

Teaching Practices for ESL Students

By Ellen "Aileen" Curtin

Introduction

The education of immigrant students, in the United States, up until the early 1970s, was one of "sink or swim" policy with students having to assimilate as quickly as possible with no language support or transitional period in their own native language. The *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974) court case was the landmark case that initiated the beginnings of English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms as well as bilingual education as it is today. Now, immigrant and non-English-speaking students are given the opportunity to spend time in a "sheltered" ESL classroom with intense English language instruction until they have adequate English language skills to survive in the regular mainstream classroom with English speakers.

However, the duration and length of this period of "sheltered" ESL classroom instruction, allocated for English as Second Language learners, remains a source of debate and contention legislatively and philosophically in many states. Legislators, for example, in the state of Texas mandate that all ESL students take the state standardized TAKS test in their third year of arrival in the United States: the underlying assumption that second language acquisition only requires three years or less and that ESL students should be able to pass standardized tests on a comparable level as native English-speaking counterparts at the end of three years. Is three years a realistic amount of time for all ESL students to acquire a second language

while concurrently meeting grade level competencies?

Researchers like Cummins (1996) and other second-language acquisition theorists demonstrate that academic competency in a second language requires longer than a three-year period. While many ESL students quickly acquire "Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills" (BICS) before entering the mainstream classroom, they still need continuous English language support in order to achieve the higher "Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency" (CALPS) necessary to pass state standardized tests.

Second-language acquisition theorists caution educators that higher second-language competency skills can take anywhere from five to eight years to attain realistically for any individual acquiring competency in a second language. There are many other variables like age of arrival in the United States and standard of education from home country that can further impact the speed and success of second-language acquisition for ESL students.

The question remains: is three years an adequate length of time for a middle school or high school student to acquire English language mastery concurrently with grade level content knowledge and skills? Researchers say "no," but state legislators in the state of Texas say "yes" by mandating a three-year English language acquisition period for immigrant students. What is the reality of everyday classroom experiences for ESL students under this new state mandate of three years? How equipped are regular classroom teachers, who are not ESL certified, to teach these students to pass state standardized content tests while still learning English language skills?

Seeking answers to these questions

was my impetus for conducting this investigation in one middle school in Texas. As principal investigator and researcher, I also sought to examine and witness for myself the everyday reality that immigrant students experience acquiring English language skills and maintaining grade level content knowledge during their initial three years in the United States.

Research on Effective and Ineffective Teaching Practices for ESL Students

Educational researchers recognize that ESL students do well academically if learning connects with both background and culture simultaneously. But, age on arrival, length of residence in the United States, and grade of entry into U.S. schools constitute variables that must be carefully considered, as well as sorting out the variability in academic performance among ESL students. So, too, family background in the country of origin, parents' educational and economic status prior exposure to Western and urban lifestyles, and languages spoken in the family all contribute to the cultural and social capital that ESL students bring with them to the classroom (Gibson, 1988; Rumbaut, 1995).

Many ESL and culturally diverse students use styles of inquiry and respond differently from the standard procedures of many classrooms. Learning styles of ESL students tend to be more field-dependent or sensitive, as they are more global in their thinking in comparison to Anglos (Sleeter & Grant, 1991). ESL and culturally diverse students generally have a global orientation to learning and are receptive to learning that is relational and holistic and em-

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loys thematic approaches (Malloy, 1997). Visual and tactile learning modes are important for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Presmeg, 1989). Language issues and how the teacher talks are important for ESL students (MacGregor, 1993).

How teachers ask questions is vital because in many cultures students are not used to being questioned (Strutchens, 1994). In fact, Patterson (1990) has found that sociocultural mismatches in questions can negatively affect ESL learners. Time and waiting are important while asking questions to ESL students (Callahan, 1994). Use of cooperative work and heterogeneous grouping better suits the learning styles of linguistically and culturally diverse students (Malloy, 1997; Zaslavsky, 1993). Use of technology has also been found to suit the learning styles of minority and linguistically diverse students (Hatfield et al, 1997).

