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From Element-Level Review to Relational Cross-Checking: Functional Compatibility in Professionally Oriented Role-Based Simulation Tasks

Ozoda Zohid qizi Nazirova
Tashkent State Technical University named after Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Professionally oriented role-based simulation tasks combine design decisions that draw on both language pedagogy and domain knowledge. A communicative task-design decision may be pedagogically appropriate, while a related domain element may be professionally plausible; however, two separate positive judgments do not necessarily guarantee that the two elements are functionally compatible when combined within the same task. This conceptual and methodological study operationalizes a relational cross-check intended to identify incompatibilities that arise specifically at the point of combination between separately acceptable elements. The study draws on research in languages for specific purposes, specific-purpose language assessment, and simulation design. Three distinct objects of analysis are differentiated: the language-pedagogical acceptability of a communicative task-design decision, A(x); the domain appropriateness of a related domain element, B(y); and the functional compatibility of the relationship between the two, C(x,y). Because C is evaluated only after positive A and B judgments, the sequential procedure yields five basic analytic outcomes under determinate binary decisions. Particular attention is given to A+ / B+ / C–, defined as a relational incompatibility: both elements remain independently acceptable, while their specific combination creates a functional contradiction. The procedure is illustrated through three contrasting analytically constructed cases. It helps determine whether a mismatch lies within an individual element or in the relationship between otherwise acceptable elements, thereby allowing revision to be targeted more precisely before classroom implementation.

Keywords: Languages for specific purposes; ESP; role-based simulation task; task design; functional compatibility; relational cross-check; professional communication; domain expertise.

1. Introduction: Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in particular, are grounded in the relationship between language education and the communicative requirements of specific academic, disciplinary, or workplace environments. Course content, materials, and tasks are therefore expected to reflect target situations, communicative needs, and the types of action learners may need to perform through language (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Flowerdew, 2025).

Role-play and simulation-based tasks provide one way of bringing selected features of professional communication into the language classroom. Such tasks may differentiate participant roles, distribute information unevenly, introduce professional constraints, and require learners to produce a contextually meaningful communicative outcome.

Designing such tasks, however, involves more than one knowledge domain.

From a language-pedagogical perspective, the designer needs to establish what learners are expected to accomplish through language, whether the communicative requirement is sufficiently clear, whether interaction is genuinely needed, and whether the required action is feasible within the scope of a

language course.

From a domain perspective, the task may also need to be examined for the plausibility of its roles, documents, information, constraints, procedures, decisions, and other domain-specific elements.

These two perspectives are related but not identical.

A communicative activity may be pedagogically well designed, and a domain element may be realistic in its own right. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the two are functionally compatible when combined.

For example, a task may ask learners to communicate an acceptance decision to a supplier. As a communicative task, the activity may be clear, purposeful, and manageable. At the same time, the professional scenario may contain a binding technical specification that is entirely plausible within the domain. Yet if the requested acceptance decision directly conflicts with that specification and no authorized deviation procedure is included, the problem lies neither in the communicative act itself nor in the domain element considered separately. It lies in their relationship.

The mismatch may therefore lie in the relationship between the elements rather than in either element considered separately.

This issue is particularly relevant when language specialists and domain specialists contribute to the design or review of professionally oriented materials. LSP research has long recognized the importance of domain knowledge in the development and evaluation of specialized language tasks and materials. Recent ESP work continues to emphasize interaction between language-materials developers and disciplinary or workplace specialists (Harwood, 2025).

Specific-purpose language assessment has investigated this relationship in greater depth. Studies associated with the Occupational English Test have shown that domain experts may identify professionally meaningful features of communication that are not fully captured by conventional language-assessment criteria (Pill & McNamara, 2016; O'Hagan et al., 2016; Knoch et al., 2020a). At the same time, language-trained raters may experience difficulty applying some professionally oriented criteria when those criteria depend on domain knowledge (Knoch et al., 2020b).

Simulation research offers a further relevant line of work. Simulation-design standards already address internal coherence, content expertise, scenario fidelity, and structured pre-implementation review (INACSL Standards Committee et al., 2021; Mujjli et al., 2023).

Professional review, scenario checking, and the general requirement for coherence are therefore not methodological contributions of the present study in themselves.

