# A PROJECT-BASED APPROACH OF ESP STUDENTS TO LEARN SPECIALIZED IDIOMS. A PIECE OF CAKE

**Roxana-Maria Nistor (Gâz), Alexandra Cotoc**
**Lecturer, PhD., Babeş-Bolyai University, Lecturer, PhD., Babeş-Bolyai University**

*Abstract:Idioms are linguistic elements that indicate advanced or proficient users of a language. In this study, we present the experiment of acquiring specialised idioms by first year students in the fields of European Studies, Management, Psychology and Pedagogy through an autonomous activity that allows for individual work or pair work. Our aim is to analyse the students' vocabulary improvement, their ability to use idioms in a contextualised manner and to assess their presentation skills.*

*Keywords:idioms, English for Specific Purposes, vocabulary improvement, autonomous activity, presentation skills*

**Introductory Remarks**

Elaborating an ESP course pack for university students is never an easy task, as they all come from different backgrounds with different levels of language proficiency. What might work for a group of students, might not work for another one. Therefore, besides the mandatory topics to be studied in class, language instructors are always *putting their shoulder to the wheel* to create activities that attract students' attention and interest in learning new vocabulary.

Many language teachers prefer the language-centred methods where they introduce "grammatical structures and vocabulary items one at a time and help learners practice them until they internalize the L2 system" (Kumaravadivelu, 1994: 29); however, there are also learner-centred methods which we consider very important as they focus on the communicative function of the language and help students improve their speaking skills, making them at the same time learn new vocabulary and acquire idiomatic competence.

Following the introduction of Stern's *macrostrategies* for learning (Stern, 1992), some specialists in language learning proposed various methods to help and stimulate students to acquire new vocabulary (Basturkmen, 2006; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Watson Todd, 2003; Tomlinson, 2011). Kumaravadivelu (1994), for instance, proposes 10 macrostrategies for language learning, among which it is worth mentioning the activation of "intuitive heuristics" (i.e. a process or method enabling a person to discover or learn something for themselves), as well as the promotion of "learner autonomy" (Kumaravadivelu, 1994: 32), and these macrostrategies can be achieved through microstrategies.

In the activity we carried out in class, we focused on these two macrostrategies (*intuitive heuristics* and *learner autonomy*), as students enrolled at the faculties of European Studies and Psychology and Educational Sciences within Babeş-Bolyai University were involved in the "Idiom of the Week" activity through which, at the end of each English class, students had to find and present an idiom related to the units we were discussing in class at that moment, having the autonomy of selecting an idiom of their choice but at the same time directing them towards a specific field in which they could use that idiom.



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## 1. Hypotheses and Motivation of the project

Given the nowadays context in which the digital world occupies most of the students' free time and it is also highly present in their academic life, we started from the assumption that our students have to be engaged in interactive, dynamic and blended activities (both online and face-to-face) in order to improve their vocabulary and presentation skills. From our teaching experience, it seemed that students are much more engaged in activities which give them freedom, which involve the use of multimodal elements (images, videos) and allow them to have fun while solving particular tasks, even though the content itself is not that easy to grasp. As such, our aim became that of investigating students' vocabulary improvement, their ability to use idioms in a contextualised manner, regardless of, but also dependent on, their language level and assessing their presentation skills. The investigation was carried out having in focus the students' online search for idioms, their weekly posts on a user-friendly and popular platform in our country, their creative and interactive presentations, as well as their ability to create appropriate contexts for the usage of the idioms selected. We aimed to explore the improvements in terms of vocabulary and presentation skills and to engage students in this pilot project.

## 2. Theoretical considerations and description of the project

*a. Theoretical considerations*

Why idioms? Learning idioms is not an easy task and it is even said that "if natural language had been designed by a logician, idioms would not exist" (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1993: vii). It might be easier for students who have at least an intermediate level to learn idioms, as they have already acquired basic grammar knowledge and have a rather rich vocabulary. However, learning idioms is not only an activity designed for and targeting upper-intermediate and advanced students, but it is also addressed to pre-intermediate students, as "figurative competence is an important component of L2 fluency and (...), in order to be proficient in a foreign/second language, an L2 learner needs to build a large repertoire of conventionalized expressions such as idioms, collocations, compounds, phrasal verbs, and other so-called multiword lexical items" (Cieślicka, 2015: 209).