Thompson (2000) carried out a study in Southern California with tenth-grade ESL students. The purpose of the study was to determine the teachers' instructional strategies that either helped or deterred students from learning. All the participants were predominantly Hispanic and were enrolled in honors or college preparatory programs, and English was their second language. Literature based activities, oral practice, individual help, peer interaction, games, and use of realia (real objects) constituted the instructional strategies the students perceived as being most helpful to them in the classroom.

The students listed the most ineffective strategies that teachers used as being forced to read in front of the class, being corrected publicly, segregating language-minority students from the language-majority students, ignoring language-minority students, embarrassing students, not providing adequate assistance, and covering information too rapidly. The researcher concluded that while policies mandated what teachers should be doing, in reality the teacher totally controlled what was implemented once the classroom door was closed.

Garcia (1992) summarized research studies of effective instructional practices used with linguistically diverse and culturally diverse students. Eight common attributes were identified as successfully meeting the needs of ESL and culturally diverse students: (1) high level of verbal communication between teacher and students, and among students; (2) integration of basic skills instruction with instruction in other subjects; (3) organization of instruction around themes; (4) use of collaborative learning groups; (5) students allowed

to progress naturally and without pressure from writing in their native language to writing later in English; (6) highly committed teachers who act as student advocates; (7) principal support for teachers; and (8) parents active in school activities.

Passive learning, however, constitutes the main mode of instruction in too many American classrooms, with negative consequences for students, especially ESL students. In 1991, a congressionally-mandated longitudinal study was done to assess the effectiveness of three kinds of programs for ESL students. Classroom observational data were collected from 1984 through 1989 in 51 elementary schools and 554 classrooms in nine school districts in five states (California, Florida, New Jersey, New York, and Texas). The research revealed that many ESL classrooms were teacher dominated, with children treated as passive learners and assigned only cognitively simple tasks (Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991).

Dentler and Hafner (1997) found in low-performing school districts few innovative teaching strategies such as the ones described in the literature of effective practices. A deficit model rather than a capacity-building model was evident in low-performing districts. Teachers in low-performing districts conducted business as usual, lecturing, using worksheets, and focusing on skill building and drills. Teachers in low-performing schools tended to use traditional achievement tests, and very little innovation was observed (Dentler & Hafner, 1997).

In summary, research reveals that the education of ESL students is quite complex; the reality is that these students may need longer than three years to assimilate into mainstream classroom. Factors like age on arrival in U.S. and whether the ESL student attends a high or a low-performing district could impact the educational attainment of such a student. The teaching of ESL students is a matter of urgent priority for many states like Texas which have a continuous influx of non-English speaking students.

The three-year mandate, while well intentioned in ensuring educational equality and accountability measures for a group of students who were in the past ignored and treated as ESL lifers with low educational attainment, may also be creating additional stresses for such students and their teachers. Legislators must understand and acknowledge that the education of ESL students is a more complicated issue when translated into actual classroom practice.

Background and Introduction to Study

The results attained from this research study help to shed light on the actual classroom reality of everyday life for ESL students as they mainstreamed into regular classroom after spending as little as one or two years in a sheltered ESL classroom. The results of this five month qualitative study sheds light and gives voice to the everyday reality experienced by such immigrant students as they mainstreamed out of ESL into regular classrooms in one urban school in Texas.

The focus of this study was one middle school in Texas. The study focused on six ESL students who were Spanish-speaking immigrants to the United States, were in their third year in the United States, and were mainstreamed into regular classes for most of the school day. All of the students in this study had to take the Texas standardized test during the course of this research study. The site chosen for this study was an urban middle school in a large urban district in Texas. This school was located in an economically disadvantaged urban setting, had an immigrant student population of more than 30%, and had an "acceptable" academic rating on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) for the 2000-2001 school year.

The immigrant students for this study spent a year in a sheltered ESL school (Welcome Center) where they received intensive English language instruction. At the end of this initial year the students were assigned to a regular ESL middle school classroom setting for a short period (2-3 months) and then gradually mainstreamed into regular academic classrooms. All participating students in this study were in their third year in the United States and actually took the state standardized state tests during this research period.

In this study, I collected data from many sources for triangulation purposes: classroom observations; interviewing students, teachers, and administrators; and select document collection (lesson plans, disaggregated TAAS data, mission statement of school, year books, etc.). I also maintained extensive field notes during the research study. I audiotaped eight hours of administrator interviews, 18 hours of student interviews, and 30 hours of teacher interviews.