The narrower question addressed here is:

Does the separate acceptability of two related task elements provide sufficient grounds for concluding that their relationship is functionally compatible?

Let x represent a communicative task-design decision and y a related domain element.

Three distinct judgments can then be differentiated:

A(x) — the language-pedagogical acceptability of x

B(y) — the domain appropriateness of y

C(x,y) — the functional compatibility of the relationship between x and y

Positive A(x) and B(y) do not logically determine positive C(x,y), because the first two judgments concern properties of individual elements, whereas the third concerns a relationship between them.

The central object of the study is therefore C(x,y).

The research question is:

How can the functional relationship between elements of a professionally oriented role-based simulation task be checked after the elements have separately received positive language-pedagogical and domain-based judgments?

The study aims to operationalize such a relational cross-check and to distinguish mismatches located within individual elements from incompatibilities that arise only when two separately acceptable elements are combined.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. The professional domain as a basis for specialized task design

A central principle of ESP is that teaching and assessment should be informed by the communicative requirements of the target academic or professional environment. Needs analysis is used to identify target

situations, genres, communicative purposes, participants, and other characteristics relevant to language use in context (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

Contemporary ESP retains the centrality of needs analysis while embedding it within broader processes of curriculum development and contextual inquiry. Flowerdew (2025), for example, reviews a range of approaches for investigating needs in academic, disciplinary, and workplace contexts.

Materials development raises a related issue. Harwood (2025) discusses ways in which ESP materials developers may work with disciplinary and workplace specialists to improve the suitability of materials for their intended contexts. Professional relevance is therefore not limited to the inclusion of specialized vocabulary; it also involves understanding how communication operates within the target domain.

A comparable principle underlies LSP assessment. Douglas (2000, 2025) treats specific-purpose communication as context-dependent and influenced by the interaction between language knowledge and relevant background knowledge.

Dursun, Morris, and Ünaldı (2020) provide a more specialized illustration within assessment design. Using an evidence-centered design approach, they developed profession-oriented writing assessment tasks through systematic analysis of target workplace communication.

These strands of research provide strong methodological grounds for aligning specialized language tasks with target-domain communication.

They do not, however, resolve the more local problem considered in this study: how to analyze the relationship between two particular task elements once each has already been judged acceptable on its own grounds.

2.2. Domain expertise and different bases for judgment

The contribution of domain experts has been examined extensively in LSP assessment.

Pill and McNamara (2016) involved occupational experts in establishing standards for professionally relevant spoken communication in the Occupational English Test.

O'Hagan, Pill, and Zhang (2016) extended speaking-assessment criteria by operationalizing features of communication considered important from a health professional perspective.

These studies indicate that domain perspectives may identify aspects of communicative quality that do not map directly onto conventional language-assessment criteria.

Knoch et al. (2020a) reported a similar issue in professional writing. Domain experts appeared to draw on a broader construct of quality than could be fully represented within the final language-rating scale.

A related study by Knoch et al. (2020b) showed that language-trained raters could implement a professionally relevant scale, but that some criteria were more difficult to apply, partly because raters perceived them as requiring medical knowledge.

Professional and language-based perspectives therefore overlap, but they are not interchangeable.

McNamara et al. (2016) further demonstrate that collaboration among applied linguists, language-assessment researchers, and healthcare professionals involves methodological choices concerning target tasks, elicitation procedures, participant selection, and the interpretation of expert judgments.

More recently, Knoch et al. (2026) examined the relevance of three writing tasks to the accounting profession through interviews with domain experts. Their analysis showed that, when responding to broad questions, experts sometimes focused on a relatively narrow range of task features and interpreted comparable characteristics differently.

This finding does not itself establish the need for the relational cross-check proposed in the present study. It supports a more limited methodological point: the outcome of expert review partly depends on what is made an explicit object of the question.

The present procedure therefore distinguishes three objects of judgment:

A(x) concerns the language-pedagogical properties of communicative decision x

B(y) concerns the domain appropriateness of domain element y

C(x,y) concerns the functional relationship between x and y

The distinction is therefore primarily between objects of judgment, rather than between fixed categories of reviewers.