Although a large variety of terms have been used so far to describe a "a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words" (Oxford English Dictionary), such as 'fixed expressions' (Carter, 1998), 'multi-word units' (Grant & Bauer, 2004), or 'phraseologisms' (Gries, 2008), the term 'idiom' is still widely occurring, and this is the term we chose to use in our project.

The importance of idioms cannot be denied. "Using idioms correctly is one of the things that sets apart fluent speakers of a language, and, realizing this, students are often keen to learn them" (Schmitt, 2000: 100). Although idioms might seem difficult at first, they can be very versatile and give "colour" to language, they can help an L2 speaker use figurative language, and they can give them fluency as well. That is why we decided to implement this activity with all our students, irrespective of their level, because once they *learn the ropes* of figurative speech, they can play with the idioms, break them into chunks and, why not, combine them differently and in various contexts. "Lack of metaphorical competence is a major reason why foreign language learners fail to attain native-like fluency and that competence in using figurative language is inadequate in typical classroom language learners even after three or four years of foreign language learning" (Danesi, 1992 *apud.* Cieślicka, 2015: 209).



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Idioms, as part of the figurative meaning in English language, do not only help learners enrich their vocabulary, but this way they can also understand the cultural background behind idioms in a language. For example, when it is raining heavily, the English will say *it's raining cats and dogs*, but the Romanians will say *plouă cu găleata* (literally translated, "it's raining with the bucket").

In making students acquire new vocabulary, and idioms implicitly, we focused on learner-centred approaches, which put the students at the centre of the process of learning, helping them enrich their vocabulary and develop their communication skills, giving them some autonomy at the same time.

According to Schmitt (1992), new vocabulary can be acquired either through discovery (letting learners find out/discover new vocabulary on their own) or through consolidation strategies (using new words in context to be able to learn them), two elements which were incorporated in our pilot project.

*b. Description of the project*

*Idiom of the Week* is a pilot project which we started at the beginning of the second semester with the students enrolled at the Faculty of European Studies and the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. Through this project we targeted the students' discovery and consolidation strategies in learning new vocabulary, which can be used in their specialized field of study (e.g. management, European studies, psychology, pedagogy, etc.). Moreover, this project contributes to the development of students' autonomy in the teaching-learning process, engaging them in an activity which requires them to perform online research, to select the adequate resources, to critically assess the content, and to give arguments why the end result corresponds to the requirements.

At both faculties, during the introductory course, students were announced about the project and our requirements, and we embarked on this project starting with the second week of the second semester and ending with the last course of the semester. We took, however, a slightly different approach in engaging the students in this activity: in the case of the Faculty of European Studies, this activity was mandatory, while in the case of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, this activity was optional, designed to give students an opportunity to have a higher semester mark. We decided to use to different approaches in order to investigate the differences in terms of the results obtained while dealing with the same kind of project, but with a mandatory/optional label.

Students were scheduled for the idiom presentation during the first week and could present their idiom(s) onlyduring the scheduled course. If they failed to do so, they could not present their idiom during a different course. They were asked to find an idiom that would match the topic of the unit discussed that week during the English course and to present it at the end of the course, spending maximum three-four minutes on their presentation.

Students also received clear instructions about what they had to do, as during the first English class of the semester, we exemplified the activity for them, and we also created a document containing instructions for the activity.

In order to prepare them for future activities, to help them practise their speaking / presentation skills, the students were encouraged to deliver a presentation according to some mandatory steps. Therefore, they had to:

1. find an idiom related to the unit studied in class;



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2. find a picture depicting the idiom (the funnier, the better) and upload it on the Facebook groups created for this purpose, two days prior to the presentation.
3. print out that photo and bring it to class to show it to their colleagues;
4. explain any unknown words that were part of the idiom chosen;
5. explain the idiom;
6. create a context related to the unit studied at that time in order to show their colleagues how that idiom could be used in a certain field of activity/study.

