

STUDENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES IN AN ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION COURSE: GOALS, CHARACTERISTICS AND VIEWS

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Abstract

Student-teacher conferences are considered an effective pedagogical tool for individualized writing instruction. Yet, little is known about the goals, characteristics and perceptions of student-teacher conferences for individualized English as a second language (ESL) pronunciation instruction. This article presents an exploratory study on student and instructor perceptions of mandatory student-teacher conferences in a semester-long ESL pronunciation course. Data were gathered from 24 college ESL students and five experienced ESL instructors via pre-/post-instruction read-aloud tests, four questionnaires and a focus group discussion. The results indicated pronunciation improvement during the course and participants' overall satisfaction with the learning outcomes, goals, format and characteristics of the conferences. Participants' views on benefits, drawbacks, and recommendations for these one-on-one meetings revealed valuable insights for pronunciation instructors.

Keywords: student-teacher conferences, pronunciation instruction, ESL, EFL, individualized instruction

1. Introduction

Students whose first language is not English often come to the English pronunciation class with a variety of linguistic backgrounds, goals, beliefs, concerns, attitudes, motivations, and feelings about pronunciation learning (Baran-Łucarz, 2022; Sardegna, 2012, 2022; Sardegna and Jarosz, 2022; Sardegna et al., 2018). They also vary in their pronunciation awareness, efforts, learning approaches, cognitive skills for L2 speech learning, speed and readiness to learn (Mora, 2022; Sardegna and McGregor, 2013). Whole-class settings cannot typically address all their pronunciation concerns and goals, and offer all the instructional supports they might need to improve. Also, evidence from classroom-based research shows that English pronunciation learning takes time and effort and requires explicit instruction of pronunciation rules and strategies, awareness-raising and perceptual training activities, oral focus-on-form practice, and corrective feedback (for a research synthesis, see Sardegna and McGregor, 2022). There is simply not enough time in the classroom to include all these

teaching components successfully and, at the same time, individualize instruction. As a result, one-on-one feedback rarely takes place during class unless the instructor talks with one learner at a time while the rest are doing something else. A pedagogical alternative to the latter is holding student-teacher conferences outside of class (Sardegna, 2012, 2022). These conferences are individual, face-to-face teacher and student conversations about the student's ability to predict, produce and perceive English speech. They also involve focus-on-form practice with challenging pronunciation features and individualized feedback on oral production and strategy use. Yet, little is known about the goals, format, and views of student-teacher pronunciation conferences. Thus far most research on conferences has focused on first and second language (L1/L2) writing conferences (e.g., Eckstein, 2013; Maliborska and You, 2016; Walker and Elias, 1987; Wu and Lin, 2015; Yang, 2022; Yeh, 2016; Young and Miller, 2004). The current study seeks to extend this research area by investigating the goals, characteristics, and views of five mandatory student-teacher pronunciation conferences that were incorporated into an ESL pronunciation course.

2. Student-Teacher Conferences

Student-teacher conferences are a well-established pedagogical approach in L1 composition courses and writing centers and are becoming increasingly common in L2 writing courses. However, they are not common in L2 pronunciation courses. Thus, most research on student-teacher conferences has focused on L1 writing and, to a lesser extent, on L2 writing. Existing research shows that L1 and L2 writing conferences are viewed favorably because of their positive influence on students' writing skills (Maliborska and You, 2016), confidence (Keh, 1990), empowerment (Young and Miller, 2004), and relationship with the teacher (Eckstein, 2013; Yang, 2022; Yeh, 2016). As Keh (1990) reflects, these conferences offer a "live" audience (i.e., the teacher), which makes it possible for the learner to ask for clarification, check understanding, and get assistance as they try to solve writing problems. Writing conferences afford students more timely, targeted, and accurate feedback on their writing drafts (Keh, 1990) and a chance to develop genre awareness and strategies for subsequent writing (Wu and Lin, 2015; Yang, 2022). In a survey involving 100 ESL students and eight writing instructors, Maliborska and You (2016) found high overall satisfaction regarding learning outcomes and the frequency (weekly) of the writing conferences although most instructors and students would have preferred having met for longer than 10 minutes. The researchers also observed that the instructors spent much time preparing for the conferences.

Research efforts have also uncovered a number of effective pedagogical strategies for writing conferences, including preparing (e.g., reading drafts) before the conference, offering critical but also encouraging comments, asking questions to engage students, and giving specific feedback (Carnicelli, 1980). Walker and Elias (1987) indicated that the format of the conference may affect learning outcomes as they found teacher-led conferences to be less successful than student-led conferences; yet, most of their study participants were L1 writers. Sowell (2020) cautions instructors of multilingual writers regarding this recommendation. Multilingual writers come from diverse backgrounds and often have different linguistic needs and cultural expectations regarding these conferences. Instead, Sowell recommends to approach L2 writing conferences with much more flexibility because some multilingual students may prefer the instructor to lead the meeting. Yang (2022) observed this flexibility in the interactions of an EFL writing instructor and her five students. The instructor adopted different strategies according to student needs: more directive strategies with passive students and more indirect feedback through thought-provoking questions with more active students. Finally, Eckstein (2013) surveyed 14 writing teachers and 546 students of five different levels of proficiency and found that the conferences not only afforded individualized instruction and feedback but also gave teachers a chance to reflect on and adjust their classroom instruction. These findings led the researcher to argue that writing conferences cover more than just writing feedback.

