive contribution. Haghi et al. (2026) found that AI could reinforce novice language teachers' confidence and technological identities while generating uncertainty about pedagogical knowledge, competence and authenticity. These encounters may become personally consequential through teachers' understandings of who they are professionally.

Professional identity develops through negotiations among beliefs, experiences, expectations and contextual positioning (Beijaard et al., 2004; Varghese et al., 2005). These may be especially salient for novice teachers as confidence, legitimacy and relationships develop. Emotions signal what teachers perceive to be professionally at stake (Hargreaves, 1998; Zembylas, 2003). Kelchtermans (2009) locates vulnerability in commitments exposed to others' judgement and conditions beyond teachers' control. A student challenging feedback with an AI-generated alternative, for example, may unsettle expertise or responsibility.

Criticality lies in retrospective interpretation of an event's professional significance. Derakhshan and Nazari (2023) connect emotional incidents with novice teacher identity negotiation; Flinn and Fogal (2026) link interpretations and agentive responses with identity trajectories. An incident-focused approach examines what teachers do with significant experiences.

AI-mediated instruction can reinforce and disrupt novice language teacher identity (Haghi et al., 2026), while emotional incident research connects particular events with identity negotiation (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2023; Flinn & Fogal, 2026). These studies motivate closer examination of how a GenAI encounter becomes emotionally significant and prompts teachers to affirm, question or reposition the professional self. Through retrospective incident accounts, this study examines teachers' interpretations, responses and continuing doubts alongside routine encounters they did not describe as changing their identities.

This study explores AI-related critical emotional incidents among six novice English language teachers in Vietnam. A critical emotional incident is a specific GenAI-related professional event remembered as emotionally salient and interpreted as relevant to the teacher's professional self, role, values, competence or legitimacy. The analysis examines teachers' interpretations and responses without assuming identity transformation. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. *What AI-related critical emotional incidents do novice English language teachers experience in their professional practice?*

2. *How do they interpret and respond to these incidents in negotiating their professional identities?*

The study connects GenAI-mediated teacher identity with emotional incident scholarship to inform teacher development attentive to emotion, agency and identity alongside technological competence.

## 2. Literature review and conceptual framework

### 2.1 Professional identity as situated negotiation

Beijaard et al. (2004) highlighted conceptual variation, context, professionalism and teachers' stories in identity research. Varghese et al. (2005) showed how different theoretical perspectives illuminate professional positioning, cautioning against treating identity as a stable role. Here, identity negotiation refers to efforts to affirm, question, defend or reposition the professional self within responsibilities and relationships. AI proficiency or changed practice alone cannot establish identity change.

Novice status allows variation in confidence, commitments and opportunities to act. Flinn and Fogal (2026) associate incident responses with agency and contextual affordances.

### 2.2 Emotion and professional self-understanding

Zembylas (2003) theorises identity as affective and constituted within power, agency and culture. Emotions gain professional meaning through concerns about competence, responsibility or recognition. Analysis examines why an experience mattered; emotional labels alone do not establish its significance.

Kelchtermans (2009) connects professional self-understanding, commitment and vulnerability with social, cultural and structural working conditions. Existing self-understandings shape emotional interpretations, while experiences may prompt reconsideration. Emotion and identity are mutually implicated; strong emotion alone does not establish identity transformation.

### 2.3 Critical emotional incidents in encounters with GenAI

Tripp (2012) connects incident interpretation with professional judgement. Derakhshan and Nazari (2023) situate emotional incidents within interpersonal and institutional relationships. Criticality rests in interpreted professional significance, not necessarily an exceptional event.

Analysis attends to GenAI involvement, emotional salience and professional meaning, including teacher use and AI-mediated student work. GenAI's contribution is distinguished from network access and the wider teaching arrangement.

Haghi et al. (2026) examined concrete AI-mediated experiences through observations and stimulated recall. This study complements their work with retrospective accounts linking interpretations, responses, continuing doubts and routine usefulness. Contrasting encounters distinguish enjoyment or efficiency from identity-relevant meaning; an encounter without perceived change may still affirm an existing role. Interpretation therefore extends beyond emotional valence or technological outcomes.