I observed for 18 hours in the classrooms. I observed the six participating teach-

ers in the study, two other teachers who invited me to observe them, as well as two teachers in the ESL classroom. I maintained extensive field notes of all my activities and reflections. I spent time in the teachers lounge, cafeteria, hallways, and around the school in general. All the audiotapes were transcribed and field notes typed. All these sources generated approximately 1,000 pages of written data which I analyzed at the end of the five-month research period.

The question of duration and frequency of observations and interviews was critical to this study. Valuable qualitative data could not be obtained without rapport between the volunteer participants and me; thus, I spent much time getting to know participants and making them feel at ease before I began interviews and observations (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992; Spinder, 1992). To further facilitate the development of this rapport between participants, and me, the interviews and observations were divided out over the five month research period rather than conducting all interviews at once with one participant at a time. The decision to divide out the interviews and observations in this manner was integral to the design of the study and ensured that relationships were developed gradually with students and teachers.

Profile of Students

The students who met the criteria for this study were all from Mexico. All were either ten or eleven years of age upon arrival in the United States. Three male and three female students participated in this study. All students were originally from Mexico and were either in the seventh or eighth grade during the time of this study. Two of the students, Enrique and Lupe, were considered to be at-risk academically and behaviorally. All students were in their third year in the United States and were to take the state-mandated TAAS test during the time this study took place.

All students liked school in the United States. They found it materially comfortable and they felt safe. This is consistent with research findings by Ogbu (1992) that immigrants have a dual-frame of reference which makes them more appreciative of the life and opportunities they have in their new country because they generally came from more impoverished conditions in their countries of origin.

Students' Perceptions about Instructional Practices Used by Teachers

The students perceived that the teaching styles used by the mainstream teachers were different and less favorable to their learning styles than those used by the ESL teachers. For these immigrant students, the mainstream teachers did not explain as well or use enough examples compared with the ESL teachers.

Five of these students in response to the question "What does the teacher do to help you understand in class?" responded negatively to the mainstream teachers techniques and positively validated the instructional techniques used by ESL teachers. The ESL teachers, according to five of the six students, gave more examples, explained more, came to their desk to help them, gave more practice items, tutored individually during lunch and after school, talked more slowly, explained more than once, and did not give all the directions at the same time.

These five students all agreed that the ESL teachers helped them understand and learn better than the mainstream teachers. These five students also cited the following negative instructional practices used by the mainstream teachers that did not help them learn best: highlighting answers, calling out correct answers without any explanation or discussion, not coming to the desk when students asked for help, ignoring students who raised their hands, only giving one explanation, giving too many directions, talking too fast, not giving examples, and not giving enough practice items.

My classroom observations of mainstream teachers verified the perceptions that students shared with me in their interviews. I did not observe the same degree of language expression and discussion by teachers with students in the mainstream classrooms. In classrooms where the teachers had strong didactic teaching styles, the teacher did the majority of the talking, silence was expected from all students, and there was a heavy reliance on worksheets or completed assignments from either the textbook or overhead projector.

The ESL students I observed in these classrooms were seated in rows, rarely called upon to answer, and worked independently to complete their seatwork. The class period generally consisted of the following formula regardless of subject being taught: teacher gave quick verbal directions on the assigned material at the beginning of the

class period, students worked independently while the teacher sat behind a desk or graded papers, teacher went over the answers with students, students graded each other's papers, teacher asked for grades aloud (sometimes), recorded grades, and then if there was time left in the period the teacher assigned another activity for the students to work on independently.

Use of "Examples"

All the students stated, particularly Maria and Jaime, that the teachers in the mainstream did not give as many "examples" as those in the ESL classroom. The students believed they needed more opportunities to practice and because of this did not perceive they were being taught as well in the mainstream classrooms as they were in the ESL classroom. The concept of "example" first came up in the third structured interview I conducted with students in response to the question, "What does your teacher do to help you be successful in school?" Responses from four of the six ESL students included references to the word "examples."