While there is scant evidence on the efficacy, views, and practices related to student-teacher pronunciation conferences, there are some reports suggesting the successful implementation of pronunciation tutoring interventions (Sardegna, 2020) and courses with student-teacher pronunciation conferences (Sardegna, 2012; 2022). For example, Sardegna (2022) shared longitudinal evidence supporting the Covert Rehearsal Model (CRM, Dickerson, 2013, 2015), which was implemented in an ESL pronunciation course that incorporated student-teacher conferences. CRM guides students' focus-on-form practice outside of class through a recursive sequence of six steps: find privacy, perform aloud, monitor the performance, compare the performance with other models, change the performance to match the models, and practice the changed performance aloud until fluent. During these steps, students use orthographic rules (see Dickerson, 2015) and pronunciation learning strategies (e.g., monitoring, comparing, revising; see Sardegna, 2022; Sardegna et al. 2016; Sardegna et al. 2018) simultaneously or in sequence to predict produce, and listen for one or more pronunciation targets (e.g., a sound, the stress in a word). Once students are satisfied with their improvement, they can restart the process and focus on a different target. Sardegna (2022) described *Enhanced-CRM* as a model that incorporated teacher actions to the CRM process. She observed that in-class activities included teaching, modeling, raising awareness, providing speech models and resources, and engaging students in controlled and communicative activities, while out-of-class activities included CRM (focus-on-form) practice

and individualized student-teacher conferences. Yet, no information was gathered on the characteristics and perceptions of these conferences. To fill this gap, the current study explored the goals, format, length, frequency, materials, topics and overall satisfaction of student-teacher conferences incorporated into an ESL pronunciation course that followed CRM.

3. An exploratory study

This exploratory study extends previous findings from pronunciation teaching approaches and student-teacher writing conferences by examining the perceptions of ESL college students and experienced ESL pronunciation instructors toward mandatory out-of-class student-teacher conferences in an ESL pronunciation course. Before this exploration, however, the study assesses students' pronunciation improvement. If there was an improvement, exploring what participants think of the conferences is of pedagogical value as these conferences were a required course component. The following research questions (RQ1-RQ6) guided this investigation:

1. To what extent did the ESL students improve their pronunciation learning goals during the course?
2. What were the instructional goals for the student-teacher pronunciation conferences?
3. What were the opinions of the ESL instructors and students about the format and characteristics of these conferences?
4. What were the perceptions of the ESL instructors and students regarding the benefits and drawbacks of these conferences?
5. How did the ESL students feel during these conferences?
6. What recommendations for practice did the ESL students and instructors have for the student-teacher conferences?

3.1 Participants and context

Participants were 24 ESL college students taking the course *English Pronunciation for Academic Purposes* and five experienced ESL instructors teaching that course at an American university. Ten female and fourteen male students from two different course sections volunteered for the study. Their first languages were Chinese (13), Vietnamese (5), French (1), Korean (1), Portuguese (1), Spanish (1), Thai (1), and Turkish (1). Their scores on the university's ESL oral test for incoming students had placed them to take the ESL pronunciation course. The instructors were two male and two female native speakers of English (henceforth, T1-T4) and one female native speaker of Spanish (henceforth, T5). T5 was the instructor of the 24 student participants (S1-S24). She had native-like

proficiency in English and twelve years of experience teaching ESL. All five instructors had received the same training to teach English pronunciation, followed the same syllabus, and used the same lecture and practice materials.

The goal of the ESL pronunciation course was to improve students' production and perception of natural English speech and their ability to predict the correct pronunciation of words and phrases. It met three times for a total of three hours per week for 15 weeks. During the class, the students learned and practiced the pronunciation of English vowels and consonants, and pronunciation rules and strategies to improve the rhythm and melody of spoken English. They were expected to practice outside of class and on their own following CRM. The course included five mandatory student-teacher conferences for individualized pronunciation feedback, which are the focus of this investigation.

3.2. Student-teacher pronunciation conferences

The purpose of the student-teacher conferences was to provide a platform for personalized help and feedback that could not typically be offered in a whole-class setting. The expectation was that the students would leave their one-on-one meetings with the instructor with a clearer sense of the extent of their pronunciation improvement during the prior weeks and guidelines to continue the work. These conferences were mandatory, conducted in an office, and offered every other week for 15 weeks.

Before the conferences started, the students were recorded reading aloud six paragraphs, six dialogs, and 22 words (pre-test). The recordings lasted approximately 7-10 minutes. To avoid reading disfluencies due to first-sight reading, the students read the testing materials either silently or aloud before recording. As the students read aloud, the instructor marked incorrect targets on a rater template. These marks did not appear in the testing materials. Hence, the students had no way of knowing which targets were being assessed and with which words or phrases. Intelligibility goals, students' read-aloud accuracy scores and their perceived pronunciation challenges informed the instructors' decisions on pronunciation learning goals for the semester for each student. Low-accuracy sounds with a high functional load (Brown, 1988) were chosen as priorities for learning and were assigned in pairs. For example, if a student's pronunciation of /v/ was not accurate and/or sounded more like a /b/, then the student was assigned the pair /v/ vs. /b/ for focused contrasting practice. Typically, the instructor did not assign more than five sound pairs per student. Linking, stress, and intonation targets below 60% accuracy on the pre-test were also included in the list. The group was divided in two so that half of the group would meet in one week and the other half would meet in the following week. Hence, the pre-test for each student took place in either Week 1 or Week 2 (i.e., Week 1/2). To assess progress, a post-test (same materials) was administered during Week 14/15.

There were five mandatory 30-minute-long student-teacher conferences in Weeks 3/4, 5/6, 7/8, 9/10, and 11/12. All course sections followed the same format

characteristics concerning where, how many, how long, and how often these conferences had to take place. They also shared the same task expectations (see 1). During these conferences, the instructors gave individualized instruction and feedback on features that had already been taught in class and were in the student's list of pronunciation learning goals. If time allowed, the instructors provided practice opportunities with additional features covered in class that were not included in the student's list. While the format and instructor tasks were the same across sections, it was up to each instructor to decide how long to focus on any given target, how many to assess, and how. The students were not graded on their knowledge of rules or oral performance. At the end of each conference, the students received a Feedback Sheet with recommendations to continue the work.