2.3. Internal coherence in simulation design

The requirement that scenario elements fit together coherently is well established in simulation-based education.

The Healthcare Simulation Standards of Best Practice: Simulation Design recommend purposeful scenario design, alignment with learning objectives, consultation with content experts, appropriate fidelity, and pilot testing (INACSL Standards Committee et al., 2021).

Particularly relevant is the notion of conceptual fidelity, which concerns whether elements of a scenario relate to one another in a realistic and internally coherent way.

The general problem of scenario quality has also been operationalized through structured tools.

Mujjli et al. (2023) developed and validated the Simulation Scenario Quality Instrument (SSQI), covering multiple domains of scenario quality, including objectives, target group, content, complexity, sequence, fidelity, debriefing, and assessment.

The existence of these standards and tools means that neither preliminary scenario review nor internal consistency can be claimed as a novel contribution of the present study.

The present study addresses a narrower analytic operation.

The question arises after x and y have separately received positive judgments:

Can the relationship x–y nevertheless remain functionally incompatible?

2.4. The analytic space addressed in the present study

The theoretical synthesis draws on three relevant bodies of research.

First, ESP and LSP research provides methods for needs analysis, domain analysis, and professionally informed materials and task development.

Second, specific-purpose language assessment demonstrates the value of domain experts, differences between professional and language-based grounds for judgment, and methodological difficulties involved in eliciting and applying professional criteria.

Third, simulation design provides standards and structured instruments for examining scenario quality and internal coherence.

Building on these three strands of research, the present study introduces a three-part operational distinction between element-level and relational judgments:

A(x), B(y), and C(x,y)

where A and B concern properties of individual elements and C concerns the functional relationship between them.

The notation is introduced as an operational representation of the particular methodological problem examined in this study.

The central proposition is:

A(x)+ ∧ B(y)+ does not automatically entail C(x,y)+.

This makes possible the specific outcome:

A+ / B+ / C–.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study uses a conceptual and methodological design supported by a targeted theoretical synthesis of three bodies of literature: LSP/ESP, specific-purpose language assessment, and simulation design.

The development of the procedure involved four steps:

1. synthesizing relevant literature across LSP/ESP, specific-purpose language assessment, and simulation design;
2. distinguishing judgments about individual elements from judgments about relationships between elements;
3. **logically modeling the sequential decision paths involving A(x), B(y), and C(x,y);**
4. illustrating the distinction through three contrasting analytically constructed cases.

The unit of analysis is not the task as a whole, but a specific pair of elements x and y between which a functional relationship is assumed.

For the purposes of this study, functional compatibility is defined as the absence of a contradiction between the communicative requirements represented by x and the professional possibilities, constraints, responsibilities, or procedures represented by y.

This definition is intentionally relational. It does

not ask whether y causes or justifies x in a general sense. It asks whether the two can function together without contradiction.

3.1. Stage A: language-pedagogical review of x

Stage A concerns the communicative task-design decision x.

The guiding question is:

Does x have the required language-pedagogical properties independently of the professional relationship that will later be checked?

Relevant properties may include:

- clarity of the communicative requirement;
- presence of purposeful language use;
- need for interaction;
- identifiable communicative outcome;
- feasibility within the scope of the language course.

The result is coded as:

A(x)+ — language-pedagogical acceptability

A(x)– — language-pedagogical mismatch

Stage A does not establish whether linking x to a particular y is professionally appropriate.

3.2. Stage B: domain review of y

Stage B concerns the domain element y.

The guiding question is:

Is y, considered as an individual domain element, professionally plausible and appropriate within the relevant field?

Possible y-elements include:

- a professional condition;
- a role;
- a document;
- a type of information;
- a technical requirement;
- a category of decision;
- a procedural restriction.

The result is coded as:

B(y)+ — domain appropriateness

B(y)– — domain mismatch

A positive B(y) concerns y itself, not the relationship between y and a particular communicative decision x.

3.3. Stage C: relational cross-check of x–y

When A(x)+ / B(y)+ has been established, the object of analysis changes.

The cross-check asks:

Do x and y form a functionally non-contradictory combination within the task?

The result is coded as:

C(x,y)+ — functional compatibility

C(x,y)– — relational incompatibility

Stage C is therefore not a repetition of Stage A or Stage B.

