



GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE LEVEL AND GRAMMAR LEARNING STRATEGY OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract:

This study attempted to determine the grammar learning strategy and grammatical competence level of the 2nd year and 3rd year pre-service teachers. Additionally, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between their grammar learning strategy usage and grammatical competence level. To this end, the study employed the descriptive-correlational research method. Data were collected through a questionnaire facilitated in Google Forms. The study's results revealed that, first, the pre-service teachers have highly used the Grammar Learning Strategies in general and when categorized as Cognitive, Meta-cognitive, and Socio-affective; although all GLS categories were highly used, the one with the highest mean was the Cognitive GLS while the least was the Socio-affective GLS. Second, respondents were found to have a fair level of grammatical competence in general as well as when specified to Subject-Verb Agreement, Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement, Parts of Speech, and Adjective-Adverb Agreement. Lastly, it was found in this present study that there is a highly significant relationship between grammar learning strategy usage and grammatical competence level but it is a weak positive correlation at 0.20. This outcome is conducive to better understand the pre-service teachers' GLS usage, to maximize the other GLS which were not highly used, and to supply some references for enhancing one's grammatical competence level.

Keywords: grammar learning strategies, metacognitive, cognitive, socio-affective, grammar, grammatical competence level

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been a significant change in how education is done. The traditional teacher-centered model has given way to a modern student-centered

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paradigm, in which students are given a lot of responsibility for how they learn, which has helped them learn a lot more. Al Abri (2017) said that more attention had been given to students in the teaching-learning process. Students have now been provided the opportunity to make use of their own ideas and ways of learning. Hence, they have been given the freedom to choose what strategy to utilize that will work best for them in second language learning, especially in English.

Looking into second language learning, Al Abri (2017) referred to learning strategies as specific actions, methods, and techniques that are purposefully used by learners when they are aiming to level up their learning of the second language, particularly in the aspect of grammatical competence. According to Ella (2018), who cited Green & Oxford (1995), there are differences in learning strategies among students with various levels of language competence because of their various attitudes toward language learning, exposure to learning-relevant materials, and the learning environment. Additionally, it showed that those at proficient levels or who excel in competence tend to choose cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This being said demonstrates that language competence levels, specifically grammar, may be affected by the learning strategies employed by students.

As published by De Guzma (2020) in PhilStar Global, an international education company called Education First (EF) publicized in their 2020 report that the Philippines went down to a 7-spot lower from its last year's ranking in the English Proficiency Index. The English language acquisition of full-time students aged 13–22 was measured here wherein a notable continuous decline in the country's ranking on this has been observed, from 13th in 2016 down to 15th in 2017, 14th in 2018, 20th in 2019, 27th in 2020, and 18th in 2021. Moreover, in a published news article, Tima (2018) reported that the study done by Hopkins International Partners, whose respondents are Philippine college graduates through its official representative in the country named Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), revealed that in terms of English proficiency, the country lags behind most of its neighboring ASEAN countries. Based on the study of the above group, the identified students from the Philippines have a lower English proficiency level than the target English proficiency level of Thailand's high school students.

With the established problem of declining competency in English, Cabigon (2015) claimed that there is a need for the Philippines' education stakeholders to improve and to step up their efforts and endeavors in improving the teaching and learning of English. They should take some further action in developing English as a vital skill as one of the ways of solving the declining proficiency in the established lingua franca, the English language. Also, the development of communication skills, especially grammar skills, must be given a lot of attention. As the Philippine education system shifted to the K-12 curriculum, it is essential to note that in the new curriculum guide for English, emphasis is given to the development of students' communicative competence, which is also identified as a vital element in successful English language learning. As we look at communicative competence, one of its components is grammatical competence. Hence, in order to achieve this goal, the students' strategy for learning grammar must also be

taken into account because, one way or another, it will give students a better understanding of their own learning, and they will significantly benefit from it in terms of their English competence level. As Radwan (2011) mentioned, knowing your grammar learning strategy is essential since it can improve your language competence level.