Before All Conferences	Before Each Conference	During Each Conference	At the End of Each Conference
1. Record and assess diagnostic test.	1. Explain pronunciation rules in class.	1. Ask S to choose what to practice first.	1. Congratulate S on their progress thus far. - Be specific.
2. Assign pronunciation learning goals for the semester.	2. Ask S to practice the new rules in covert rehearsal.	2. Ask S to read half way through one of the practice materials.	3. Summarize the most important aspects of your feedback using the Feedback Sheet.
3. Write a summary of what is problematic in S's speech and why the assigned targets need attention.	3. Ask S to prepare by: - writing predictions, - listening to speech models, - reading the materials aloud until fluent.	4. While S reads: - focus on the target, - ignore other errors, - mark errors in copy, - do not interrupt S.	2. Give Feedback Sheet to S.
4. Give S practice materials for each target. Keep a copy of each in a folder.	4. Ask S to bring the practice materials so that they can read them aloud for feedback.	5. Congratulate S, assess, identify remaining problems with target, and answer questions.	3. Encourage S to continue practicing.
5. Prepare a Feedback Sheet to complete during the meetings.	5. Ask S to bring questions for you.	6. Provide feedback orally and on Feedback Sheet. - Set specific objectives - Confirm understanding of what you explained.	4. Ask if S has any remaining questions.
6. Develop a list of available resources.		7. Ask S to select another target. Go back Step #2.	5. Dismiss S.

Figure 1: Instructor task expectations for before all student-teacher conferences and before, during and at the end of each conference (S = Student)

Student folders included 80 academic words selected by the student (40 from their field of study), and texts of two/three paragraphs with high-frequency counts of words with two sound contrasts (e.g., /v/ vs. /b/). The number of texts assigned

to the student depended on the number of sound pairs the student had to practice. The words and texts were used for home practice and conference feedback on sounds, thought grouping, stress, intonation, contractions, endings and linking targets. Dialogs from the course textbook – *Speechcraft* (Hahn and Dickerson, 1999) – were also used for practice.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

To answer RQ1 and assess students' pronunciation improvement, inferential statistics were computed using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 28. First, independent sample *t*-tests established that there were no significant differences in the pre-test means of the two groups of students ($p > .005$ for all assessed target features). Next, paired sample *t*-tests were computed to assess any significant differences between pre-test and post-test score means for each target feature for all the students (as one group). Inter-rater reliability was high for all features and tests (ICC $> .90$).

Data gathered from three anonymous student questionnaires and a focus group discussion were used to explore students' views and recommendations (RQ2 – RQ6). The students completed Questionnaires #1 (Q1) and #2 (Q2) after Conferences #2 (Week 5/6) and #3 (Week 7/8), respectively. Q1 and Q2 elicited information on the course so far and the student-teacher conference they just had:

1. The instructor's ability to explain things is (1 = *Poor*; 5 = *Excellent*).
2. If I need help, the instructor is (1 = *Not willing and available*; 5 = *Willing and available*).
3. Materials and activities used out of class prior and during the office meetings are (1 = *Insufficient for learning*; 5 = *Sufficient for learning*).
4. How do I feel when I am in the class and in office meetings (*interested? confused? encouraged? embarrassed? bored? comfortable? discouraged? challenged? excited?*) Why?
5. Aspects of the conference I find most helpful/beneficial. Explain why.
6. Aspects of the conference I find least helpful/not beneficial. Explain why.
7. Further comments and/or suggestions for the course and out-of-class meetings.

The students completed Questionnaire #3 (Q3) after Conference #4 (Week 9/10). Q3 elicited their opinions about their perceived improvement (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*), and their views on the conference format (required, out-of-class, 30-minutes long, every two weeks, not graded, oral and written feedback provided) (*Yes, I like – No, I don't like*); components (practice materials, instruction, targeted practice, and instructor's feedback) (1 = *Not useful*, 5 = *Very useful*); benefits and drawbacks. Students were asked to elaborate on their responses, provide recommendations and state their preferences when they disagreed with a statement. After Conference #5 (Week 11/12), eight students

participated in a 15-minute focus group discussion on recommendations for the course. Finally, the five instructors' goals, views, and recommendations (RQ2 – RQ6) were gathered through an instructor questionnaire administered at the end of the course. The instructor questionnaire elicited their goals, recommendations, and opinions about the format, characteristics, benefits and drawbacks of the student-teacher conferences via Yes/No statements, and Likert-scale and open-ended items similar to those in Q3.

Percentage Yes/No responses were computed on Yes/No statements and frequency counts were tallied on students' reported feelings. Descriptive and inferential statistics were computed on students' Likert-scale item responses. Due to the small sample size, instructors' Likert-scale responses were analyzed descriptively. Finally, a thematic analysis of comments made in the focus group and questionnaires was conducted using procedures adapted from a general inductive approach to coding qualitative data (Thomas, 2006). The data sources were reviewed multiple times by two researchers to identify commonalities and salient themes across participants' views. When disagreement occurred, a third researcher was consulted to reach a 100% intercoder agreement (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Based on the identified themes, a set of categories was developed and then triangulated with the information obtained from other sources.

4. Results

4.1. ESL students' learning outcomes

Students completed Q3 before they received their post-test results. Q3 asked them, "Do you think you have improved?" The majority (92%) strongly agreed, one student (4%) agreed, and one student (4%) indicated feeling neutral regarding their improvement. Their instructor (T5) also strongly agreed that her students had improved. A comparison of students' pre- and post-test scores corroborated their perceptions. In the case of vowels and consonants, only the sounds assigned for focused practice were compared. The results revealed that, on average, students' post-test scores were higher than those of the pre-test for all the targets analyzed (.). All differences were significant ($p < .001$) and large-sized effects, $d > 1.60$ (Table 1). The large practical significant of these results reinforced the merit of exploring participants' views on student-teacher conferences for individualized pronunciation instruction.

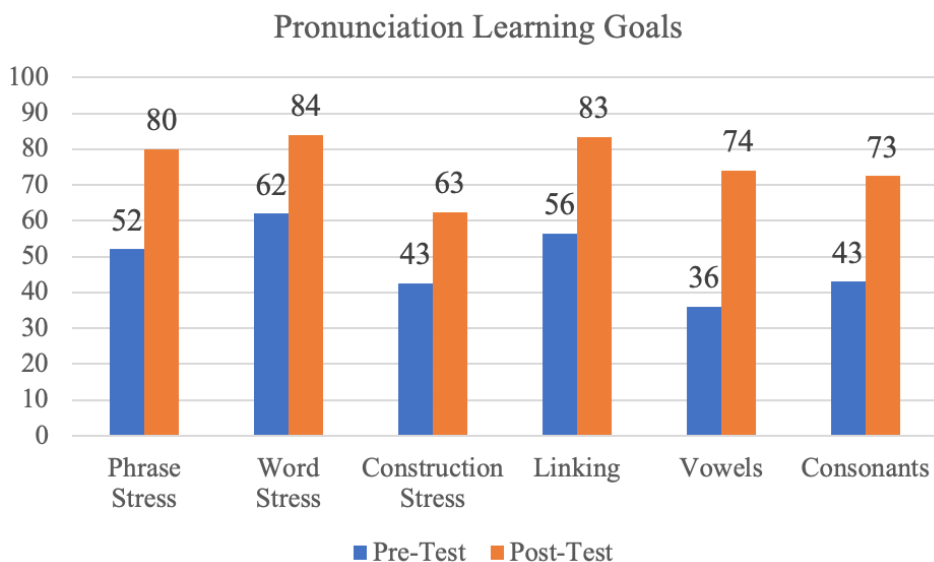


Figure 2: Pronunciation progress with targets assigned for focused practice ($N = 24$)

