FACTORS THAT CAUSE POOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF SUDANESE STUDENTS IN SPEAKING SKILL: A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF THE GEZIRA STATE- SUDAN

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ABSTRACT: *This study is conducted to assess factors that affect teaching and learning speaking skills at the Gezira State secondary schools. The researcher uses direct observations and close-ended questions interview as most appropriate tools for collecting the data and evaluating ideas about factors that cause students' poor academic performance. Then the researcher uses the descriptive method to analyse the data. Furthermore, he uses the SPSS programme to compute it. Some of the findings of the study are as follows: Students do not get good exposure to practice speaking skills when they are in lower grades. There are personality factors like; lack of motivation and self-confidence. One of the researcher's recommendations is that, English language teachers- in the above mentioned schools- should use a lot of efforts to solve the problems of teaching speaking skills by; motivating the students, giving them opportunities of speaking activities, providing appropriate speaking materials and giving additional classes.*

KEYWORDS: Factors, poor academic performance, spoken English, self-confidence.

INTRODUCTION

In fact, English language is an important language worldwide. Being that the case, all students of foreign languages, without taking any notice of their age, social, cultural or professional backgrounds share lifelong desires for mastering the ability to speak the language fluently in order to communicate with others. One can hardly claim that they understand a foreign language when they cannot use it efficiently in oral presentation. Hijab M. Al-Qahtani (2018) presented "the factors that impact the EFL learners to have poor performance in English language learning as follows: English is regarded as a difficult subject to learn. Learners depend on the English teachers as authorities. There is a lack of support to use English in the home environment and the community. Learners have insufficient or lacking of exposure the language as there is a limited opportunity to use English outside the classrooms. Students have a limitation of vocabulary proficiency as well as English reading materials are not always available. Learners have an unwillingness and lack of motivation to learn English as the y do not see the immediate need to use the language." (p.1300). Yet, of the four main skills of the target language (i.e. English language) speaking is the foremost that has great importance in terms of judging a learner's effective ability to use the language.

As a matter of fact, the importance of speaking goes back to the time when the Direct Method was more important, strong or noticeable than the other methods and when speaking was made the primary aim of language learning. Then, oral communication

became the basis of grading the language teaching programmes. Nowadays, along with the strengthening position of English language, speaking has become an extremely important skill. The importance of English language, besides the problem of students' low achievement in learning English, have led the decision makers and syllabus designers in Sudan, recently, to decide that English should be taught as early as possible- in elementary schools- exactly from the fourth grade in order to master it.

Unfortunately, secondary school graduates, in Wadmadani, who study English for about nine years are, in most cases, unable to communicate in English and their level of proficiency is far below the expected levels. In addition to that, students reflect a noticed academic weakness in speaking, even in short dialogues. They used to make frequent pauses and reflect in order to choose suitable and correct words. They generally use more poor language which does not match their academic level. They usually feel very shy and hesitant when they try to avoid such situations. Al-Haj (2011) claims that "teachers of English in secondary schools of the Gezira State do not motivate their students in EFL classes; this is on the one hand. On the other hand, these teachers are - to some extent - not qualified enough to use motivation while teaching. This claim has been strengthening with the fact that, these teachers do not use learning activities -like games, debates, etc. - which motivate the students while they are learning English." (p.524).

There are three reasons that, the study is suitable for the researcher. First, its problem catches his interest as it is in the field of his working life which has been very successful. Second, the solution of this problem is personally important to him as it will add up to his own work experience or to improve his performance as an English as a Foreign Language teacher. Third, this problem is in the field in which he has both knowledge and some experience.