As future English teachers, pre-service teachers are expected to have acquired good communication skills, especially in written English. In its Memorandum No. 75 Series of 2018, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) highlighted that preservice teachers should be able to communicate effectively in both English and Filipino, both in oral and in writing (Section 5).

In addition, to effectively communicate, correct grammar usage is also an essential factor to be looked into. The dependence of grammatical competence level on grammar learning strategies usage is seen as a need and something beneficial for pre-service teachers because this sheds light on what strategies work well for them as they learn English. Such awareness can also be used to improve their communicative competence. On the other hand, on the side of the teachers, allowing the students to become more aware of the best strategies will give a clearer opportunity, banking on the strategies, to provide necessary assistance to less proficient students. As facilitators of learning, teachers can efficiently and meaningfully help students become effective and successful in English language learning by promoting the best strategies for them. Thus, this will help the pre-service teachers, become effective agents of change in resolving Filipino learners' declining English competence level.

Zhou (2017) noted that in learning and teaching English, the most complicated and most challenging element is grammar since there is a need for students and teachers to spend a lot more time understanding its rules. For instance, both teachers and students must master how to create sentences that are comprehensive and meaningful by correctly arranging their words and knowing how to use them in the target language.

In order to help address this gap, the present study was conducted first to investigate the types of grammar learning strategies that pre-service teachers use in learning English grammar. Second, to find out the grammatical competence level of the Pre-service teachers. Finally, this study will look into the relationship between pre-service teachers' grammar learning strategies and their grammatical competence level. Understanding such data would greatly help these future teachers better hone their grammatical competence by effectively utilizing their respective grammar learning strategies.

2. Statement of the Problem

The main objective of this study was to find out the grammar learning strategies employed by pre-service teachers and identify their relationship to their grammatical competence level. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the grammar learning strategy used by the pre-service teachers?
- 2) What is the level of grammatical competence of the pre-service teachers?

- 3) Is there a significant relationship between the pre-service teachers' grammar learning strategy and grammatical competence level?

3. Methodology

This study used a descriptive-correlation research design since the numerical data were elaborated descriptively to point out the answers to the problems identified. As defined by Sousa et al. (2007), a descriptive-correlational design describes the variables and the relationships that occur naturally between and among them. The researcher found this design suitable for this study because it aimed to investigate the grammar learning strategies of the respondents and determine its relationship to the other variable, which is the grammatical competence level.

Furthermore, the researcher used a quantitative method to examine the relationship between two variables and to gather numerical data to explain a particular problem. According to Babbie (2010), the quantitative method places an emphasis on precise measurements, statistical, mathematical, or numerical analysis of data gathered through surveys, questionnaires, and polls. This assisted in analyzing the data gathered, which is appropriate in determining the grammar learning strategies used by pre-service teachers and their relationship to their grammatical competence level.

3.1 Research Instruments

The researcher made use of an 80-item researcher-made test questionnaire on grammar, which assessed the participants' grammatical competence. It was a multiple-choice type of test that covered grammar components with 20 items each as specified by Barraquio (2009), such as Subject-Verb Agreement (items 1-20), Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement (items 21-40), Parts of Speech (items 41-60), and Adjective-Adverb Agreement (items 61-80). In addition, to determine the students' employed Grammar Learning Strategies, a 35-item questionnaire inclusive of items for cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective grammar learning strategies, adapted from the study of Gurata (2008) was used. The GLS questionnaire was in a four-point Likert scale format.

3.2 Validity and Reliability

To ensure that the instrument used is valid and reliable the following steps were done: First, the face and content validity of the questionnaires were evaluated by three experts: the Program Head of the BSED Program, the Program Head of the BA Communication Program; and the SHS English Teacher who also taught at the tertiary level. These experts were all MA degree holders in the field of English specifically on MAEd in Teaching Communication Arts-English. Each of them received a copy of the questionnaires and their feedback were taken into account when the research instruments were finalized. They specifically checked the appearance of the questionnaires in terms of feasibility, readability, consistency of style and formatting, and clarity of the language used. The research instruments were examined by the same acknowledged subject-matter experts

for content validity to ensure that they have all required components and omit any extraneous ones for a certain construct domain. Such that, the experts evaluated each item in relevance to the grammar contents it aimed to test and measure. Second, the reliability index was also identified through the data gathered from the conducted pilot testing. For the Grammar Learning Strategy questionnaire, it has high internal consistency as well with a 0.89 Cronbach alpha coefficient.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 On the grammar learning strategy used by the pre-service teachers

The table below reveals the mean scores of students' usage in each grammar learning strategy category.