Its object is the relationship x–y.

3.4. Basic pathway outcomes

Because Stage C is applied only when both A(x) and B(y) are positive, the sequential procedure yields five basic pathway outcomes under determinate binary judgments.

Outcome	Interpretation
A+ / B+ / C+	functionally compatible relationship
A– / B+	language-pedagogical mismatch
A+ / B–	domain mismatch
A– / B–	dual mismatch
A+ / B+ / C–	relational incompatibility

The scheme is not intended as an exhaustive classification of all possible expert responses.

Empirical application may also require categories for insufficient information, uncertain judgment, or disagreement among reviewers.

The central outcome for the present conceptual analysis is:

A+ / B+ / C–.

In this case, the positive A and B judgments remain valid with respect to their original objects; the negative judgment concerns only the relationship between those objects.

3.5. Typical relational questions

Relationship	C(x,y) question
role – action	Is this specific action functionally compatible with the responsibilities assigned to this role?
role – information	Is access to this information compatible with the position represented by the role?
professional condition – communicative action	Does the required communicative action conflict with the possibilities or restrictions created by the professional condition?
decision – authority	Is making or officially communicating this decision compatible with the authority assigned to the participant?
product – recipient	Is the function of this communicative product compatible with the needs and position of the specified recipient?

These relationships are used as possible objects of cross-checking; they are not presented as a new architecture of role-based simulation task design.

4. ANALYTICAL DEMONSTRATION

Three contrasting cases are used to demonstrate the logical distinction among the outcomes.

4.1. Case 1: functionally compatible relationship — A+ / B+ / C+

A shipment of spare parts is being received. A discrepancy is found between the item number in an electronic specification and the label on one package.

A warehouse employee has information about the package and batch received. A procurement engineer has access to the approved specification. The person responsible for receiving the shipment must determine whether processing can continue or whether additional verification is required.

A(x)

Communicative decision x requires participants to exchange different pieces of information, compare them, and formulate the next action.

The activity has a clear communicative purpose, requires interaction, and leads to an identifiable outcome.

A(x)+.

B(y)

Domain element y is the existence of an approved specification used as an official reference for checking the received shipment.

Such an element is professionally plausible.

B(y)+.

C(x,y)

The communicative action of comparing the available information does not conflict with the function of the specification as a professional reference.

The two elements are functionally compatible.

C(x,y)+.

Final outcome:

A+ / B+ / C+.

4.2. Case 2: domain mismatch — A+ / B–

Following replacement of a measurement module, one control measurement is taken at a single point in the operating range. The result matches the reference value.

Participants are asked to discuss the result and prepare a statement confirming that the instrument is fully calibrated across its entire operating range and may be used without further checking.

A(x)

Communicative decision x is clear: participants are required to consider the available result and formulate a conclusion.

The communicative activity is identifiable and manageable.

A(x)+.

B(y)

Domain element y is:

the use of a single control-point result as the professional basis for a conclusion about the instrument across the entire operating range.

Stage B asks whether that basis is professionally sufficient.

If the relevant procedure requires additional measurements, several control points, or further verification, y fails the domain review.

B(y)–.

Final outcome:

A+ / B–.

The mismatch is already located within y; Stage C is not required for its initial identification.

4.3. Case 3: relational incompatibility — A+ / B+ / C–

A construction project uses an approved technical specification that requires a particular class of material.

A supplier informs the company that a cheaper material of a different class is available.

The classroom task instructs the participants to prepare a formal message to the supplier confirming acceptance of the alternative material and specifying the conditions for further delivery.

A(x)

Communicative decision x requires learners to produce a clear professional message that communicates an acceptance decision and specifies follow-up conditions.

As a language-pedagogical activity, the requirement is purposeful, observable, and suitable for professional communication practice.

A(x)+.

B(y)

Domain element y is the existence of an approved technical specification requiring a particular material class.

Such a requirement is professionally plausible.

B(y)+.

C(x,y)

The relational question is:

Is communicating formal acceptance of the alternative material functionally compatible with the binding requirement represented by the approved specification?

If the scenario contains no authorized deviation, substitution approval, or formal change procedure, acceptance of the non-compliant material contradicts the restriction imposed by y.