Statement of the Problem

To have the ability to interact effectively in English is one of the long term goals that language teachers would like to achieve in class. So, English language teachers' role is to make students ready to use the language effectively. Indeed, it is a demanding task for English language teachers to provide sufficient input for students to be competent speakers of the target language. Unfortunately, the level of students at the Gezira State secondary schools is unsatisfactory. The researcher observed the insufficient participation of students in English language classrooms, for example when they are invited to act any activity they shift the language from the target one to their native language. They usually, feel not pleased with their performance when speaking English and they face communication problems in and out their classrooms. They do not have the required English knowledge in order to understand what they learn from their teachers or from educational aids. Ibrahim M. A. & Khalid A. (2014) claimed that, "the situation of English language in the Arab world is not satisfactory. A lot of efforts have been exerted to improve it. The quality of English language produced by Arab learners in the productive skills is always below standards. Their abilities to understand written and spoken English are also poor." (p.105).

This study is, therefore, designed to assess the factors that affect teaching speaking skills in EFL classrooms. It, mainly, focuses on the experiences and challenges that affect teaching speaking skills in the Gezira State secondary schools. Thus, emphasis should be given to address this problem which requires analysis and to identify the reasons that lead to these unsatisfactory results. It is the researcher's purpose to conduct an evaluative study that can solve the above problem via answering the following question: '*What are the factors that cause poor academic performance of the Gezira State secondary schools students in speaking kill?*'

Questions of the Study

The researcher tries his best to generate from the main question of the study other clear and concise research questions that enable him to search the literature effectively. These questions will, also, allow him to generate and write clear hypotheses and select the most appropriate research design for his study. To fulfil the foregoing issues the following questions are raised:

- Do English language teachers at Gezira State secondary schools ignore teaching spoken English in their classrooms?
- Do students, at Gezira State secondary schools, have a good chance to practice spoken English in and out their classrooms?
- Are students, at Gezira State secondary schools, confident and motivated enough to interact in English?

Hypotheses of the Study

Bearing in his mind that a hypothesis should define the problem of the study, provide a solution to it and submit a result; the researcher offers these hypotheses:

- English language teachers, at Gezira State secondary schools, ignore teaching speaking skill in their classrooms since they are not interested.
- The students, at Gezira State secondary schools, can communicate in English if they have enough opportunity to practice speaking skills inside and outside their classrooms.
- Students, at Gezira State secondary schools, can interact in English if they are confident and motivated enough.

Significance of the Study

Since speaking ability is regarded as the most needed skill for English as a foreign language, the students' inability to speak and communicate in English may hinder the process of LEFL. Thus, this study might contribute to the body of educational knowledge by shedding light on English speaking problems and difficulties faced by the Gezira State secondary schools students. Its findings are expected to provide English language teachers, inspectors, syllabus designers, decision makers and consequently students with useful information that can solve speaking problems. The researcher hopes that the results of this study contextualize with other researchers' work and to be of high standard with the aim of producing knowledge that is relating to the whole community.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study is planned to focus on the factors that contribute to poor academic performance - of Gezira State secondary schools students - in speaking skills. The study is dealt with in the academic year (2018-2019). It would have been more thorough and meaningful, if this study included other schools in different regions of the Sudan. Moreover, due to time and financial limitations its depth is limited to assess the factors that affect teaching speaking skills in Gezira State secondary schools as proper as it should be. Furthermore, the interviews are (to some extent) incomplete processes, mentally disturbing and interviewers' personality and mood are subjective items. In other word, they are snap judgments and done without allowing time for careful thought or preparation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Saputra J. B. & Wargianto, S. (2015) declared that, a large number of language learners throughout the world study English for the sake of proficiency in speaking skills. And this is only because speaking is the first in importance than the other English language skills and should be learnt by people if they need to communicate with each other around the world and gain benefit out of that communication. (p. 1). Asma O. & Tesnim O. (2017) claimed that, "it is based on the assumption that the key function of language use is communication and its main purpose therefore is for learners to develop and foster communicative competence or proficiency." (p. 189).