Hence, every week, at the end of the English class, two/three/four students were required to present the "idiom of the week" to their colleagues. After having presented their idioms in class, students were asked to write the idiom, its meaning (and the example they gave, in the case of the students enrolled at the Faculty of European Studies) in an online document created for this purpose, which, in the end, became the "glossary of idioms". At the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Studies, the instructor inserted an idiom whenever a student did not perform this task. Hence, the glossary that resulted contains entries which are marked by *T:* ... and are written in red (the ones introduced by the instructor) and entries which are marked by *S:* ... and are written in black (introduced by the students). The purpose was to create a collaborative project made not only by the students, but also to engage the instructor who became an active participant, not just an observer, especially since at this faculty the activity was optional.

## 3. Corpus Analysis

### *3.1. Facebook Groups (posts, comments, online communication)*

The schedule for the presentation of the idioms and the document containing the description of the class activity were uploaded on each Facebook group created for communication with the students after having been presented in class. In the case of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, the groups had already been created at the beginning of the academic year, while in the case of the Faculty of European Studies, the groups were created at the beginning of the second semester.

Each week, the language instructors posted messages in each group reminding students about the activity, uploading documents when necessary, and nominating/tagging those students who had to present idioms the following week, mentioning the theme of the idiom as well.

Students had to previously post the content related to the idioms that they would present in class on our Facebook group on the day before the course. They had to check the Facebook group to make sure they didn't choose the same idiom as another colleague.

An interesting fact about the Facebook posting requirement is that the activity triggered interaction between the students as quite often the students reacted to the posts of other students, either via the *like button* or via a comment. For instance, for one of the uploaded photos, a student inserted a comment in the form of a GIF producing a chain reaction from the other students. It is well-known that the like button, the GIF and the emoji on FB are very popular among young adults, signalling to us that they acknowledged one another's digital presence and followed the colleagues' online activities giving coherence to the steps of the project, but also forming an online learning community while engaging in a type of interaction that relaxes them and they are very fond of.

At the Faculty of European Studies, it was actually the students who 'changed the rules of the game', because they uploaded the picture that depicted the idiom, sometimes the idiom itself as well, bu they did not write the explanation for the idiom so as to stir their colleagues' curiosity. Each student who got involved in this activity posted one picture depicting the idiom



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they chose. There were cases when students uploaded the same idiom or the same picture depicting the same idiom; they did not check the Facebook groups to see what idioms had already been chosen. Consequently, we had to quickly let them know about that by replying to their photo and asking them to change the idiom they chose. This activity required attention from both the students and the language instructor, as the activity on the Facebook group had to be constantly monitored.

*3.2. Analysis of presentations*

As previously mentioned, the students' presentation had to include some mandatory elements. First of all, they had to identify an idiom that could be used in a context related to the unit that was studied in class at that time (e.g.: law, or intelligence). Secondly, they had to find a picture that described the idiom they chose. They had freedom in choosing their idiom and the photo depicting it; we hoped they would find funny pictures, so that their colleagues could remember that idiom easier through a "mental picture" – a memory strategy (Schmitt, 1992). Once they found a photo, they had to upload it on the Facebook groups created for each specialization for this purpose two days prior to the presentation. Thirdly, students were asked to print out the picture depicting their idiom, which they uploaded on the group and show it to their colleagues in class while delivering their brief presentation. Fourthly, students had to explain the idiom to their colleagues, for example by also giving synonyms or explanations for some of the words making up the idiom, which were unfamiliar to the other students (e.g. *to give someone a pat on the back* – the student who chose this idiom had to explain the meaning of the word "pat" to their colleagues before explaining what the idiom meant). Fifthly, after having made sure that their colleagues understood the meaning of each word making up the idiom, the students had to explain their meaning. To make sure their colleagues understood them, they also had to make a sentence related to the unit that was studied at that time in order to show their colleagues how that idiom could be used in a context related to a specific field of activity/study (step 6).