Maria, for example, in response to the question replied, "Sometimes they (teachers) don't give you examples to understand the lesson better like when you're doing a lesson and you don't understand after you told them (teachers) to...like show you an example. They (teachers) should do it by themselves not telling...not by the students telling them." For Maria this notion of "example" given by the teacher was extremely important towards helping her understand and do well in class. She also considered a better teacher to be one who gave lots of "examples." This term, "example," I initially stumbled across with Maria and then noticed it with three of the other students in this study. The remaining two students, although not using the term "example," did use the term "explain" to refer to how a teacher helped them understand in class.

I proceeded throughout the research period to explore the concept of "example" in order to: (1) to understand whether all the students used the term in the same way; (2) whether my understanding of an example was similar to theirs; (3) where they acquired this term; and (4) why it was of such paramount importance to their understanding of what a good teacher should be doing instructionally to help them learn better. Maria told me:

In the ESL...she (teacher) give us an example the day before. Like we are writing a how to paper and she like

does with us one or something...told us to do one and if you don't understand it you just ask her (teacher) and she will tell you what you have to do. Or if you're writing and you feel like it's not okay you just go ask her (teacher).

I further probed and asked Maria to pick out a teacher who was not good at giving examples and to tell me specifically what that teacher did. Maria chose the technology teacher who "gives us a guide, a student guide but the guide doesn't explain it very well and then we ask him (teacher) and he says "Did you read, Baby?" and we're like "yes" but you have to read carefully and he doesn't give many examples."

Maria told me, "Ms. Henry who gives us an example like sometimes she gives us homework so we can do maps or something like that and she have one on the wall so we can see it." In this instance Maria implied that an "example" meant a finished product, something that helped her see what she was supposed to be doing.

For Jaime, a teacher who helped him understand in class gave him "examples." He explained, "They, my ESL teachers usually give us a lot of examples so we can understand... they get us to practice something more than once." When I asked him tell me more about a teacher who never gave examples, he immediately talked about his social studies teacher, Mr. Bond, who Jaime told me did 'explain' the assignment but "never gives examples when he gives us work, he goes over the answers."

For Angel, teachers helped him learn better when "They explain about the things we review..." "Homework... and more practice" constituted examples for Angel, doing the same things "over and over" again. In this instance I understood that "example" had something to do with repetition and lots of practice to help learning.

I realized that the concept of "example" was somehow connected to how a teacher explained information to students in class. For Lupe, the teacher should explain something "like two times." Lupe told me, "Not just say one time, you have to do this and this in order" or "I'll no understand what she says." There was a clear connection between explaining more than once and giving examples to help Lupe understand what she was supposed to be doing in class. All students explained to me that they needed to hear something more than once to fully understand.

In response to the question, "What do teachers do to help you learn best?" Maria told me, "I think, like examples. I think, the

most important, to learn is examples." For Maria an example was something that was done "over and over and over..." Maria explained, "Because, you sometimes do something and the next day...the next day you forgot it or she (teacher) doesn't give any more papers like that. So then like three months later she give us another paper and she (teacher) likes 'remember the other day.'"

"Getting Mad"

Connected to this concept of "examples" for all of these students was the idea of a teacher "getting mad." The ESL students in the mainstream classrooms, they told me, preferred not to ask for more examples or explanations because the teachers, according to Jaime, got "mad." The other students expressed to me that some mainstream teachers never even read or explained the assignments in class.

They reported they were left on their own to figure it out and oftentimes, as with Angel, just referred to the dictionary if he didn't understand a word or just simply asked the person beside him rather than upset a teacher who might be "busy doing something else." For Rosa, the "better" teachers who helped her the most "never get mad at me if I have trouble with something they help me."

The importance of multiple examples and multiple explanations was substantiated for me when the students told me what they did when they did not understand what the teacher was explaining in class. For Jaime, getting the answers highlighted or being told the correct answer was not learning. For Maria "sometimes they just give you the answer and you just put in the answer and you don't know what you are putting in the paper." This was not challenging for Maria, as she preferred a teacher who "they don't just give the answer, they just try to let you think."

For Jaime, particularly, and the other students, asking "one of my friends or someone next to me" is how he got further directions when he did not understand something in class. Because sometimes, Jaime told me, "they're (teachers) busy doing other things." All the students in the study clearly stated that the ESL teachers "won't get mad if I (Jaime) ask them" because "I've been with them like two years."