### 2.4 Locating the inquiry in Vietnam

Pham and Nguyen (2025) examined thirteen preservice teachers' identities through private tutoring in Vietnam. Student behaviour and parental pressure provide contextual comparison, not evidence about in-service GenAI encounters.

Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg, issued on 27 October 2025, approved a project for English as a second language in schools during 2025-2035, with a vision to 2045 (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2025). It contextualises contemporary teacher development, not earlier incidents.

### 2.5 Analytical orientation

Table 1 connects encounters, emotions, commitments, responses and current interpretations. These sensitising dimensions may overlap, recur or be absent. Relational and institutional conditions contextualise the incident within the participant's wider account.

***Table 1*** *Sensitising dimensions for incident interpretation*

| Analytical dimension | Question directing interpretation |
|---|---|
| **Encounter and conditions** | What happened, how was GenAI involved, and who participated? |
| **Emotion and significance** | What feelings were recalled, and why did the experience matter? |
| **Professional self and relationships** | What role, commitment, competence or recognition was affirmed or questioned? |
| **Response and agency** | What did the teacher describe doing, and what enabled or constrained the response? |
| **Current interpretation and contrast** | What remains unresolved, and how does this differ from a routine AI encounter? |

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Philosophical orientation and research design

The study adopts an interpretivist orientation and a constructionist understanding of meaning (Crotty, 1998). Professional significance is situated and potentially multiple; interviews provide interpretations co-constructed through questions and retrospective narration. The researcher's interest in emotion and identity requires reflexive attention to assumptions about competence, innovation and growth.

A qualitative, incident-focused interview design with a narrative orientation examined remembered encounters and their significance. It supported retrospective interpretation and thematic comparison, without longitudinal observation of identity development.

### 3.2 Participants and professional settings

Criterion-based purposive sampling recruited six teachers through professional networks and referrals. Criteria were one to five years of independent, paid teaching, including exactly five years;

employment in a Vietnamese upper-secondary school or university; direct GenAI use or encounters with students' problematic use; and recall of an emotionally significant AI-related incident relevant to identity. Supervised placements were excluded; part-time experience was calculated on accumulated actual time without double-counting overlapping appointments. Experience at recruitment in August 2026 ranged from one to three and a half years *(Table 2)*.

***Table 2*** *Participant context and teaching experience at recruitment in August 2026*

| Code | Experience reported | Teaching setting |
|---|---|---|
| **P01** | 1.5 years | Private university |
| **P02** | 2 years | Public upper-secondary school |
| **P03** | 1 year | Private upper-secondary school |
| **P04** | 3 years | Public university; permanent faculty; Business Writing |
| **P05** | 3.5 years | Public specialist upper-secondary school |
| **P06** | 2 years | Private university |

The sample supported detailed interpretation and comparison, without a saturation claim. Incident-based selection privileged consequential experiences; institutional differences were contextual features.

### 3.3 Data collection and preparation

In August 2026, the researcher conducted all initial interviews face to face in private settings, in Vietnamese, for approximately 60 minutes each. A flexible protocol explored teaching contexts, GenAI use, incidents, emotions, meanings and responses; participants selected incidents or received prompts. Focal incidents were retrospectively dated to October 2023–April 2024. Table 2 reports experience at recruitment, not at those incidents.

Interviews were audio-recorded with notes; software transcripts were checked against recordings. The corpus combined transcript extracts, post-interview summaries and edited accounts. Findings are paraphrased, distinguishing reports from interpretation, and translated by the researcher. Unresolved differences were documented; precise sequences were reported only where supported.

All six completed text-message follow-up two days later to clarify details, elaborate responses, check understanding and explore continuing concerns and routine encounters. These exchanges extended data collection and were distinct from later participant checking of interpretations.