Table 1: Pronunciation progress with targets assigned for focused practice ($N = 24$)

Targets	Pre-Test M (SE)	Post-Test M (SE)	Diff.	$t(23)$	p	Effect Size (d)
Phrase Stress	52.04 (2.81)	79.96 (2.78)	-27.92	-10.42	< .001	2.13
Word Stress	61.96 (2.79)	83.92 (2.45)	-21.96	-7.81	< .001	1.60
Construction Stress	42.50 (2.15)	62.50 (1.86)	-20.00	-8.12	< .001	1.66
Linking	56.42 (2.57)	83.33 (2.10)	-26.92	-9.71	< .001	1.98
Vowels	35.96 (2.62)	74.00 (3.16)	-38.04	-13.15	< .001	2.68
Consonants	42.96 (2.45)	72.50 (2.33)	-29.54	-12.13	< .001	2.48

4.2. ESL instructors' goals for student-teacher conferences

The five instructors highlighted different aspects of the pronunciation learning process in response to “What is your main instructional goal for your out-of-class meetings this semester?”:

- *To raise students' awareness of their specific articulatory problems and needs. (T1)*
- *To show students useful pronunciation strategies for practice during covert rehearsal. (T2)*
- *To offer students valuable feedback geared at improving their intelligibility, listening comprehension, and predictive skills. (T3)*
- *To boost students' confidence by acknowledging their progress. (T4)*
- *To provide students with a sense of direction and keep them on track. (T5)*

4.3. Opinions on format and characteristics of student-teacher conferences

As Figure 3 displays, Q3 responses indicated that the students valued that the conferences were mandatory and provided during out-of-class time. They also fully appreciated that they were not graded and included oral and written feedback. Yet, half of the students disagreed with having them every two weeks. In their explanations, those that disagreed expressed their desire to have more than five conferences dedicated to practice and feedback. Moreover, the students that disagreed with the length of the meeting (58%) all explained that they would have preferred having met for longer than 30 minutes.

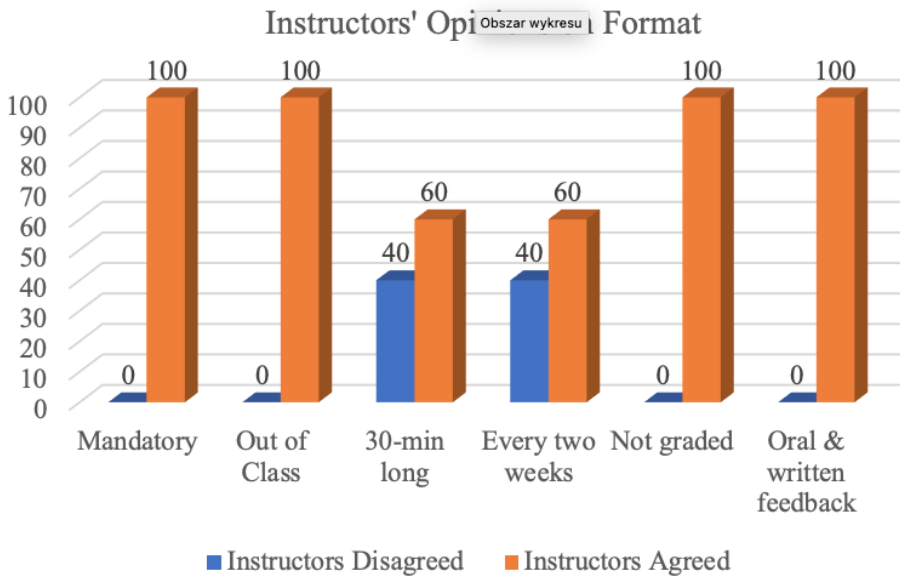


Figure 3: Students' opinions about the format of the student-teacher conferences ($N = 24$)

Some participants elaborated on their responses to show their appreciation for the conferences and their desire to have more, as illustrated in the following sample comments:

- *The office meetings are the most helpful. The instructor knows my errors in very very detail.* (S12, Q3)
- *I'm very pleased with the meetings. So much information and feedback!!* (S17, Q3)
- *I need more office meetings.* (S12, Q3)

In addition, all five instructors fully agreed on having mandatory, out-of-class, and not-graded student-teacher pronunciation conferences. They also reached 100% agreement on their perceptions of the value of providing individualized written and oral feedback during these conferences. Only two instructors disagreed on the number and length of these one-on-one meetings; yet, their opinions varied as one expressed a desire to increase and the other to decrease the frequency and time of these meetings (Figure 4).