Gerald Ford, on the importance of effective communication, (2016) stated that, "If I went back to college again; I'd concentrate on two areas: learning to write and to speak before an audience. Nothing in life is more important than the ability to communicate effectively." (n. p.). As it was stated by Al-wossabi S. (2016) speaking, in a second language, is the foremost skill that needs a lot of time and attention to a large degree than the others ... for a lot of people, speaking is treated as the most important skill. (p. 2061). Speaking skill is important due to the large number of students who want to study English in order to be able to use it for communicative purposes. This is presented in Richards and Renandya's publication, (2002) where they expressed, "A large percentage of the world's language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking". (p. 201).

In fact, the Gezira State secondary schools students should be able to communicate orally with each other using the target language. Yet, the lack of practicing English language both inside and outside the classroom leads to the students' failure in learning how to speak in a good manner. Another thing that supports the failure of the students' speaking skill is the short duration of time in which English lessons at secondary schools are delivered; higher secondary schools adopt the integrated method of teaching EFL that consists of the four main abilities of mastering the target language. As a result, the amount of teaching speaking is very short since it is integrated with the other three language skills. Being that is the case, the English language teachers, in the Gezira State secondary schools, are expected to make use of the available time more effectively and efficiently by applying certain strategies and activities by which can include all students more actively in the speaking skills, thought what is worrying is that they are not.

Ibrahim M. A. & Khalid A. (2014) stated that, "language assessment that still uses pen and paper (one medium) does not suit the ways through which present-day generation gain knowledge. Language learning/ acquisition need authentic materials and a lot of practice. Traditional ways of instruction in most cases may be boring and useless and will put learners in isolation and deprive them from discoveries, innovations and technology applications of the rich and healthy environment of the Digital World." (p.113)

Students, really, wanted to show their feeling or give their views about the material being taught, but they did not know how to express themselves. This was due to their limited vocabulary and the classroom environment (friends with different cultural backgrounds); some of them knew how to construct sentences but they were reluctant to speak as they were feeling fear or worry about making mistakes when pronouncing words or structuring sentences. Besides, they were afraid of being laughed at by other students, so they just kept silent and sat back listening to the teacher or wandering off into some dream world. Nambiar (1985) declared that "learners are reluctant to participate in oral activities because of the following: (1) speaking practice is more difficult than sitting back and listening to the teacher or wandering off; (2) many students feel uncomfortable in their first attempts at speech in the second language; (3) many students are self-conscious and don't like to make mistakes or to appear stupid in front of their peers; and (4) they are afraid of failure, laughter and ridicule." (Cited in Saputra J. B. & Wargianto, S., 2015, p. 3)

In the findings of their paper, Lai-Mei L. & Ahmadi S. M. (2017) indicated that, learners who have low confidence in their own abilities, low motivation, and feel unhappy have extreme difficulties in speaking skills despite their satisfactory linguistic abilities. On the contrary, students with high motivation and low anxiety will be able to speak easy and in an effective manner. (p. 39)

Yaseen N. B. (2018) in her thesis stated that, "the experts, who are viewed as efficient elements in the teaching process, have conveyed their opinions that teaching methods are significant in teaching speaking. They stressed that there is an urgent need for more teacher training on communicative approaches and methodologies of teaching speaking skills. Furthermore, they have also stressed that lack of motivation by students, and lack of encouragement from the surrounding environment, in addition to students' fear and anxiety while performing a speaking task hinder students' speaking proficiency." (p. 65)

Brian Tracy, at Haitian Women Meet up Club (2019) said that, "It is not failure itself that holds you back; it is the fear of failure that paralyzes you." (n. p.). Besides the factors that related to teachers and students, there are so many other factors that can badly affect students' academic performance such as; the teaching methods, available materials and books used. If the resources available are outdated or inappropriate, this will lead up to unsatisfactory results. Yet, Elyas T. & Badawood O. (2017) represented that, "the students and teachers are exposed to the materials, their learning and teaching identities are likely to change. Additionally, the rapidly changing policies and socio-political environment and mixed messages presented both in the media and policy

documents are also likely to cause ideological conflicts within the students and teachers." (p. 79).