Artefacts included P01's annotated test; P02's parent messages and school meeting record; P03's dictionary and AI screenshots; P04's editing history and rubric; P05's slides and revised paper plan; and P06's assessment spreadsheet and AI-assisted feedback. They contextualised checking, assessment, explanations, preparation and scoring/comment drafting alongside interviews. Emotional and identity meanings remained grounded in teachers' accounts.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was the primary method, drawing on Braun and Clarke (2006). A narrative orientation preserved incident sequence and context, connecting remembered events, later responses and present interpretations. Idiographic attention informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2015) guided individual meaning-making before comparison. These complementary perspectives supported thematic analysis; separate narrative-analysis or full IPA procedures were not implemented.

Each participant was analysed before proceeding to the next. Repeated reading attended to context, emotion and meaning; line-by-line coding addressed conflict, responses and reflection. An incident-analysis matrix connected conditions, feelings, professional meanings, responses and tensions. Only after individual analyses were complete were related codes compared across participants and developed into subthemes and themes, attending to convergence and divergence.

Analysis distinguished initial events, later adjustments and present concerns without assuming linear trajectories. Source references identified interview extracts, follow-up and artefacts. Contrasting episodes tested thematic boundaries; discrepant details were retained when a single chronology could not be supported.

### 3.5 Reflexivity and trustworthiness

Trustworthiness addressed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. A reflexive journal and audit trail retained recordings, coding files and a codebook; contextual descriptions supported transferability. Interview-document comparisons made interpretations traceable. Reflexivity examined how prior familiarity, working relationships and teaching experience could shape disclosure and interpretation, testing expectations of growth against routine usefulness, affirmation without change and continuing uncertainty.

Following coding and preliminary themes, individual incident and interpretation summaries were sent approximately three weeks after the final initial interview. All six responded by email or messaging about accuracy, resonance and refinement. Checking supported interpretative dialogue (Birt et al., 2016); agreement was considered alongside other evidence.

P01 clarified spontaneous pedagogical self-defence, revising a deliberate-deception code. P04 clarified permanent faculty status and Business Writing. P06 endorsed empowerment; later authenticity concerns remained in the analysis.

### 3.6 Research ethics

Participants received information about purposes, benefits and risks, signed written consent, and agreed to recording. They could decline questions or withdraw without reasons or adverse consequences, and review proposed verbatim excerpts. Names and identifying details were masked or generalised using P01-P06. Distinctive incidents could nevertheless permit local recognition. Students' and parents' responses are represented through teachers' accounts and records, not independent testimony.

The study received an ethics exemption (ED-2025-EFL-014). Raw recordings and unredacted transcripts were encrypted using AES-256 in a dedicated cloud drive, accessible only to the principal researcher and direct academic supervisor. Permanent deletion is scheduled three years after the article's official publication.

## 4. Findings

Three themes connect incidents in preparation, assessment, feedback and interaction with credibility, fairness, responsibility and care. Routine encounters clarify the boundaries of identity-relevant meaning.

### 4.1 When AI Makes Professional Credibility Vulnerable

P01 recalled an AI-generated reading test in November 2023 under heavy workload. A student identified faulty questions, prompting embarrassment and fear of appearing careless. Efficient preparation had expressed resourcefulness; the public error made accuracy and accountability more pressing. The concern extended beyond correcting the test to what competent preparation meant.

P01's explanation that the test intentionally demonstrated AI errors was improvised, distinct from the original time-saving purpose. Participant checking clarified a defensive reaction under pressure. Protecting credibility immediately and accepting responsibility afterwards remained in tension.

P05's November 2023 demonstration lesson combined AI-generated content with online activities interrupted by access problems. Observer criticism prompted disappointment and challenged an aspiration to appear innovative. The episode questioned whether technological display demonstrated pedagogical judgement. AI preparation, infrastructure and evaluation shaped its significance; AI was not established as the cause of failure.

P02 recalled a February 2024 parent dispute about a mark for a suspected AI-assisted essay. Frustration and fear were connected with vulnerability as a new contract teacher. Discussions with school leaders and a request for supervised writing situated the response. Professional legitimacy depended on justifying assessment to students, parents and leadership.

In April 2024, P03 recalled a student comparing teacher feedback with an AI-generated alternative. Threat and self-doubt concerned standing before students: expertise had meant strong language knowledge and supplying superior answers. The disagreement exposed an expectation about what an expert should consistently provide.