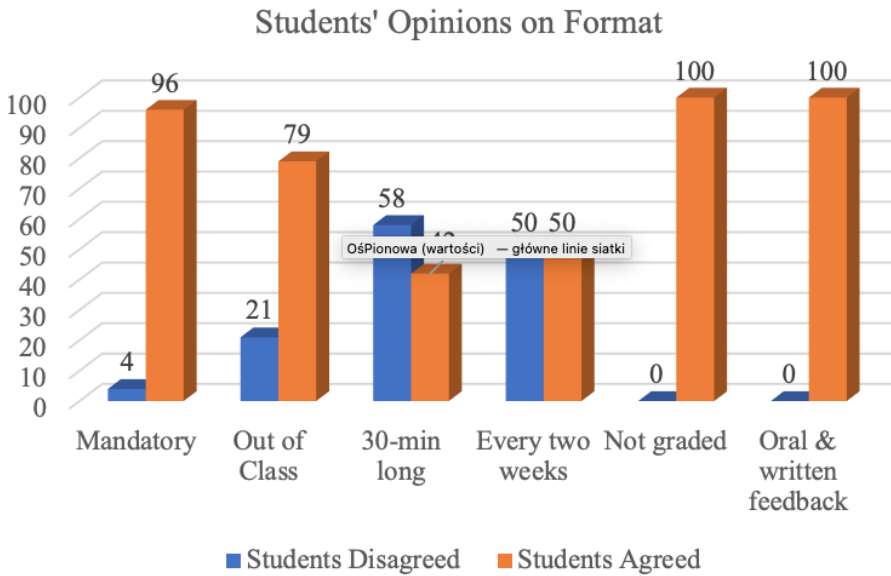


Figure 4: Instructors' opinions about the format of the student-teacher conferences ($N = 5$)

Q3 also elicited students' opinions on the required instructional components of the conferences, including the practice materials and required tasks of providing instruction, practice and feedback. The results indicated that the students exhibited high satisfaction with the overall quality of all these components (means > 4.5) (Table 2).

Table 2: Students' opinions on the required conference components ($N = 24$)

Components	Very Useful	Useful	Neutral	A Bit Useful	Not Useful	Mean
Practice materials	17 (71%)	6 (25%)	1 (4%)	0	0	4.66
Instructions	13 (54%)	11 (46%)	0	0	0	4.54
Targeted practice	21 (88%)	3 (12%)	0	0	0	4.88
Instructor feedback	21 (88%)	3 (12%)	0	0	0	4.88

Generally, students' views on the course and conference components were highly positive, as the following comments demonstrate:

- *The materials are well organized and very useful. (S1, Q1)*
- *I think the conference is well organized and the instructor is very helpful. Everything is very helpful. I learn a lot. (S3, Q1)*
- *I consider the feedback system in the office meetings an excellent way to know more our own weaknesses and strengths. (S10, Q1)*
- *The most helpful things are practice materials, home exercises, office visits, exercises in class. Also, recordings and exercises with questions are very helpful. (S23, Q1)*
- *The class provides lots of opportunities for questions. I like the office visits very much. (S24, Q1)*

Similarly, the majority of the instructors agreed that the practice materials and the targeted practice were very useful (80%) except for one instructor that expressed neutrality with respect to the practice materials, and one instructor that said that the individualized practice was just useful. They also agreed that the instructions and instructor feedback were very useful (60%), except for two instructors that remained neutral in their assessment of their own instructions and two that perceived their feedback as just useful.

4.4. Opinions on benefits and drawbacks

4.4.1 Students' Opinions

Q1 and Q2 asked students to indicate aspects of the conference they found least helpful/not beneficial. Hence, the students were asked twice, totaling 48 possible answers (two per student). Thirty-four of the 48 possible answers (71%) were either left blank or had a comment such as "*Nothing is unhelpful/everything is*

helpful.” An analysis of the only 14 student comments suggested three categories of which 1-2 were unrelated to the student-teacher conference:

1. Not enough time for practice or to complete the homework ($n = 8$; 17%): mentioned by S14 (twice), S22 (twice), S2, S11 and S12. S5 also complained, but did not seem to mind the amount of work: *In my opinion, there is a lot of homework so it is a very time-consuming course, but it is OK! I know that they are important and helpful.*
2. Listening recordings and class quizzes ($n = 4$; 8%): mentioned by S19, S23, S15, and S8.
3. Sound practice: ($n = 2$; 4%) (S2: *consonants were difficult* and S1: *Linking is too difficult*). These comments referred to the student’s struggles during the conference.

Q1 and Q2 also asked students to indicate aspects of the conference they found most helpful/beneficial. Eleven of the 48 possible answers (23%) had a comment such as “*Everything is (very) helpful*” without offering any further details. The students that provided detail on benefits included 46 comments identifying benefits. That is, some students identified more than one benefit per response. A thematic analysis of those comments uncovered that students associated benefits with the prediction rules taught (17); the characteristics they liked of the pedagogical approach (Enhanced-CRM) (9); and the opportunities to practice, receive feedback, ask questions, and improve SPEAK test scores (20). ESL students had to pass the SPEAK test to become graduate teaching assistants at the university. Table 3 displays the themes, number of comments, and representative comments. Percentages denote the representativeness of each theme in the data.

Table 3: Themes, number of comments, and representative comments indicating benefits

Benefits	N (%)	Representative Comments
1. Prediction rules	17 (37%)	- <i>Prediction is what I found most helpful. After the course, we can pronounce fluently unknown words (S3, Q1)</i> - <i>The rules that are provided in the class are very helpful to use in daily life. (S16, Q1)</i> - <i>I like the rules for intonation and primary stress (S21, Q2)</i>
2. Characteristics of the approach (CRM)	9 (19.5%)	- <i>I like the sound practice by ourselves, repeating the examples (S11, Q1)</i> - <i>The class motivates me to speak English in a proper way. We learn the rules but the applying is our homework. (S9, Q1)</i> - <i>I found helpful the rules to predict pronunciation and the chance to practice the production with recordings, in class and with the instructor. (S1, Q2)</i>
3. Opportunities to practice	8 (17.5%)	- <i>The teacher gives students a chance to try themselves. Everything is helpful. (S18, Q1)</i> - <i>I found the most helpful the practice on rhythm, message units, linking, stress and pronunciation (S1, Q2)</i> - <i>I am improving my pronunciation skills, specially stress and specific words’ pronunciation with so much practice (S16, Q2)</i>

4.	Opportunities to receive focused feedback	6 (13%)	-	<i>The instructor checks my pronunciation in class, by recording and in meeting and she tells me what I should do. I think it's very helpful for me (S6, Q1)</i>
			-	<i>The feedback is the most helpful (S21, Q1)</i>
			-	<i>The instructor corrects my pronunciation in the office. I like that. She focuses on main points to improve. This makes me pay more attention when I practice pronunciation at home. (S4, Q1)</i>
5.	Opportunities to ask questions	3 (6.5%)	-	<i>The class provides lots of opportunities for questions. (S24, Q1)</i>
			-	<i>I feel comfortable to ask any questions when alone with the instructor. (S20, Q2)</i>
6.	Opportunities to improve SPEAK test scores	3 (6.5%)	-	<i>Office meeting and class work are beneficial for SPEAK test preparation. (S6, Q2)</i>
			-	<i>I found the most helpful the strategies and methods to prepare the SPEAK tests. (S8, Q2)</i>
TOTAL		46 (100%)		

4.4.2 Instructors' Opinions

The only drawback identified by the instructors is the time commitment in preparing and holding the conferences. However, they all strongly agreed that the benefits outweighed this drawback. In fact, they all expressed appreciation for the course structure and materials, which decreased their preparation time.