Table 1: The Grammar Learning Strategy of Pre-service Teachers

Indicators	Mean	Sd	Description
Cognitive	3.13	0.41	High
Metacognitive	3.07	0.57	High
Socio-affective	3.05	0.49	High

The result shows that the cognitive strategy appeared to be the highest highly used Grammar Learning Strategy of the pre-service teachers with the highest computed mean of 3.13. This is followed by Metacognitive with 3.07 and then Socio-affective with 3.05. This implies that they utilized more memorization learning strategies. Despite their exposure and high usage of the other categories, these learners still lean more on using cognitive GLS, which could be an effect as well of the pandemic, wherein for the past two (2) years, these students have taken their classes remotely, which have limited their chances of interacting and learning directly from others.

Further, those years of learning through modules and screens somehow restricted their chances of maximizing the other categories of GLS. The sudden shift from face-to-face to remote learning mode has forced them to learn things on their own, which means they have a good chance to then use more of the memorization and repetition strategies, which are the key concepts in cognitive GLS.

The above findings appeared to be similar to the results of the study conducted by Zhou (2017) which revealed that the English language learners in China also have highly used grammar learning strategies. Specifically, he found out that the cognitive strategy category was the very highly used GLS category, followed by the meta-cognitive strategy, and the socio-affective strategy ranked last. However, different results were published by Abri, Seyabi, Humaidi and Hasan (2017) when they investigated the usage of grammar learning strategies in Omani EFL learning. They found out that the grammar learning strategy category which is highly used by the respondents was the metacognitive strategies. Respondents from that study rely more on monitoring their own learning and being more aware of the thinking process, thus they were utilizing the strategies that

encouraged them to think about their thinking. Another different result was revealed from the study of Yunus and Hashim (2018) by which from their study in Malaysia, they discovered that students who want to study grammar try to listen to other people's conversations in order to hear how they employ the grammar rules, thus highly utilized the socio-affective strategies rather than of the cognitive strategies.

4.2 On the Grammatical Competence Level of the pre-service teachers

The following table details the mean and standard deviation of the grammatical competence level of the pre-service teachers on the specified grammar components.

Table 2.1: Distribution of the Level of Grammatical Competence of the Pre-service Teachers (n=160)

Score	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
65-80 (81-100)	Very High	3	1.88
49-64 (61-80)	High	57	35.63
33-48 (41-60)	Fair	98	61.25
17-32 (21-40)	Poor	2	1.25
0-16 (0-20)	Very Poor	0	0.00
	Total	160	100.00

It reveals that more than half of them (98) or 61.25% have a fair level of competence; this is followed by 57 of them, or 35.63%, who have a high level of competence. As to the very high level, 3 respondents, or 1.88% of them, were placed at such a level, while the remaining 2 respondents, or 1.25%, were at a poor competence level. Overall, the respondents have a fair level of grammatical competence, with a general computed mean of 11.98.

The next table indicates the grammatical competence level of Pre-service teachers in each identified grammar components with its mean and standard deviation data.

Table 2.2: The Grammatical Competence Level of Pre-service Teachers

Indicators	Mean	Sd	Description
Subject-Verb Agreement	11.41	2.82	Fair
Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement	11.98	2.81	Fair
Adjective-Adverb Agreement	12.49	2.72	Fair
Part of Speech	10.91	3.47	Fair
Overall	11.98	2.81	Fair

Specifically, in terms of the four general indicators in identifying the grammatical competence level, the respondents were found to have a fair level of competence in all four. However, although they're at a fair level, it appears that the participants performed better first in Adjective-Adverb Agreement with the highest computed mean of 12.49; second in Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement with a mean of 11.98; third in Subject-Verb Agreement with a mean of 11.41, and lastly in Part of Speech with a 10.91 computed mean.

