

The Impact of Task Presentations on Chinese EFL Learner's Writing Performance—From a Perspective of Practical Paperwork*

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Abstract—This study is devoted to the writing performance of Chinese EFL learners in EPPW (English Practical Paperwork Writing) course within the framework of task-based language teaching, focusing on the investigation of the influence of modes of task presentation upon the textual metafunction in the aspect of coherence, cohesion and accuracy. Three common modes of task presentation were then chosen as subject: a traditional approach- in full Chinese version and a context- situation approach in Chinese or English respectively. Three homogenous groups of college students from our college who were taking their EPPW course participated in the study and task presentation was achieved by 3 aforesaid modes respectively for 3 tasks of various genres, which stood for high, medium and low level of complexity respectively. Contrastive textual analysis and survey revealed that the context- situation approach of task presentation was more effective in the teaching of EPPW compared to FC in enhancing the writing behavior for modest Chinese learners; furthermore, the results also showed that ES outperformed CS in mean scores and implementation of high complexity task.

Index Terms—modes of task presentation, writing performance, Chinese EFL writing

I. INTRODUCTION

As an indispensable and most difficult part of language acquisition, writing has been long and widely acknowledged as an “intricate” and complex task as well as the “most difficult of the language abilities to acquire” (Allen & Corder, 1974, p. 177). But as one of the primary skills of communication, writing has always held a very important place in language acquisition. However, the present situation of writing teaching and learning is not satisfying even in the first language and worse in foreign or second language. In addition, the effect of writing teaching is widely acknowledged as being inefficient and time-consuming. As a universal language, the importance of English writing has been intensified by the economic globalization and internet revolution (Warschauer, 2000). But the effect of worldwide English writing teaching turns out to be frustrating, of which China is one of the most severe disaster areas according to previous statistics of international and national language test analysis, such as IELTS, TOFEL, CET band 4 and 6 (Xiping Li, 2013).

Consequently, many researchers have been conducted to reveal the reason for low-efficiency in writing teaching based on distinct theoretical frameworks and learning effects in different aspects, of which the exploring of more effective ways and methods in the teaching of language writing is a heated focus. Previous studies showed that the implementation of scientific classroom-teaching design is crucial in motivating and developing the writing skills of EFL learners and hence enhancing the quality and efficiency of teaching practice (Melor Md Yunus et al, 2012). Moreover, task presentation is a must teaching procedure of task-based approach within a communicative framework, which is very popular in the teaching of EFL writing in China. This approach requires the learners to fulfill a meaning-focused task rather than to concentrate on language features during performance. Moreover, task presentation serves as the introduction of the teaching content; nonetheless, its significance is mostly ignored or underestimated in most EFL researchers because it was widely regarded as an unimportant interfering factor on learner's writing behavior. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate whether different modes of task presentation have correlation to writing performance on the level of composition in a Chinese EFL context.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Task-based Approach

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 223), task-based approach must base on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching. It is gradually widely recognized and accepted among applied

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linguistics researchers and teachers since 1980s and “holds a central place in current second language acquisition (SLA) research and language pedagogy” (Ellis, 2003). The soul of this approach lies in the belief that “language is primarily a means of making meaning”- meaning is crucial in language use, and language acquisition can only achieved through language practice. What’s more, it also holds “lexical units are central in language use and language learning”, and “conversation” is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition (Sarani, 2012). Therefore, it promotes that the learners should fulfill task activities for a communicative purpose by using the target language in order to achieve an outcome (Willis, 1996) while teachers must guarantee that the teaching task is effectively arranged, implemented and assessed grounded upon the systematic components including goals, input, setting, activities, roles and feedback (Ali Panahi, 2012).

B. Procedures of Task-based Approach

In order to make full use of task-based approach, the teachers must be well aware of its procedures and instructions before the design of the task-based lesson in EFL writing teaching. It involves the consideration of both of the classroom teaching stages and procedures. The former consists the teaching phases while the latter regards how to perform the task (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). Although there are lots of procedures and stages devised so far in different aspects, the typical task-based teaching process consists of three principle phases: pre-task, during task, and post-task (Ellis, 2003).