Two categories emerged in the analysis of perceived benefits: (a) benefits afforded to the instructors (20 comments; 69%), and (b) benefits afforded to the students (9 comments; 31%). Of the 20 comments indicating benefits afforded to the instructor, 11 highlighted increased opportunities for a more targeted and differentiated assessment of the instructor's teaching effectiveness and the learning process. Clearly, this is an important benefit as all five instructors included at least a comment related to differentiated assessment:

- *Better determine students' needs and amount of improvement. (T1)*
- *See how well students link prediction rules to oral production. (T2)*
- *Assess students' knowledge of pronunciation rules and their ability to produce intelligible pronunciation based on those rules. (T3)*
- *Assess students' oral progress and understanding of course content. (T4)*
- *Assess teacher effectiveness in explaining the course content and in giving oral instructions. (T5)*

The remaining nine comments stressed other teacher-related tasks, such as the ability to review and provide target information, offer individualized instruction, answer questions, keep students on track, and congratulate students for their efforts, as illustrated in the following comments:

- *Review learning strategies. (T2)*

- *Be targeted and specific in terms of pronunciation instruction and feedback. (T3)*
- *Take the time to answer students' questions. (T1)*
- *Get students back on track if they have not been performing to their highest potential. (T5)*
- *Congratulate students on their improvement. (T4)*

All but one of the nine comments indicating learner benefits included words such as *more*, *individualized*, *target(ed)*, *focused*, *detailed*, and *specific* – that is, words indicating differentiated and increased practice and feedback opportunities:

- *Have more individualized practice tailored to their [learners'] needs. (T1)*
- *Show the result of their [learners'] target practice in covert rehearsal. (T4)*
- *Get detailed feedback on their [learners'] progress. (T3)*
- *Get specific guidance for self-monitoring and self-correcting. (T2)*
- *Obtain focused instruction to improve sounds, rhythm, intonation, and stress placement. (T5)*
- *Have more opportunities to practice. (T2)*
- *Receive focused feedback. (T5)*

The instructors were also asked to identify aspects of the conferences they thought made them successful. Their responses varied but, to a certain extent, also reflected their stated goals (see Section 4.2) and beliefs about the benefits of these meetings. For example, T1's focus was on addressing individual needs/questions (stated goal: *To raise students' awareness of their specific articulatory problems and needs*) and that is precisely what T1 thought made the conferences successful:

- *Students get an opportunity to ask their own questions, try things out in a stress-free environment, and get feedback that is relevant to them. Some students are afraid to ask questions in class. I think that having an opportunity for one-on-one practice is reassuring for the students. (T1)*

T2's attention was on ensuring students were using effective pronunciation learning strategies (stated goal: *To show students useful pronunciation strategies for practice during covert rehearsal*). Interestingly, T2's comment shows she thought her careful modeling was what made the conferences successful:

- *I always follow this motto: "Show how and ask the student to show me back." I've found that the students like this because it gives them a model to follow. It has been useful for me, too, as it helps me determine*

what they are able to do on their own with the resources and modeling I provide. (T2)

T3 aimed at providing students accurate information and detailed feedback (stated goal: *To offer students valuable feedback geared at improving their intelligibility, listening comprehension, and predictive skills*). In reflecting on what made the conferences successful, T3 stressed the importance of planning and being prepared (informed) to give the most effective practice and feedback:

- *The most beneficial thing is to have clear objectives and instructions. I plan these ahead of time so that I can maximize my time with my students. I think they appreciate that. (T3)*

T4's efforts concentrated on increasing students' confidence (stated goal: *To boost students' confidence by acknowledging their progress*). Not surprisingly, when asked to identify what made these meetings successful, T4 highlighted building a positive environment for students:

- *A friendly atmosphere is a must. Most students come to us with low self-esteem regarding their oral skills and feel bad about not being understood. We need to create an atmosphere where it is OK to make mistakes and try again. (T4)*

T5 was concerned about the students' pronunciation journey during and after the course (stated goal: *To provide students with a sense of direction and keep them on track*). To her, conference success had to do with giving students positive feedback and encouragement to continue the work (i.e., keep them on track):

- *Students leave these meetings with a high sense of accomplishment. The positive feedback they get about their hard work encourages them to keep working to improve their oral skills (T5).*

4.5. Students' feelings during the student-teacher conferences

Q1 and Q2 asked students to report how they felt in Conferences #2 and #3 by selecting the adjectives that best described their feelings. On average students selected two adjectives (*Mean = 1.9*). Figure 5 displays a tally of their choices.