The contradiction does not invalidate the communicative act as a language-learning activity, nor does it invalidate the professional plausibility of the specification.

It exists specifically in the relationship between them.

C(x,y)–.

Final outcome:

A+ / B+ / C–.

The relational incompatibility can be corrected in at least two ways.

If the specification remains binding, x can be revised so that participants request formal deviation approval, reject the proposed substitute, or ask the supplier to provide a compliant alternative.

If the communicative act of accepting the substitute is pedagogically important, the scenario must include a professionally plausible authorization or approved substitution procedure that removes the contradiction.

5. COMPARISON OF THE THREE ANALYTIC CASES

Case	A	B	C	Location of the issue
Shipment verification	+	+	+	no mismatch

Measurement module	+	–	—	domain element y
Material specification	+	+	–	relationship x–y

The cases illustrate the difference between two questions:

Are x and y independently acceptable?

Are x and y functionally compatible when combined?

In Case 2, the problem lies within domain element y itself.

In Case 3, both x and y remain independently acceptable; the contradiction becomes visible only at the level of C(x,y).

This difference defines the specific function of the relational cross-check.

6. DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests that preliminary review of professionally oriented language tasks can benefit from distinguishing element-level judgments from relational judgments.

This distinction is relevant to interdisciplinary task development.

Contemporary ESP research already offers well-established approaches to needs analysis and domain-informed materials development. Flowerdew (2025) reinforces the central role of needs analysis in ESP curriculum development, while Harwood (2025) discusses collaboration with disciplinary and workplace specialists during materials development.

Dursun et al. (2020) offer a more specialized example in LSP assessment: task-design decisions can be systematically derived from analysis of target workplace writing and an evidence-centered design process.

The present procedure is not intended to replace needs analysis, domain analysis, or overall authenticity review.

A second established line of research concerns professional expertise.

Pill and McNamara (2016), O'Hagan et al. (2016), and Knoch et al. (2020a) demonstrate that a domain perspective may identify communicative characteristics not fully represented by conventional language-assessment criteria.

Knoch et al. (2020b), in turn, show that professionally oriented criteria may pose difficulties for language-trained raters when professional knowledge becomes relevant to judgment.

These findings provide grounds for differentiating A(x) from B(y), but they do not by themselves establish the necessity of C(x,y).

The more recent study by Knoch et al. (2026) provides a useful methodological caution. Domain experts responding to broad interview questions about occupational relevance sometimes focused on a relatively restricted set of task features and interpreted comparable characteristics differently.

The implication for the present procedure is limited but important: an expert may notice a relational inconsistency spontaneously, but a research procedure should not assume that every relevant relationship will necessarily become an explicit object of review.

Stage C is therefore not based on the assumption that a domain expert is incapable of identifying a contradiction earlier.

Its purpose is to make the relationship x–y an explicit and required object of analysis.

A third relevant research tradition is simulation design.

The INACSL Standards already address scenario alignment, conceptual fidelity, content-expert review, and pilot testing. Instruments such as the SSQI provide structured approaches to reviewing scenario quality (INACSL Standards Committee et al., 2021; Mujjli et al., 2023).

Accordingly, A+ / B+ / C– should not be interpreted as the discovery of internal inconsistency as a general phenomenon.

Its methodological function is narrower.

It formalizes a specific analytic configuration:

x receives a positive judgment under A

y receives a positive judgment under B

the relationship x–y receives a negative judgment under C

The analytic unit of the cross-check is therefore not a task component in isolation and not the scenario as a whole. It is a specific functional relationship between two separately reviewed elements.

This distinction has practical consequences for revision.

With A– / B+, revision is directed primarily at communicative decision x.

With A+ / B–, revision is directed at domain element y.

With A– / B–, both elements require reconsideration.

With A+ / B+ / C–, x and y may remain independently acceptable, while the relationship between them is revised.

In Case 3, for example, the professional act of communicating a formal acceptance decision is not inherently unsuitable for language learning, and the binding specification is not professionally implausible. The incompatibility is created because the task combines them without a professionally valid mechanism that would permit the proposed acceptance.

This allows revision to be more precisely targeted than a general conclusion that the scenario is inconsistent.