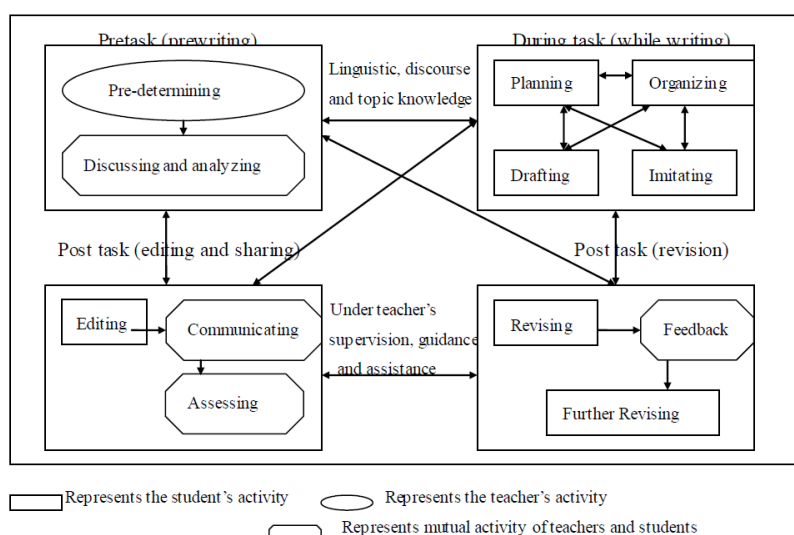


Figure 1. Teaching Procedures of Various Stages of Task-based Approach (Xiping Li, 2013)

In the pre-task/ prewriting phase, the overall purpose is to help to cultivate the learner's interest and get good preparation for the next phase. It usually has two main functions -the presentation of topic-related information and task, which would arouse the learners' task-related interest on the chosen topic and activate topic-related language knowledge in the aspect of words, phrases and target sentences. A third, optional function is to help students communicate as smoothly as possible during the task cycle (Sarani, 2012). Respectively, there are two main teaching activities in this stage- predetermining the task environment as well as analyzing and discussing (see figure 1). First the communicative task and its environment (including communicative purpose, target readers and interpersonal relationship) is pre-determined. Consequently, the discussion and analysis of the communicative tasks and its environment (including role of author, form of text, topic of the task) as well as characteristics (such as field, model and tenor) of the model genre is implemented to help learner fulfill the following activities (Richard Badger and Goodith White, 2000): summing up the writing structure and language characteristic of a certain genre→determining the situation of the target task →establishing the writing purpose of such target task → considering the language region of the article (ibid)). Therefore, pretask phase lays a foundation of specific composition and task presentation is just a prologue or starting point.

In the “during task/ while writing” phase, the learner's utmost task is to accomplish the independent construction of the first drafting of the target discourse under the teacher's supervision, guidance and assistance. It usually involves the following steps (see figure 1): planning or generating the outline of the target discourse→ collecting and organizing relevant information→imitating writing after provided model→composing the first draft ((ibid)).

The post-task phase includes two writing process: revision, edition and sharing. The author's main task is to further revise and resubmit their target discourse by experiencing a series activities (see figure 1): self revision →self or peers feedback →further revision and editing→ trial communication→ overall assessments on the writing performance (ibid).

C. Task-related Factors

In recent years, L2 writing tasks have aroused attention in SLA research as they can potentially create the

circumstances for learners to restructure their interlanguage until they reach target-like level. So L2 writing tasks can be manipulated for researchers to observe students' development and to test different theoretical constructs in various L2 writing contexts. What's more, the task is also a crucial factor causing cognitive load in complex learning (Kirschner, 2002), thereby affecting learners' performance (Cai Yanling, 2009).

The task-related factors such as task types (Cumming, et al., 2005), task structure (Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005) and prompts or prompt designing (Polio & Glew, 1996; Reid & Kroll, 1995) have studied mainly in the writing testing or assessing environment. Recently, L2 writing task studies begin to be carried out in terms of the information processing. For example, Ellis and Yuan (2004) explored the effects of L2 writing task in different planning (pre-task planning, unpressured on-line planning, and no planning) conditions. Kuiken and Vedder (2007, 2008) investigated task complexity and linguistic performance in L2 writing. Hamid Reza Haghverdi (2013) explored the impact of task-planning and gender on the accuracy of narrations composed by Iranian EFL learners.

As for task presentation mode, Cai Yanling (2009) has investigated the effects of text and pictorial task presentation mode on EFL writing by students of different English levels and drew the conclusion that the presentation mode made a significant difference when interacting with English proficiency level. For the subjects with higher level, text task promoted their L2 writing significantly than pictorial task. Whereas for the subjects with lower level, though it was not significant, pictorial task worked better because it helped them in translating ideas into written words.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A. *The Present Situation of EFL Writing in China*

Writing has long remained to be one of the poorest language abilities among Chinese learners according to previous statistics of international and national language test analysis, such as IELTS, TOFEL, CET (a standard test as the nation-wide College English Test in China) band 4 and 6. Zou Shen (1998) and Sun Suping (2004) investigated the writing performances in exam of CET-4 and stated ever since 1987 the average scores of writing throughout the country has remained quite low, about half of the full score 15, with 5.8 in the exam in June, 1991, 5.88 in January, 1994, and 7.52 in June, 1997. A large number of students are tired of English writing and are scared of it; many teachers regard writing teaching as a hard work and are reluctant to do it.