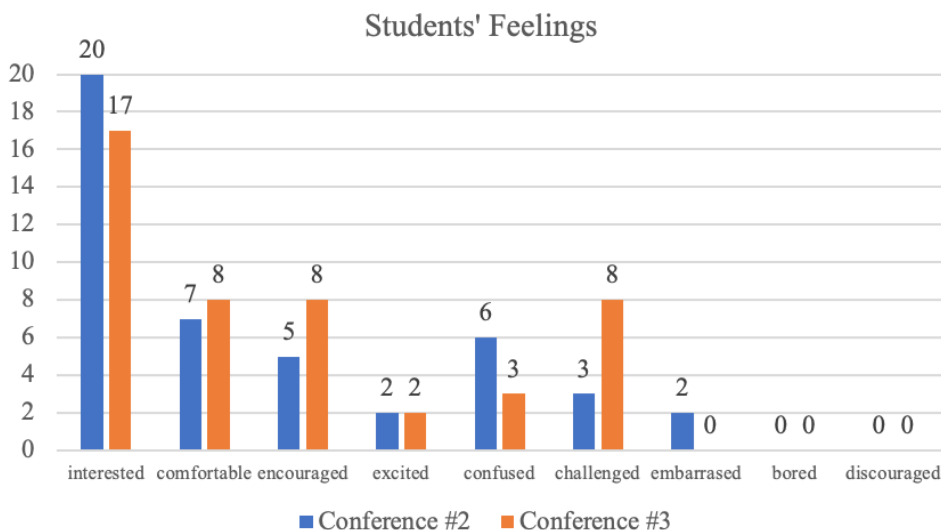


Figure 5. Students' feelings during the conferences ($N = 24$)

Notoriously, most students felt *interested* (83% and 71% in Conference #2 and #3, respectively), and none felt *bored* or *discouraged* in either conference. They also reported feeling more *comfortable*, *encouraged*, and *challenged* in Conference #3 than in Conference #2. In contrast, while 25% of the students expressed feeling *confused* in Conference #2, by Conference #3 only 12.5% (3 students) remained *confused*. Some sample explanations for their choices are as follows:

- *I felt challenged but I could feel proud of my improvement. (S6, Q1)*
- *I feel very interested because I learn a lot after each class and meeting. (S13, Q1)*
- *At the beginning, it is a little confusing, but it is getting much more interesting (S22, Q2)*
- *Sometimes I feel confused at first when new rules are explained, but after practicing them in class and here [in the conference] they are clear for me. (S4, Q1)*
- *The classes are always a lot of fun and I feel very comfortable. (S23, Q2)*

Other students ($n = 15$) opted to explain their feelings by expressing gratitude to the instructor (T5) or for the course. Here are some sample comments:

- *Thanks to my instructor! I learned a lot from this course. (S12, Q2)*

- *Excellent class! I will strongly suggest the class to my colleagues. (S17, Q2)*
- *I am very thankful for this course because it is challenging, motivating and encouraging and these make me apply all the rules we learned. (S9, Q2)*
- *I am very interested in this class because I get very good information I need to practice. The instructor has a good and vivacious attitude for students. (S20, Q2)*
- *I am interested because the instructor makes the class funny. I'm encouraged to participate in class because she does a good job to attract my attention. (S18, Q2)*
- *Our instructor can stir everybody in the class because she is enthusiastic. (S13, Q2)*
- *This instructor is excellent teacher. (S10, Q2)*

Students' positive sentiment toward the instructor and the course was reinforced in students' Likert-Scale responses (Table 4).

Table 4: Students' opinions about the instructor and course

	Scale	Conference #2 Mean	Conference #3 Mean
- The instructor's ability to explain things is...	1 = <i>Poor</i> ; 5 = <i>Excellent</i>	4.88	4.96
- If I need help, the instructor is...	1 = <i>Not willing and available</i> ; 5 = <i>Willing and available</i>	4.92	4.96
- Materials and activities used prior and during the office meetings are...	1 = <i>Insufficient for learning</i> ; 5 = <i>Sufficient for learning</i>	4.66	4.83

4.6. Recommendations for practice

4.6.1 Students' recommendations

Students had the opportunity to offer recommendations for the course or conferences four times (via Q1, Q2, Q3 and the focus group). However, only sixteen recommendations were included in the questionnaires. These recommendations made six kinds of requests: give us more time in conferences (4), give us more handouts (4), give us more recordings to listen to (3), give us less homework (2), give us more time to practice free speaking (2), give us a summary (1).

During the focus group, students' recommendations mostly focused on class activities. The few that related to student-teacher conferences reiterated some of the recommendations already made through the questionnaires, such as "give us more time in the office and more practice" (3), "it'd be ideal to have more handouts and recordings for practice" (1). Yet, a couple of students adamantly said that there were already a lot of materials to practice and simply no time to use

more. Hence, their opinions somewhat reflected the information gathered through the questionnaires: a few feeling that they had too much to do and a few feeling that they wanted more practice; yet, the majority feeling content with the amount and frequency of the conferences. Additionally, four students reflected on the kind of instructor needed for a successful conference. They recommended an “*understanding*”, “*patient*”, and “*knowledgeable*” instructor, and one that “*lets the student try things out many times without judgement.*”

4.6.2 Instructors’ recommendations

Table 5 summarizes instructors’ recommendations for student-teacher pronunciation conferences. Their responses are organized in pairs of should/should *not*. When more than one comment referred to a similar recommendation, one was chosen as a representative example. Overall, they made 36 recommendations, which ranged from 4 to 10 per instructor ($M = 7.2$).

Table 5: Instructor recommendations for student-teacher conferences

Teachers should <i>not</i> ...	Teachers should...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be uninformed and unprepared. • overwhelm students with information. • pre-teach content of future classes. • teach class content. • do the work for the students (e.g., apply rules after modeling/explaining). • spend the whole time practicing the same target with one activity. • talk too much. • spend more time than agreed for the meeting. • show impatience if repetition of information or feedback is needed. • show frustration if no progress was made. • ignore students’ improvement because the focus is on what else to correct. • overcorrect. • be repetitive and boring – it lowers students’ motivation to work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set individual learnable goals and bring practice materials to focused practice and feedback. • review rules only when necessary. • be selective; address targets already taught in class. • challenge students to figure things out by themselves using information given in class. • make students do the work (focus on application) • be dynamic, creative and resourceful. • balance student-teacher talk. • respect students’ time. • be supportive; students have different needs and challenges. • understand students’ struggles and know when to stop pushing. • be encouraging; show appreciation for improvement. • be selective; focus on one target at a time. • be enthusiastic and passionate – it increases students’ motivation to work.

5. Discussion

The ESL students made improvements of practical significance with the target features assigned for individualized practice, which provided further support for the efficacy of Enhanced-CRM (Sardegna, 2022). Due to the study design, we cannot attribute the improvement to the student-teacher conferences alone. The course included other pedagogical components (explicit instruction, awareness-

raising, perceptual training, and focus-on-form practice) that are likely to have also influenced students' improvement. Nonetheless, this finding provides a pedagogical purpose for exploring the goals, views, and characteristics of the individualized student-teacher meetings offered during the course.