All the students complained that even if a mainstream teachers didn't necessarily always get mad at them if they asked for more explanations or examples, they (teachers) sometimes, according to Jaime, "don't do it in a kind way." These students were

reticent to raise their hands in class. Jaime told me he raised his hand for help only if his friends beside him couldn't help. But even then Jaime expressed that he was often "ignored" as when "I raise my hand and she don't come to me."

These students learned the culture of "classroom survival" by taking turns to ask the teachers for help so they can all take turns sharing the "unkindness" of teachers or just simply not getting into trouble all the time for talking or being accused of "cheating" as happened to Lupe. Lupe explained to me that she often got into trouble for talking when she was only asking for help on her assignment. She got upset when she was then moved away from other students, as she had nobody to help her.

These students such as Lupe often explained to each other in Spanish what the assignment entailed. I observed Lupe during a mainstream science class asking the student beside her in Spanish for help on a graphing assignment. This was done without the knowledge of the teacher. I asked the mainstream teacher afterwards if he was aware of what Lupe had done. He told me "no" and expressed surprise.

I asked him if he encouraged ESL students such as Lupe to ask for help in Spanish and he said "no." I asked this of the other mainstream teachers and they all voiced a similar response that they felt it was their responsibility as teachers in the mainstream to help ESL students "transition" to English and that they did not encourage asking for assistance in Spanish from a classmate in class.

When I posed the same question to the ESL teachers I was told that they encouraged the ESL students to help each other in Spanish as needed. My classroom observations in the ESL classroom also substantiated this to be the case. I saw this happening often and saw that the students were comfortable doing this in Spanish and did not get into trouble with the teacher. These same students "figured out" that it was not acceptable with didactic teachers. If the students engaged in this kind of behavior in the mainstream, they did it quietly without the teacher's knowledge.

When asked what do teachers do to help them understand if they asked for help, Enrique told me that teachers needed to be a "a little kind" and to let him get his late work out of his locker. For Jaime, the teacher sometimes gave another example or went to the "the second" problem on assignment sheet. For Angel, the teacher "says it again" (meaning the second problem, obviously working it out). For Angel, if

the teacher “says it again (second time)” he did not ask again but went to the dictionary and figured it out by himself. When I asked him if he spent a lot of time figuring it out on his own his response was “I think so I do.” For Lupe, the teacher who explained “two times or more” helped her learn best. For Rosa, the teacher should “explain it again.” Rosa told me that when she had difficulty with math in the Language Center, the teacher gave her “examples” and explained to her with drawings, etc.

“Examples” was an important concept for these students, as my text search of their interview transcripts counted 57 references made to the word “examples” in the total interview search. The students who referred to “examples” the most were Maria and Jaime, who referred to the term 26 and 25 times respectively in their interview transcriptions.

Researcher’s Observations in Mainstream Classrooms

“Examples,” as defined by students, I observed, were seldom given by the didactic mainstream teachers during this research period. These teachers never actually did more than one problem completely on the chalkboard or overhead projector, and never alerted students to anticipated difficulties they might encounter in a proposed assignment. The students were told what to do and then proceeded to do their work silently. After approximately 10-15 minutes the teacher checked in and if all students were finished the teacher simply proceeded to call out the answer or have a student call out the correct answer.

All my observations of the mainstream teachers, with the exception of two veteran interactive teachers, displayed teaching techniques that gave directions with little time for group practice or interaction. The teachers did walk around the room sometimes but generally did not go to students unless they raised their hands. Rarely did I observe the ESL students in this study raising their hands

The students all told me that science was one of their favorite classes in the mainstream. The teacher’s interactive teaching style of walking around the room and proceeding through assignments in a step-by step process was something the ESL students liked a lot. The ESL students did not like being left to work independently in classrooms where the teacher tended to sit behind the desk and review the correct answers afterwards. The ESL students also liked the support of being in a

group and being given permission to ask each other for assistance if needed.

Researcher’s Observations in ESL Classroom

My observation in the ESL classroom validated for me what the students meant when a good teacher used “examples” and “explained” a lot. I observed the ESL teacher eliciting speech and conversation from the same students I had hitherto observed sitting silently in mainstream classrooms. The atmosphere in the ESL classroom was different. I could sense a comfort level among these students not observed in mainstream classrooms. The students were speaking Spanish to one another easily and were not discouraged from doing so. They helped each other and explained in Spanish if the student beside them did not grasp what the assignment entailed.