The result reflects how these sets of pre-service teachers have shown their knowledge of the grammar rules yet found to be still with a need to improve it further because it is two levels away from very high competence. Among the identified grammar areas, the adjective-adverb agreement got the highest mean which showed how these students have most likely easily retained the concepts of adjectives and adverb agreements since there are easier to identify with the use of "ly" for adverbs. In daily life as well, adjectives and adverbs were commonly applied compared to the rules of parts of speech which are broad in nature since there are 8 parts to look into. As future teachers as well, part of the training in facilitating a class is providing constructive feedback to students, such that these students have utilized the agreements in adverbs and adjectives when providing feedback to their students during demonstrations, field studies, etc. The parts of speech component also deal more on the sentential level while the adjective-adverb agreement is more on the word level, such reflects how these students find it more convenient to apply the rules at a word level and it's still a challenge for them to apply it in a sentential level.

Further, in relation to the memorandum of CHED for the BSED-English program, students under this must exhibit mastery and high competence in English and one key point for that is communication competence which includes and highlights grammatical competence. Focusing on the student factor, most likely on how these students have absorbed and learned these essential grammar concepts, their attitude towards learning it, must really be visited and be guided by the experts related to their chosen course/field especially that they are aiming to become teachers of this subject in the future.

In contrast with the above findings, Abdullah (2021) found that "subject-verb agreement" was the least level of competence among respondents which can be said as well that they find most difficult. As implied, students can understand the rules, but when they try to use them in sentences, they run into difficulties. This is in line as well with the research done by Nayan and Jusoff (2009) and Najlaa' Nasuha binti Mohd Radin and Fong (2012), which revealed that students struggle to use the general grammatical rules for this issue while building sentences generally and not on specific rules. Runkati (2013) also found out that students had difficulty using the grammar rules in a sentence-level application rather than in a mere word form application.

In here, the pre-service teachers were found to have an overall fair level of grammar competence. In all grammar areas identified in this study, respondents as well have fair levels in each area. Among the four grammar areas, Adjective- Adverb Agreement appeared to be where they are more competent but it is in Parts of Speech where they're least competent.

4.3 On the relationship between the pre-service teachers' grammar learning strategy and grammatical competence level

The table presents the correlation between the pre-service teachers' grammar learning strategy and grammatical competence level.

Table 3: Correlation between the Pre-service teachers' Grammar Learning Strategy and Grammatical Competence Level

Grammar Learning Strategy		Grammar Competence				
		Subject- Verb Agreement	Pronoun- Antecedent Agreement	Adjective- Adverb Agreement	Part of Speech	Overall Grammar Competence
Cognitive	Pearson Correlation	0.15*	0.13ns	0.20**	0.26**	0.29**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.05	0.10	0.01	0.001	0.001
Metacognitive	Pearson Correlation	0.23**	0.18*	0.22**	0.29**	0.35**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.004	0.02	0.005	0.001	0.001
Socio- affective	Pearson Correlation	0.16*	0.22**	0.14ns	0.20**	0.27**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.05	0.006	0.08	0.01	0.001
Overall	Pearson Correlation	0.20**	0.19**	0.20**	0.27**	0.33**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.01	0.001	0.01	0.001	0.001

The treated data shows that there is a highly significant relationship between the two variables mentioned with an overall r value of 0.33, which is lower than the set alpha value. Therefore, the result indicates that there is a significant relationship between the students' grammar learning strategy and grammatical competence level but the correlation is a positive weak one.

When looking at the correlation if grammar learning strategies are categorized, the result reveals that the relationship between the cognitive grammar learning strategy and grammar learning competence is highly significant with an overall r value of 0.29. For the metacognitive grammar learning strategy category, a highly significant relationship is also found with an r-value of 0.35. A similar interpretation is seen in the socio-affective grammar learning strategy category, which has an r-value of 0.27. With this, the null hypothesis relating to this must be rejected since a highly significant relationship between the individual categories of GLS and grammar competence level is found to exist.