The results revealed high student satisfaction with the conference materials, tasks, practice, instruction, and feedback ($M > 4.5$), indicating that the students found the conferences useful and good use of their time. The five 30-min-long conferences required significant time beyond the classroom, including prior preparation/practice time. Nonetheless, none of the students wanted to reduce the amount and length of the meetings. On the contrary, some wanted more and longer meetings. Likewise, the instructors reported high satisfaction with the conference materials and targeted practice and strongly agreed with the students that these one-on-one meeting should be mandatory, out-of-class, and not graded, and include written and oral feedback. Also, despite all acknowledging the drawback of the amount of time needed for these conferences, only one of the instructors expressed a desire for fewer and less frequent meetings. These positive perceptions regarding the usefulness of the student-teacher pronunciation conferences and students' desire for more echo findings from student-teacher writing conferences (Maliborska and You, 2016; Yang, 2022; Yeh, 2016). To address the need for more individualized practice, instructors might want to consider incorporating recorded oral assignments for feedback. Students could record themselves reading aloud target words, texts and dialogs many times before submitting their final (best) recording for feedback. The instructor would only need to listen to their final recording, thereby increasing students' focus-on-form practice without substantially increasing instructor feedback time.

The analysis of instructional goals established that each instructor had a different focus for these meetings. Yet, their stated goals (e.g., raising awareness, providing target practice and modeling, offering individualized feedback, boosting confidence, and providing a sense of direction) closely matched their beliefs of what they thought made their student-teacher conferences successful. This finding supports the view that teachers' cognitive beliefs often guide their pedagogical decisions. At this point, it is important to note that, as appreciated by the instructors, the course provided a strong structure, including required components, materials, and instructor task expectations (see Section 3.2 and Figure 1). This structure ensured that the instructors followed the same pronunciation approach and procedures, and were well-prepared for each conference – a characteristic that was reported as an effective strategy for writing conferences (Carnicelli, 1980). Differentiation occurred based on the instructor's cognitive beliefs and the student's needs and concerns. For example, some flexibility, as suggested by Sowell (2020) and Yang (2022), was incorporated by letting students decide which target to address first and with which materials. This seems to have given the right amount of flexibility to adjust to multilingual students' needs and wants without losing sight of the pedagogical goals set for the

student. Also, by providing the practice materials a priori, the instructor retained some level of organization and direction. This approach seemed to work well because the ESL students highly praised the organization and content of the conferences.

Both the instructors and students identified few drawbacks regarding the conferences, which were mostly related to time and amount of work required. Yet, it was evident that the benefits outweighed the drawbacks given the number of benefits they identified and the majority's preference for keeping the required number, length and frequency of the meetings. The instructors reported two kinds of benefits: benefits afforded to the instructors and benefits afforded to the students. All five stressed the benefit of providing and receiving individualized and targeted feedback on learning, which is in line with studies of student-teacher writing conferences (Eckstein, 2013; Maliborska and You, 2016; Yang, 2022; Yeh, 2016). Other benefits for the teacher included the possibility of reviewing and providing target information, receiving feedback on teaching effectiveness, offering individualized instruction, answering questions, keeping students on track, and congratulating students for their efforts. Other benefits for the learner included increased opportunities for focused, detailed, specific, and targeted guidance, feedback, and practice. The students also highlighted the benefits of increased opportunities for practice, feedback, and asking questions. Based on prior literature on writing conferences (Maliborska and You, 2016; Keh, 1990), most of these benefits seem to be characteristic of successful student-teacher conferences regardless of the target language skill. In addition, the students identified three other benefits that are unique to the course approach and focus on pronunciation: the prediction rules taught, the focus-on-form and strategy-based pronunciation practice (Enhanced-CRM Model), and the opportunity to improve their scores in the SPEAK test, a high-stakes test for international graduate student. These three benefits constitute 63% of the comments on benefits, which suggests their significant influence on students' overall satisfaction with the conferences.

The instructor's teaching effectiveness and attitude during these conferences appear to have also contributed to both the actual and perceived effectiveness of these conferences. T5 was praised for her organization, instruction, knowledge, feedback, patience, encouraging comments, and vivacious, funny, and enthusiastic attitude. These comments underscore that T5 was able to build a good relationship with the students – another reported characteristic of successful student-teacher conferences (Eckstein, 2013; Yang, 2022; Yeh, 2016). Students' choice of adjectives describing how they felt during the conferences further emphasize that T5 was effective in creating a learning environment where students trusted and appreciated her feedback, felt interested and comfortable when receiving feedback, and were challenged to keep practicing. In their recommendations, the students explicitly stated that the instructor needed to be "*understanding*", "*patient*", and "*knowledgeable*" – like T5. While more research is needed to corroborate these findings, these could be characteristic traits to look

for in pronunciation instructors. Furthermore, instructor recommendations of what pronunciation instructors should and should not do reflected, to a large extent, the opinions of the students as they also highlighted the need for instructors to be informed, organized, patient, understanding, encouraging, and flexible yet purposeful. They also stressed the importance of not overcorrecting, pre-teaching, or doing the work for the students during the conferences. Future research is needed to extend the findings to other settings, courses, and pronunciation approaches using student-teacher conferences for individualized pronunciation instruction.

6. Conclusion

The results of this course-specific and exploratory case study cannot be generalized for other courses using student-teacher pronunciation conferences with a different format, materials, or approach. Nonetheless, the results provide some valuable insights into the goals, format, components, and benefits of conference-based pronunciation courses for ESL students. Overall, the students and instructors surveyed expressed high satisfaction with the format and characteristics of the student-teacher conferences and recognized them as an effective, helpful and useful tool for individualized pronunciation instruction and feedback. The actual and perceived learning outcomes corroborate findings suggesting the efficacy of Enhanced-CRM for pronunciation learning (Sardegna, 2022). However, further research is needed to establish whether the observed improvement during the course would differ if no conferences were offered. Other valuable avenues for future research include how instructors should be trained for these conferences, what kind of materials best support pronunciation learning, and what instructor characteristics are best suited to support students' pronunciation learning journeys.

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