At both faculties, students received the instructors' support if they asked for it. For instance, at the Faculty of European Studies, there were pre-intermediate students who asked for help because they were not sure if the idiom they chose was appropriate or not, or because they wanted to receive the professor's approval to feel more confident when delivering the presentation.

At the Faculty of European Studies, most students complied with the instructions given for the presentation of idioms. Although there were presentations that were more interesting than others (where students used jokes for instance to attract their audience's attention, or they put themselves in the shoes of a language instructor and tried to use appropriate tone of voice and intonation, pauses to create suspense about what came next), most of the presentations, however, did not contain too many elements of creativity and the presentations were sometimes a bit flat, as if the students were simply reciting a memorized text. There were also cases when students with lower levels of English chose difficult idioms and they were not able to explain them properly or to create a sentence connected to the unit studied in order to exemplify how that idiom can be used in a specific context.

Mention has to be made, however, that due to logistical constraints there was no possibility to divide the into groups the students enrolled at Faculty of European Studies, according to their language skills and level, and this could be one reason why some of them felt that they either had a too good a level or, on the contrary, that they were not sufficiently prepared to speak in front of colleagues who had better English skills than they did.



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At the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, there was a clear difference in the approach undertaken by the students studying early education pedagogy—that is, future educators in primary school and pre-university studies—, and the one undertaken by the students studying Psychology. This contrast is due to the fact that, for the students in early education pedagogy, a special emphasis is usually placed on the methods and strategies used in the teaching-learning process throughout their studies and they are eager to put into practice the information acquired. Hence, the presentation of the students in early education had a higher degree of creativity and involved the audience to a higher extent than the students in Psychology.

In what the groups are concerned, we noticed a difference between the pre-intermediate, the intermediate and the advanced groups for both Psychology and early education students. In terms of motivation and attitude towards the activity, the advanced students showed more confidence during the presentations (their presentations were interactive and playful and displayed a plethora of PowerPoint presentations, games, jokes, videos, stickers, riddles etc., involving the audience as active participants), but at the same time, many of their presentations were quite dully factual, probably due to the fact that they were not so motivated by the extra points received for the activity and also due to the fact that they perceived the activity as being easily accomplished. We expected much more insightful presentations. The Intermediate group put more effort into presenting their activities, showed more concern about their choice of idioms and about presenting the idioms properly. The students in the pre-intermediate groups perceived this activity as stressful and they needed continuous support and guidance. Most of them felt reluctant that their choice of idiom was suitable and quite often contacted the instructor via the FB messenger to receive a confirmation that the idiom chosen was suitable. They gave very dry presentations, reading from their notes or from their ppt slides. There were some who didn't know the meaning of the words in the idiom and when asked to give other examples that the ones they chose they found it very difficult to provide one. However, they showed interest in finding a Romanian equivalent for their English idiom or for their colleagues' idiom.

Another interesting fact about this project is that the students did not choose to present in a pair/group neither at the Faculty of European Studies, nor at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, which might also be an indicator of the students' general perception of classroom activities.

*3.3. Glossary of idioms (corpus analysis)*

In what the tangible result of the activity is concerned, the instructors created an editable google drive document and asked the students to write their idioms and their meaning (Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences), idioms + meaning + example (Faculty of European Studies). Hence, after each session of idiom presentations, the students collaboratively edited the document, contributing to the creation of the *glossary*that all the students could view and edit throughout the semester.

At the beginning of the semester, the students were also informed that, from the glossary created together with the students, the idioms presented in their groups would be included in the content for the end-of-semester test which would check the new vocabulary acquired throughout the semester (idioms). Students would receive the list of selected idioms one week before the written exam. For this activity (project + presentation), each student would receive 0.5 points.