The current conceptual and methodological analysis establishes the logical distinction among A, B, and C and demonstrates the operational possibility of A+ / B+ / C–.

It does not establish how frequently this outcome occurs in real teaching materials or whether an explicit C-question provides additional diagnostic yield beyond ordinary review.

An empirical study would therefore need to record not only binary A and B decisions but also reviewers' open comments.

If a reviewer independently identifies a relational contradiction before C(x,y) is presented, that case should not be counted as a mismatch detected uniquely by the cross-check.

A future design should therefore distinguish among:

1. mismatches identified directly through A or B;

2. relational incompatibilities noticed spontaneously during initial review;

3. relational incompatibilities made explicit only after the specific C(x,y) question is introduced.

Only the third category could provide direct empirical evidence of additional diagnostic yield from the relational cross-check.

At the present stage, the methodological contribution is narrower:

the study operationalizes the move from two separate positive element-level judgments, A(x) and B(y), to an explicit relational judgment, C(x,y), and formalizes A+ / B+ / C– as a distinct analytic outcome of that procedure.

7. PRACTICAL APPLICATION

The procedure can be applied to an already developed task as follows:

1. identify a functionally related pair x–y;

2. review communicative decision x through A(x);

3. review domain element y independently through B(y);

4. record both decisions and any open comments before proceeding;

5. if A(x)+ / B(y)+ is obtained, formulate the specific relational question C(x,y);

6. record C+ or C–;

7. identify whether revision is required at the level of x, y, or the x–y relationship;

8. re-check the revised element or relationship.

The crucial methodological point is that Stage C asks a different question.

After A+ and B+, the procedure does not ask again whether the communicative activity is clear or whether the domain element is plausible.

It asks whether combining the two produces a functional contradiction.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The present study is conceptual and methodological.

The three cases are analytically constructed to demonstrate the logical difference between element-level and relational judgments.

The study does not establish:

- the frequency of A+ / B+ / C– in authentic teaching

materials;

- inter-rater agreement;
- the stability with which different reviewers distinguish A, B, and C;
- the additional diagnostic yield of Stage C;
- procedures for aggregating uncertain or conflicting judgments.

The five pathway outcomes should therefore be interpreted as results of the conditional sequence, rather than as an exhaustive set of all possible A/B/C combinations.

Future empirical work should include an option such as insufficient information / indeterminate, record open comments, and keep A and B decisions independent before introducing C.

A particularly informative design would apply the procedure to a corpus of real professionally oriented role-based simulation tasks, record separate A and B judgments, and introduce C only after those decisions have been fixed.

Such a design would make it possible to determine whether explicitly asking the relational question reveals functional incompatibilities that were not already identified during the initial review.

CONCLUSION

Professionally oriented role-based simulation tasks combine communicative decisions and domain elements that may be acceptable on different grounds.

A language-pedagogical review can establish the acceptability of communicative decision x.

A domain review can establish the appropriateness of domain element y.

Two positive element-level judgments, however, do not automatically determine the functional compatibility of the relationship x–y.

The proposed procedure therefore distinguishes:

A(x) — language-pedagogical review of x

B(y) — domain review of y

C(x,y) — relational cross-check of the functional compatibility between x and y

Because C is evaluated only after positive A and B judgments, the sequential procedure yields five basic pathway outcomes under determinate binary decisions:

- A+ / B+ / C+ — functionally compatible relationship;
- A– / B+ — language-pedagogical mismatch;
- A+ / B– — domain mismatch;
- A– / B– — dual mismatch;
- A+ / B+ / C– — relational incompatibility.

The final outcome represents a situation in which each element retains independent grounds for a positive judgment, while their particular combination creates a functional contradiction.

The three analytic cases demonstrate how the procedure differentiates a mismatch within an individual element from an incompatibility located in the relationship between separately acceptable elements.

The methodological contribution of the study is the operationalization of the move from two separate positive judgments, A(x) and B(y), to an explicit relational question, C(x,y), concerning the functional compatibility of the corresponding elements.

Further empirical research is required to establish the reproducibility of this distinction and to determine whether the explicit relational question identifies incompatibilities that remain unnoticed during the initial element-level review.

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