Lai-Mei L. & Ahmadi S. M. (2017) stated that, "teachers should understand their students' interests and feelings, improve their learners' self-confidence, and choose the best teaching method to keep their learners involved in the speaking activity. Teachers should praise their students to speak English. They should build a friendly relationship with their students, make them feel very happy in the class and have a feeling of great enthusiasm and eagerness to study English in general and speak English in particular." (p. 39).

Furthermore, if the right resources and activities are taught in the right way, speaking in class can be a lot of fun, raising general learner motivation and making the English language classroom an interesting and attractive place. The researcher claims that a variety of classroom activities play an essential part in motivating students and facilitating the acquisition of EFL. These activities can reduce the strain of formality in the classroom and make learning more student-centred and less teacher-centred. Moreover, Najat and Taiseer, (1998) revealed that, "activities carried out in groups may help to motivate and encourage the more diffident students and those who are evasive, or afraid to ask or speak for fear of making errors, that is because activities carried out in groups will transfer the process of learning from getting the skill of the language to using it." (Cited in Al-Haj, 2011, p.526).

Spratt et.al (2005: 34) claimed that "speaking is a productive skill like writing; it involves using speech to express meaning to other people. We can develop learners' speaking skills by focusing regularly on particular aspect of speaking ..." Hillary Clinton in a personal communication on why practice is important, (2016) stated that "If you are not comfortable with public speaking - and nobody starts out comfortable; you have to learn how to be comfortable - practice. I cannot overstate the importance of practicing. Get some close friends or family members to help evaluate you, or somebody at work that you trust." (n. p.).

Al-wossabi S. (2016) claimed that, "incorporating collaborative communicative tasks is a good start for enabling learners to modify their speech by asking for clarification and negotiate meaning with their peers and teachers. Through gradual instructional training for learners to exploit useful interaction strategies, learners, including weaker ones, will develop confidence for uttering other oral discourses in other communicative contexts." (p. 2066). According to Saputra J. B. & Wargianto, S. (2005) "speaking is a productive skill like writing, it involves using speech to express meaning to other people. We can develop learners' speaking skills by focusing regularly on particular aspect of speaking, e.g. fluency, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy or body language." (p. 1). In addition to that, Lai-Mei L. & Ahmadi S. M. (2017) stated that, "teachers should understand their students' interests and feelings, improve their learners' self-confidence, and choose the best teaching method to keep their learners involved in the speaking activity. Teachers should praise their students to speak English. They should build a friendly relationship with their students, make them feel

very happy in the class and have a feeling of great enthusiasm and eagerness to study English in general and speak English in particular." (p. 39)

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Instruments

To collect data relevant to the topic, the researcher makes use of interviews with closed-ended 15 questions. These interviews have been developed for 10 English language teachers in order to give their views on the guides below which are contained in the interview schedule as domains:

- Teachers' attitudes towards teaching speaking skills.
- Students' exposure to practice speaking skills inside and outside the classrooms.
- Students' confidence and motivation to interact in English.

The interview schedule which contained 15 questions is employed to collect detail information from the English language teachers who have been mentioned earlier. Each five questions of this schedule are set under one of the above three domains. (See this interview schedule). In addition to the interview, the researcher uses an observational method to study classroom events, that is to say to observe teachers and students while they are in their classes

Interview Schedule

- This interview schedule is set to obtain as much information as possible and record answers, to the questions, onto it during the interview.
- The three sub-titles below are interview guides which help the researcher to make sure that the important topics have been covered during the interview. Each interview guide contains some questions with blank space, under which, to record the respondents' answers via yes or no only, (Close-ended questions).

Teacher's number: *(   )* -**Faculty:** ………………………………… -**Specialization:** *English*

Teachers' attitudes towards teaching speaking skills.

1. Will it possible to offer your students chances to practice speaking skills inside the classroom?
   ………………………………………………………………………… …………………

2. Do you always praise students who express themselves properly in English?
   ………………………………………………………………………… …………………

3. Have you often used activities to practice speaking skills in English classrooms?
   ………………………………………………………………………… …………………

4. Do you frequently ignore teaching speaking skills in your classrooms?
   ………………………………………………………………………… …………………

5. Do you often teach speaking skills in English classrooms?
   ………………………………………………………………………… …………………

Students' exposure to practice speaking skills inside and outside the classrooms.