### 4.2 Retaining Responsibility While Reworking AI Use

P01 began systematic checking the following week, introduced two-stage review for subsequent assessment and developed a fuller preparation procedure over approximately three months. AI remained useful under teacher scrutiny. Yet heavy workload sustained fears of superficial checking, questioning whether efficient preparation could also enact care and accountability.

P04's January 2024 assessment of polished writing prompted fatigue and disorientation because linguistic quality seemed detached from student voice. The account questioned whether teaching writing meant correct text or developing thought and expression, describing the teacher's role as

invisible. Clarification identified Business Writing and permanent faculty status. The concern was recognising student contribution while sustaining educational purpose.

P02 and P04 adopted contrasting responses. After about two weeks of anxiety, P02 introduced supervised classroom writing by March 2024 to obtain defensible evidence of student performance. Later concerns questioned whether security and fairness curtailed productive AI learning. P04 redesigned assessment during the break and introduced a rubric in March emphasising AI interaction records, personal voice and explanations of writing decisions. Assignment details and weights differed between accounts. Controlled production and an acknowledged AI-assisted process made different contributions visible.

P05 revised plans the following week, reducing dependence on online applications and prioritising questioning and interaction. AI-assisted preparation continued, with edited materials printed or saved offline. Innovation was reconsidered through workable pedagogy and responsiveness to classroom conditions.

During heavy speaking-assessment workload in October 2023, P06 felt unable to give students sufficient attention. After AI-assisted feedback, an appreciative message prompted relief and renewed capacity to act as a caring companion. Assistance appeared to make a valued commitment achievable. This affirmed care without independently demonstrating reduced burnout or improved motivation.

P06 described teacher-led assessment, notes, AI-assisted comment drafting, wording checks and retained decisions about marks. The workflow was standardised in November 2023 and proposed to colleagues in February 2024. In a separate December 2023 office-hours episode, a student questioned automated feedback. P06 showed assessment notes and reviewed a pronunciation recording to make personal judgement visible.

P03 handled the initial challenge in class but located clearer role reconsideration about a month later, after training and reading. Helping students evaluate style, tone and suitability replaced competition over polished wording. Continuing defensiveness when students tested expertise nevertheless complicated this revised understanding.

### 4.3 Changed Practices and Continuing Identity Tensions

Practice adjustments did not establish completed transitions to growth. P01 still feared missed errors under workload pressure; P03 remained defensive despite reconsidering the expectation of superior answers. Changed approaches coexisted with insecure understandings of competence.

P02 questioned whether supervised handwriting protected fairness at the expense of AI learning. P04 described inconsistent expectations across colleagues' classes. P05 faced demands for visible technological innovation while prioritising workable interaction. Individual adjustments did not remove the institutional and relational demands through which roles were negotiated.

P06's affirmation of care coexisted with doubts about machine-drafted encouragement, even after review and editing. Appreciation did not settle whether commitment was sufficiently present in feedback language.

Routine encounters contrasted with these meanings. P01 enjoyed an AI-assisted group activity without describing a new self-understanding. P02 treated images as slide enhancements; P03 valued speaking materials; P04 valued a research summary; P06 regarded syllabus generation as routine. P05 enjoyed advanced exercises while retaining instructional control, consistent with an existing role but not described as a turning point. Usefulness and positive emotion did not necessarily imply identity change.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Professional meaning connects emotion with identity

Zembylas' (2003) affective, relational account explains significance beyond tool performance. P01's error exposed resourcefulness and accountability; P02's dispute subjected fairness and authority to external judgement. Emotion reflected responsibilities and anticipated judgement.

Derakhshan and Nazari (2023) locate emotional incidents within interpersonal and institutional tensions. P05's access problems and observer criticism illustrate how AI participated in workload, assessment and evaluation arrangements that made encounters personally consequential.

Routine enjoyment and efficiency did not necessarily alter self-understanding. Identity relevance concerned questioned recognition or commitments, or opportunities to enact them. P05's exercises allowed affirmation of an existing role; emotion and usefulness alone cannot establish change.