I observed the ESL teacher explaining step by step the assignment that the students had to do in class. Before the students were directed to work independently, the teacher asked several questions to check for understanding and explained many times, step-by-step the assignment.

My classroom observation in the ESL classroom illustrated for me how differently the ESL students behaved and acted compared with their mainstream classes. The ESL students’ sense of ease and comfort level was very different in the mainstream classroom. The ESL students in the ESL classroom talked more, asked many questions, and at times even had to be directed as in the case of one student, Enrique, for off-task behaviors.

The teacher spent much more time going over an example to be done by students. The teacher spent longer explaining, elicited more responses, and actually completed a finished example similar to the one the students had to complete on their own. The teacher walked the students through one particular assignment on prefixes and suffixes. The students had all prefixes and suffixes listed on a chart for reference and the teacher constantly asked questions to check for understanding. My classroom observation notes showed this explanation process took at least ten to fifteen minutes.

In the mainstream classrooms I observed the teachers going quickly through one example for a duration of no more than five minutes and then proceeding to let the students practice similar examples independently. In the ESL classroom the students were following along in their own notebooks at the same time as the teacher

explained at overhead. It was only when this long process was over did the students in the ESL classroom work independently.

Summary

I concluded that the ESL students in this study perceived an “example” to be step-by-step directions with students following along with the teacher and students not just passively listening and watching. The students were generally writing or doing the “example” at the same time as the teacher; an example was a finished outcome which could be referred to later by the student if needed; constant elicitation and questioning by the teacher; more than one example worked by teacher and students before the students completed their own independently.

This process did not happen in the didactic mainstream classrooms. The didactic mainstream teachers did one quick example on the overhead projector or chalkboard, asked few questions, and students had to pay attention and watch the teacher perform the example. Students then worked independently for ten to fifteen minutes, and the teacher checked answers on the overhead projector or chalkboard at the end of this duration. Many times students just called out the correct responses without any further clarification or explanation given.

The ESL students in this study had figured out some behavioral adaptations to help them understand better in classrooms where the teacher did not give “examples.” In these instances the students learned to rely on each other for help, take turns asking the teacher for help, etc. The ESL students liked working with the teacher in a step-by step process.

Students perceived that the instruction they received in the ESL classroom was better than the mainstream. They perceived the mainstream teachers ignored them, didn’t call on them, and didn’t give enough examples. Students perceived a “good” teacher as one who offers help first to a student. Students were reticent about asking for help. They believed a good teacher should know without having to be asked.

Students had to make behavioral adaptations in the mainstream classroom to ask for help and to avoid making a teacher “mad.” Students had ‘figured’ out strategies such as taking turns among themselves to ask for help or asking the person beside them for help when the teacher wasn’t looking.

Conclusions

The results of this particular research study indicate that some teaching styles better meet the needs of English-as-second-language learners. The study indicates that ESL teachers incorporate more interactive teaching strategies than the mainstream teachers. The students clearly perceived that a more interactive teaching style better suited their learning needs.

If state standards operate on the assumption that all students have an equal opportunity to learn, then it could be argued that the students who participated in this study did not have an equal opportunity as they did not receive the extra "examples" and assistance from the teachers that they needed. These six students were unable to achieve a passing score on the standardized tests they took during this study.

The state holds the school accountable for these students' scores. Would the students have passed if the teachers used more interactive teaching styles and provided more cooperative opportunities for learning in the classroom? Would these students have passed if they had more than three years to acquire English language skills? Regardless of where we can allocate blame, it is the student who must bear the burden of test failure. For many middle school and high school students failure can become the impetus for dropping-out of the educational system.

Three years may be enough time for some ESL students, but this study demonstrates that three years did not meet the learning needs of these six students. There are many variables involved in second language acquisition: socio-economic backgrounds, age of arrival in United States, quality of instruction available to students, and degree of education in homeland that impacts the speed and success of second language acquisition. It can be argued that

the three-year mandate to rush these students to pass on grade-level tests at the middle school and high school levels places undue burdens on some teachers and students and may not be in the best educational interests of some English-language learners.

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