1. Do secondary students have chances to practice speaking skills inside and outside classrooms?
   ………………………………………………………………………. ....………

2. Have you got any idea to organize your classroom in order to support using speaking skills?
   ………………………………………………………………………… ……...............…

3. Will your students have exposure to speaking skills in your classrooms?
   ………………………………………………………………………… ……...............……

4. Do you offer your students chances to practice speaking skills inside the classroom?

………………………………………………………………………………
.................………

5. Will it possible to encourage your students to practice speaking skills outside the classroom?
………………………………………………………………………………
.................………

Students' confidence and motivation to interact in English.

1. Do you often encourage your students to use English inside and outside classrooms?
……………………………………………………………………………
…………………

2. Have you always motivated your students to practice speaking skills outside the classroom?
……………………………………………………………………………
…………………

3. Do you always praise students who express themselves properly in English?
……………………………………………………………………………
…………………

4. Are your students confident enough to interact in English?
……………………………………………………………………………
…………………

5. Do your students have motivation to speak English confidently in the classroom?
……………………………………………………………………………
…………….……

Procedure for Conducting the Interviews and Observations

The researcher makes use of observations as a qualitative method, which is done via direct interaction to explore teachers' behaviours as well as students' behaviours while they are in EFL classes. Moreover, he uses only the results of eight questions out of the 15 ones of the interviews. (See the 8 tables below). Furthermore, the researcher uses the descriptive method to describe, organize and summarize the data by making use of the above tools. Afterwards, the interviews are held and observations of teachers' classroom behaviours are conducted. Then, the researcher uses the SPSS programme in order to compute the data. Ultimately, the researcher analyzes the data by giving

narrative description and interpretation. These data are analysed qualitatively and quantitatively, combined and summarized together to reach appropriate conclusions.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher organizes and presents the results around the hypotheses of the study. To put it another way, he restates the first hypothesis and submits the findings of it, and then he repeats the same process for each hypothesis. In other words, he tackles the hypotheses one after the other in an agreed order. Afterwards, the researcher uses only the results of the following eight questions out of the 15 ones.

The First Hypothesis

Results of tables (1) - (3), with their negative response of almost 95%, indicate that English language teachers in Gezira State secondary schools ignore teaching speaking skill in their classrooms since they are not interested. Moreover, the researcher observes that most of the students at Gezira State secondary schools are not motivated to speak the target language. He, also, claims that, teachers - of English - in these schools do not motivate their students in EFL classes since these teachers are - partly - not qualified enough to use motivation while teaching.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	no	19	95.0	95.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.

Q1: Do you often teach speaking skills in English classrooms?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	no	18	90.0	90.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 2.

Q2: Will it possible to offer your students chances to practice speaking skills inside the classroom?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	no	19	95.0	95.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.

Q3: Have you often used activities to practice speaking skills in English classrooms?

These observational results (textual data), agreed with the results of the interviews (measurable data) and at the very same time both are supported each other. In this case, the researcher claims that all these results reflect the first hypothesis that, "English language teachers, at Gezira State secondary schools, ignore teaching speaking skill in their classrooms since they are not interested."

The Second Hypothesis
These three tables from (4) - (6) which are exactly 100 % negative, show that students at Gezira State secondary schools have no chances to communicate in English inside and outside their classrooms. Furthermore and with regard to observations results, the researcher asserts that most of the students, at Gezira State secondary schools, have no chances to speak the target language inside and outside their schools. He, also, claims that, the lack of practicing English language is due to the short duration of time in which English lessons are delivered. These observational results agreed with the above results of the interviews. Then, each one of these results strengthens and supports the other. In this case, the researcher declares that all these results reflect the second hypothesis that, "The students, at Gezira State secondary schools, can communicate in English if they have enough opportunity to practice speaking skills inside and outside their classrooms."