### 5.2 Reworking responsibility through situated agency

Agency concerned exercising responsibility with AI through checking, explaining contributions and revising assessment. P02's supervised writing and P04's acknowledged AI use established different boundaries among teacher, learner and technology.

Flinn and Fogal (2026) connect incident responses with contextual affordances. Workload constrained P01's checking, colleagues' expectations complicated P04's assessment, and innovation demands persisted for P05. Responsibility was negotiated within working relationships and conditions.

P02 and P04 prioritised different evidence of student contribution. Their reasons and unresolved costs resist ranking restriction or permission as a more developed identity.

### 5.3 Affirmation and uncertainty can coexist

Haghi et al. (2026) identify reinforcement and disruption in AI-mediated identity. P06 illustrates coexistence: renewed capacity to care accompanied doubts about AI-drafted encouragement. Affirmation did not eliminate uncertainty.

Workload, defensive expertise and doubts about restricting AI persisted after adjustments, questioning whether changed practices expressed the professional self teachers wished to enact.

The contribution connects commitments, emotional significance and situated responses. Routine contrasts and continuing doubts distinguish practical adjustments from completed identity transitions.

### 5.4 Implications for teacher education and institutional support

TESOL professional development could pair reflection on an emotionally significant AI encounter with a useful routine encounter. Teachers could map events, feelings, commitments, responses and continuing concerns, then discuss working conditions. This could connect technological competence with expertise, fairness and care while accommodating affirmation, ambivalence and little change. The proposed activity has not been evaluated.

Collegial assessment dialogue could clarify permitted assistance, expected evidence and visible teacher judgement. P02 and P04 highlight contested expectations; P06 raises feedback contributions. These proposals remain unevaluated for integrity or trust.

Institutional support should address review time, offline alternatives and assessment dialogue. Innovation expectations require attention to pedagogical purposes and resources, alongside student information and feedback authenticity.

### 5.5 Limitations and directions for further research

The findings are bounded by six retrospective accounts combining transcript extracts with researcher-prepared summaries. Interviews in August 2026 recalled incidents from 2023–2024, making remembered sequences and subsequent explanations central to interpretation. Novice status was assessed at recruitment; the study does not establish equivalent career stages at each incident. Paraphrase limits analysis of original wording and interaction. Differences between versions, particularly P03 and P04, constrain reconstruction of precise sequences and assessment arrangements. Artefacts contextualise practices but cannot resolve every discrepancy: paste events alone do not establish AI authorship, institutional records do not demonstrate absence of all AI policies, and assessment records cannot demonstrate burnout prevention. Student learning, trust, wellbeing and enduring identity development were not independently examined.

Incident-focused recruitment and prompts privilege memorable emotions and identity-relevant meaning, limiting conclusions about routine use or prevalence. Contrasting episodes broaden interpretation without a controlled comparison. Setting differences are contextual, not demonstrated sector effects. Prospective incident studies, classroom observation and student perspectives could examine how meanings and responsibilities are enacted over time.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined how AI-related critical emotional incidents acquired professional significance for six novice English language teachers in Vietnam. Across their retrospective accounts, embarrassment, uncertainty and relief were connected with questions about competence, credibility, fairness and care. Teachers responded by revising preparation, assessment and feedback practices, but these adjustments did not necessarily resolve the professional concerns that prompted them.

The study contributes an incident-focused understanding of identity negotiation by connecting particular encounters with the commitments teachers sought to protect or enact. Contrasting experiences showed that practical usefulness and positive emotion did not necessarily imply identity change. Conversely, AI assistance could affirm a valued professional role while leaving questions about authenticity unresolved. Identity negotiation therefore involved both reconsidering professional responsibilities and sustaining commitments under changing conditions.

For TESOL, these findings suggest that learning to teach with AI requires opportunities to examine emotionally significant experiences alongside technological competence. Reflection and collegial dialogue may help teachers articulate what is at stake, explain their decisions and recognise the working conditions that constrain their responses. Although these six accounts cannot establish enduring identity trajectories, they illuminate how teaching with AI becomes personal through teachers' efforts to remain competent, accountable and attentive to learners.

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