At the Faculty of European Studies, we had eight first-year groups of roughly 25 students each (four groups studying International Relations and European Studies in Romanian, one studying International Relations and European Studies in English, another one studying



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International Relations and European Studies in German, one group studying European Administration in Romanian, and one studying Management in Romanian). Students studying Management had business-related topics (e.g.: Unit 2. Raising Finance, Unit 5. Business Law), while the other specialisations studied topics related to European studies (e.g.: Unit 3. Diplomacy, Unit 5. E.U. Law).

At the end of the teaching activities, out of the 100 students studying International Relations and European Studies in Romanian, 70 complied with the instruction of filling in the glossary of idioms. In the case of students studying in English, there were 19 students out of the 27 who opted to study English; out of the 10 students studying International Relations and European Studies in German, 9 filled in the online glossary; in the case of the students studying European Administration in Romanian, there were 14 students who filled in the glossary out of the 20 who opted for the English course; and finally, in the case of 1st year students who study Management, 15 students out of the 20 who opted for the English course filled in the glossary of idioms.

At the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, we had seven first-year groups of about 30 students each. Four groups were composed of students in Psychology and they were divided in two intermediate groups and two advanced groups. The other three groups included students in pedagogy, special pedagogy and early education pedagogy and they were divided in Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate and Advanced groups. For all students at this faculty, the line of study is Romanian and they study ESP for 2h/week for the duration of an academic year. In the first semester, all the students who opted for the ESP course, had to follow the course, but in the second semester, students who had a CAE/FCE/IELTS certificate opted to validate their courses and they didn't take part in the course.

Students studied topics related to their fields of study and every week covered a different unit. The topics were similar as the fields of studies covered related matters at time, but the instructor tackled the units from a different perspective in accordance with the students' specialisation (e.g. Unit 1 Types of Personality, Personality Theories; Unit 2 Individual Differences: Identity; Unit 3 The Self-Concept; Units 4, 5, 6, 7 ,8 Intelligence (Evolution of Intelligence, Nature vs. Nurture, Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Animal Intelligence) etc.

At the end of the teaching activities, out of the 127 students studying Psychology and not having a certificate, 73 complied with the instruction of filling in the glossary of idioms. As can be seen in the table below, the half of the students in the Advanced group didn't get involved in the activity at all. In the case of students in early education, there were 65 students out of 91 who filled in the online glossary.

## 4. Preliminary Results

*a. Perception and attitudes*

In terms of students' perception of the activity, we noticed from the very beginning that most of them showed great enthusiasm to participate in this three-step project (1. Facebook posts, 2. presentations and 3. Google document) as it offered them the possibility to take part in a collaborative, interactive, up-to-date and fun project.

At the Faculty of European Studies, the groups of students we worked with were multi-level classes, with students whose proficiency in English language ranged from pre-intermediate to advanced. Such mixed classes are very complicated to work with, and it is also very difficult to find activities that can get all students involved. In contrast, at the Faculty of Psychology,



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students work in homogenous groups and this allows the instructor to target all students at the same time.

At both faculties, the "Idiom of the Week" activity ~~that we designed for them this semester~~ was generally well received, as most students quickly engaged in the search of idioms, pictures, and examples. Another thing that the students liked was the creation of Facebook groups in the case of the European Studies and the continuation of the use of the Facebook group in the case of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences as the students used the social media platform in the first semester as well. They got to communicate more, and they also felt the communication with their language instructor was easier. They did not only share photos and idioms, but they also shared the "likes" and they had a platform where they were able to communicate virtually for study-related purposes.

*b. Students' motivation & involvement*

Motivation "refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language" (Gardner, 1985: 10), and it also is what makes students work more and what makes them get involved into a (new)activity. That is why, motivation has been long studied and has always represented a point of interest for teachers, professors and practitioners in the field of foreign language teaching (FLT) and second language acquisition (SLA) (R.C. Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2001, 2003, 2012; Brown, 2000).

According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), there are two types of motivation: instrumental and integrative. Instrumental motivation makes students learn something because of an extrinsic reason, such as obtaining a better job, getting a pay raise, incentives, rewards, etc. Integrative motivation makes learners study and acquire knowledge because of an intrinsic reason, for instance, in our case, a desire to learn to be able then to meet new people and to communicate with them.