In addition, when the indicators for grammatical competence level are specified as well as the GCL category, the data reveals the following: For Cognitive GLS, its relationship is seen to be highly significant with the adjective-adverb agreement and parts of speech competence, with r values of 0.20 and 0.26, respectively; it has a significant relationship as well with the subject-verb agreement competence, with an r-value of 0.15. However, it's only with the pronoun-antecedent agreement that the relationship appears to be not significant with an r-value of 0.13. For Meta-cognitive GLS, the relationship is found to be highly significant in Subject-Verb agreement, Adjective-Adverb Agreement, and Parts of Speech competencies, with computed r-values of 0.23, 0.22, and 0.39,

respectively, while it also has a significant relationship to Pronoun-Antecedent agreement competence with an r-value of 0.18. For Socio-affective GLS, the relationship is found to be highly significant in Pronoun-Antecedent agreement and Parts of Speech competencies with r values of 0.22 and 0.27, respectively. A significant relationship between the specified GLS category and Subject-Verb agreement competence is found to exist with an r-value of 0.16. However, it's only with the adjective-adverb agreement that the relationship appeared to be not significant with an r-value of 0.14.

The result presented above suggests that an increase in the use of a grammar learning strategy tends to be associated with a similar increase in the grammar competence level. This means that the more intensively the students employ grammar learning strategies, there is an expected increase in the level of grammatical competence among these respondents. But although the relationship is found to be significant, it is important to note as well that their positive correlation is only a weak one so even though their grammatical competence level tends to increase in relation and in response to their increase in grammar learning strategy usage, the relationship is not very strong.

When categorized, there is also seen to be a positive correlation between the GLS categories and grammatical competence level but still, it's only either weak or very weak. Considering as well in the previous result in the highly used grammar learning strategy category, it has been found that the Cognitive GLS got the highest mean although the correlation here is positive, unfortunately, respondents have only a fair level of grammatical competence. Even though there is a high usage of the GLS categories, it did not really relate much to how their competence level should increase as well.

However, in terms of r value, it's the metacognitive GLS that garnered the nearest to 1 r value, followed by cognitive, then lastly with socio-affective with the r values of 0.35, 0.29, and 0.27 respectively. Since with the number 1 highly used GLS category, cognitive, students have only gained a fair level of competence, the highest among these GLS categories in terms of correlation could be further utilized by the students. By this, it might most likely present a clearer increase of the variables mentioned. Training and reminding these students to not only memorize these grammar rules but utilize the metacognitive strategies when learning could help them progress more quickly since they are able to control their own learning through the use of this GLS category. If they will utilize the use of metacognitive strategy and develop metacognition, they will be more aware of the learning process and successful learning strategies. This will aid them to understand their own thought and learning processes even more. As a result, they will be more likely to supervise the selection and application of learning strategies, plan how to proceed with a learning task, monitor their own performance continuously, find solutions to issues that arise, and evaluate themselves once the task has been completed.

Bolitho (2013) also believed that increased metacognitive strategies usage can raise students' desired educational goals can be achieved by integrating metacognitive instruction into the educational process and by improving the performance attained. Further, Mahmoudi (2010) discovered that a key factor in the efficiency of language learning is the application of appropriate task-solving methods, which are metacognitive

strategies. The use of metacognitive strategies enables students to actively participate in the learning process, manage and direct their own learning, and ultimately identify the most effective methods for applying and reinforcing what they have learned. This also gives individuals an advantage in processing and retaining new knowledge, which improves test performance, learning outcomes, and achievement.

In addition, Pei's (2014) showed that there is a significant positive correlation between English grammar competence level and grammar learning strategies. Zekrati (2017) also reported a coefficient of 0.867, indicating a very high correlation between grammar learning strategies and grammar learning achievement, and this correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. Similarly, Yeh (2021) also proposed that the use of GLSs would result in increased language achievement. The results indicated that cognitive and social affective strategies were the most frequently used grammar strategies by learners. It revealed a significant difference in the frequency of use of grammar learning techniques at various grammatical competence levels.

5. Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusions of the study, the researcher presents the following recommendations:

A. For teachers

Teachers must give more attention to the use of grammar learning strategies in the classroom. They must make sure that students really understand what the strategies are and how to use them efficiently, especially while learning and applying the grammar rules. However, when teaching grammar, teachers must also encourage students to not only simply memorize and recall the grammar rules but utilize the metacognitive strategies like thinking about the situations in which they can use the newly learned grammar structures and the socio-affective strategies like studying grammar with a friend or relative rather than being passive recipients only.

In relation to students' grammatical competence level, teachers must constantly monitor students' learning and guide them in the learning process, especially during their remote learning set-up. They must also make sure that students are given enough time to master the grammar concepts and provide extra activities or drills that will require the students to not only apply the grammar rules that they have memorized but also in different forms of questions like error analysis.

B. For students

Students must continue to learn and master the grammar rules to improve their grammatical competence level by engaging in a serious and in-depth study of each rule, both in theoretical and technical applications. They must practice applying the grammar rules not only in mere recall type of questions but also in other forms like the error analysis type. They must exert extra effort to find and utilize opportunities in which they

can apply the grammar rules in different situations, like conversing with others, reading books, answering drills, etc. Extra efforts on their end must be made through serious mastery of the grammar rules to continuously improve their grammatical competence level.

Students must also adopt the grammar learning strategies which they find more appropriate and beneficial for them. Although the cognitive GLS is found to be significant to their grammatical competence level, they must explore more on the other categories like the metacognitive strategies by which they must know more about how to control their own learning by actively evaluating and organizing what they have learned like relating them to the contexts and circumstances in which they were utilized. Additionally, socio-affective techniques can be recommended, such as engaging in peer interaction and consulting friends about any language issues they may be having.

C. For curriculum designers

Curriculum designers must acknowledge the use of these strategies and must check the curriculum to somehow ensure that students and teachers can use successful learning strategies by integrating strategy-based grammar education. As such, improvement in their application of grammar learning techniques can be anticipated, leading to the eventual acquisition of grammatical competence.

Curriculum designers must also revisit the curriculum intended for these future English teachers and evaluate whether students were given enough opportunities to learn the grammar rules in their four-years journey in college. They must consider that grammar-learning-related subjects are given emphasis. Strengthening the curriculum on grammar might be needed to make sure that future English teacher will be equipped with the expected competencies.

D. For future researchers

Future researchers must conduct further studies to determine other factors which were beyond the scope of the present research such as gender, language learning goals, testing methods, teacher factor, and new computer-assisted language learning technologies. Furthermore, to properly investigate this topic and the nature of the interaction between grammar learning methodologies and other variables, more research is required.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following were formulated:

The present study revealed that the pre-service teachers highly employed cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-affective strategies in grammar learning. Although the three mentioned categories were highly used, it can be said that the cognitive grammar learning strategy category ranked as the most highly used GLS category among the three, followed by meta-cognitive, and lastly, socio-affective. Despite the high usage of the GLS, the students were found to have a fair level of grammar competence, which

implies that with cognitive GLS being highly used among the three categories, students were also found to be exploring and utilizing the other categories, especially the metacognitive ones, which Anderson (2017) supported to have strongly influenced the mastery of grammar among students. The respondents also have a fair level of grammar competence, which indicates that some grammar rules were not highly mastered in all grammar areas; Subject- Verb Agreement, Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement, Parts of Speech, and Adjective-Adverb Agreement. The common concerns with regards to students' mastery of grammar are more on their need to be engaged more in grammar application, which will not only require them to apply the rules at a word level but also at a sentence level mastery. A need to master the error analysis type of grammar questions is also seen among these respondents to make sure that they will meet the competencies expected of them as future teachers. Looking at how even the basic grammar areas of parts of speech have been fairly mastered, calls for a serious strengthening of the grammar competencies among these future teachers must be noted.

In addition, it's also concluded as well that there is a highly significant relationship between students' overall use of grammar learning strategies and grammatical competence levels, but it's a weak correlation. Such that, when the usage of GLS goes up, the competence level is also expected to increase, but the relationship is not strong or more likely unreliable. With this, exploring the other categories of the GLS, which were seen to be less highly used among the respondents, can be explored in the next studies as well as considering the other factors.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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