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	no	20	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.

Q4: Do secondary students have chances to practice speaking skills inside and outside classrooms?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	no	20	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 5.

Q5: Will it possible to encourage your students to practice speaking skills outside the

classroom?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	no	19	95.0	95.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 6.

Q6: Do you offer your students chances to practice speaking skills
inside the classroom?

The Third Hypothesis

The result of table (7) with its negative response of 90 percent means that the Gezira State secondary schools students are not confident enough to interact in English. To be certain of this result, the researcher asked them about the reason, and then most of them said that they enter secondary school with low standard especially in speaking skills. Analyzing qualitative data is difficult, however, the researcher has attended five lectures, and then collects detailed qualitative data - from inside the lecture rooms - about whether Secondary School students are confident enough to interact in English or not. Finally, the researcher notices that English language teachers do not use effective type of teaching, yet on the contrary they use traditional form of instruction. As for the results above, the researcher states that these results agree with the third hypothesis (that), "Students, at Gezira State secondary schools, can interact in English if they are confident and motivated enough."

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	no	18	90.0	90.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 7.

Q7: Are your students confident enough to interact in English?

This result of table (8) does not oppose the above result of table (7). Both results show, clearly, that the Gezira State secondary schools students are not motivated and confident enough to communicate in English. With regard to the preceding findings, the researcher claims that the study has operated since there is an agreement between the results of the direct observations and the close-ended interviews. Thus, these results supported the third hypothesis of the study which read: "Students, at Gezira State secondary schools, can interact in English if they are confident and motivated enough."

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	no	19	95.0	95.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 8.
Q8: Do your students have motivation to speak English confidently in the classroom?

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper gives attention to Sudanese EFL students- their poor academic performance in Spoken English- and investigates the factors that cause this problem. Alrabai, F. (2016) claimed that "sociocultural, instructional, and institutional factors are negatively affecting the internal factors of … EFL learners, resulting in inevitable psychological and academic problems for those students." (p. 31). Therefore, students are expected to improve their speaking skills by using English language in English classroom for various interactions and they have to get exposures out of the classroom, i.e. to use English in their day to day communication purposes. Generally, to enhance teaching speaking skills, English language teachers and schools administrations should work in collaboration to solve the problems that affect students' speaking skills in English language classrooms.

The major findings that affect teaching learning speaking skills are:

- Students did not get good exposure to practice speaking skills when they were in lower grades.
- Students have fear of making mistakes and that has bad effects on their speaking skills.
- Teachers did not use enough materials to teach speaking skills.
- Teachers employ inappropriate teaching methods and that is highly affected students' speaking skills.
- Students have lack of:
  - practicing speaking both in the class and out of it,
  - exposure to speaking skills,
  - self- confidence during speaking lessons.
- There is a lack of:
  - interest and motivation from students' and teachers' side,

- emphasis on speaking from teachers and students.

In the light of the above findings it is recommended that:

- Students need to develop their self-confidence during speaking lessons.
- Students should consider the value of making mistakes in learning speaking skills.
- Students should have control and authority over their learning in order to enhance their speaking skills.
- English language teachers should activate the basic language knowledge and skills.
- English language teachers should employ their maximum effort to minimize the problems that affect teaching speaking skills by: motivating the students, giving them opportunities of speaking skills, providing appropriate speaking materials, giving additional classes, etc.
- Secondary schools should fulfill sufficient supplementary speaking materials for better improvement of students' speaking skills.

It is well known that, a great number of English language teachers, in Sudan, who teach EFL deal with a number of problems including mainly: the absence of training, the lack of available and suitable teaching materials, large size of classes, etc. Being that the situation, the researcher has good reasons to think that this paper will be an attempt by which he can help the specialized audiences particularly in his home country in which English language is taught as a FL. Besides, audiences such as; interested readers, teachers who are concerned with EFL, and those whose career is LT and applied linguistics- to carry on further researches in this area of knowledge.

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