It is for this reason that we decided to approach this project differently: in the case of the Faculty of European Studies, this activity was mandatory, while in the case of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, this activity was optional, designed to give the students an opportunity to have a higher semester grade. We decided to use to different approaches in order to investigate the differences in terms of the results obtained while dealing with the same kind of project, but with a mandatory/optional label.

Consequently, we were able to observe that, in the case of the Faculty of European Studies, where the activity was mandatory, students were mostly driven by an instrumental motivation since they wanted to have a good end of semester mark. Similarly, at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, pre-intermediate and intermediate students were motivated by the extra points that they would receive to the final grade at the end of the semester. The advanced groups, however, did not engage as much as the other students.

Although not all of them complied with the instructions for this activity (i.e. some of them failed either to present the idiom, or to insert it in the glossary, or both), the large majority of students fulfilled their obligations related to this activity and they also enjoyed it.

*c. Problems encountered*

No new activity comes without problems; it is through trial and error that new activities are implemented, tested, then adjusted and implemented again. As general remarks, it is worth mentioning that we noticed that some of the students who had a more advanced level of English were less involved than expected. Many of them chose to present idioms that were rather



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common, and that did not challenge them in any way, probably because their motivation was extrinsic and not intrinsic.

As such, among the most common problems encountered in our activity is the failure by the students to meet the deadlines set. Some students forgot about the schedule the language instructor made and uploaded on their social media group, or they skipped classes during that day and, consequently, did not attend the English class either.

Another common problem was that some students (accidentally) deleted information from the online glossaries which led to the time-consuming task of restoring the information. In some case, some entries could not be restored; therefore, the language instructor had to reintroduce them.

In what the language instructors are concerned, their task of continuously monitoring students' activity on the Facebook groups created, of always keeping them in a loop proved to be a hard one mainly because of the large number of students involved in the project. However, the satisfaction of seeing students enjoy the activity, getting involved and contributing to the course content made all the efforts worthwhile.

## 5. Conclusions

The *Idiom of the Week* activity represented a pilot project implemented for the first-year students enrolled at the Faculty of European Studies and at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Studies within Babeș-Bolyai University.

After one semester, we noticed that the students' performance was greatly influenced by their language skills. For instance, the pre-intermediate and some of the intermediate students were more reluctant to present their idioms in front of an audience (especially if they were part of a multi-level group) and also to contribute to the classroom glossary, lacking self-confidence and being afraid that they might make mistakes. Interesting enough, they would be as willing to post their idioms on FB as the students from the intermediate/advanced groups. In addition, we also came across a surprising and unexpected situation as the more advanced students were less involved that expected, opting to present common, easy idioms, and not manifesting creativity in presenting them to their colleagues.

We also noticed a peak in the students' motivation and interest in the first part of the semester when the activity still constituted a novelty and a slow decrease in the second part due to the pre-exams and exams, and also to the fact that the novelty aspect became for some routine for the English class.

The success of this kind of endeavours depends a lot on the generation of students, field of studies, the background that they have and the teaching methods that the students are familiarised with. Another factor could be the student's type of intelligence. Thus, another conclusion we drew from the implementation of this project is that students' choice of idioms and pictures might have also been influenced by their type of intelligence (see *theory of multiple intelligences theory*, which states that we do not have one single type of intelligence, but that we rather have a sum of multiple intelligences). As such, some students might have a predominant logical-mathematical intelligence, rather than a linguistic one, that is why some might not have been so much involved in this activity.

Bearing in mind the experience and the results of our pilot project, we consider that this project was a good opportunity for the students to develop their skills in an interactive, blended and collaborative project and we intend to continue it in order to account for the results with



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different generations and having the final aim of creating an interactive online glossary of idioms useful for students in an English for Specific Purposes course.

Our proposal for the near future use is to gamify the activity in the face-to-face context, introducing in the mandatory requirements for the presentation of the idioms criteria like interactivity, creativity, collaboration, innovation.

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