Many scholars and researchers have carried out different studies to find out the reasons for this unsatisfactory condition of writing. Li Changzhong (2001) and Shu Xiaoyu (2000) made a sample analysis of students' writing performance on CET-4 and found the overall effect of these compositions was incoherence, while learners' writing proficiency was closely related to their textual coherence.

B. *The Present Situation in Task Presentation in China*

Since Chinese teaching system is examination-oriented. The test form of writing section of CET has greatly influenced the mode of task presentation in teaching practice in EFL writing because it is regarded as one of the most authoritative and extensive examinations in China. Nearly all the writing task in CET band 4 and 6 are presented in Chinese situation (with exception in November 2012 in CET-4, it is a chart description) - a given entitled topic, an outline of the body with three topic sentences. E.g., the topic for the composition in June 2012 CET-4 is "Online Shopping"; three topic sentences are: 1) Online shopping is popular now. 2) There are many advantages and problems of online shopping. 3) My suggestions. Many teachers follow suit in teaching practice- to provide an outline information or situation in Chinese in task presentation in teaching practice.

However, compared to literature and academic writing, the present situation in task presentation in the teaching of EPPW in China is much different because many genres have its own fixed format and patterns (e.g. report, memo, etc.), some even have fixed expressions (contract, certificate, etc.). Therefore, they are less space left to the author to compose freely. Therefore, in teaching practice most such tasks are designed as writing on specific situation (by either pictures or charts or text). Investigation shows that there are three modes of task presentation used in the teaching practice now: one is in full Chinese text version (hereinafter referred as FC, see sample 1) -that is to present a detailed Chinese version of a specific genre, all the students need to do is to convert or translate the information provided; another is in Chinese context-situation (hereinafter referred as CS, see sample 2)- providing an Chinese situation or information of the target assignment in outline and requirements, and the students must generate and organize their own thought to convey the main points provided in order to meet the needs; the third one is in English context-situation (hereinafter referred as ES, see sample 3)- providing an situation or information of the target assignment in English other than Chinese compared to CS. Little attention was paid to the effect of modes of task presentation on writing performance due to the complexity and diversity of teaching content, approach, facilities and level of teachers and learners.

C. *The Research Questions*

Based on all the above, this study intends to focus on the effectiveness of the modes of task presentation on the level of composition. The following questions were then proposed:

- Does the mode of task presentation influence the writing performance?
- If so, which one is more effective?

- From the teacher's point of view, what other aspect of task presentation can be improved to enhance writing performance?

IV. METHOD

A. Participants

This study employs a combination of survey and discourse evaluation to measure the modes of task presentation on the effectiveness of writing performance for Chinese EFL learner's. The sample for the study consist 110 college sophomore, 7 (6.4%) males and 103 (93.6%) females, majoring in Business English in Hunan International Business Vocational College. The age of the participants ranges from 19 to 21 with an average age of 20.3. All of them have acquired at least grade A and above in PRETCO (Practical English Test for Colleges in China), so they can be categorized into competent or modest English learners in Chinese college students at the same level. They are assigned to 3 classes randomly: there are 39 students in class FC with 37 females and 2 males; 36 students in class CS with 33 females and 3 males; 35 students in class ES with 33 females and 2 males. The same series of teaching materials are used in all of these classes. Moreover, to avoid variation in teachers, the same teacher (the author) is in charge of the instruction of writing for the three classes alternatively.

B. Research Design

The research consists of two parts: discourse observation and questionnaire. Three genres of paperwork in various level of complexity are chosen in the research: a notice of sales promotion- representative of high level of complexity, letter of introduction- representative of low level of complexity, and memo- representative of medium level of complexity. The afore-cited three modes of task presentation are utilized: in FC (see sample 1) - providing a Chinese version of the target assignment; in CS (see sample 2) - providing a Chinese situation and in ES (see sample 3) - providing an English situation. Each mode is implemented in different class in order to collect comparative data. All the composition are required to be finished in limited time from 45 minutes to 30 minutes in class and hand in when time is over without hesitation in order to check the real state of level-very similar to a composition test. After class, the discourses are evaluated using an analytic scoring scale developed by the author. Simultaneously a questionnaire on the effectiveness of the above-mentioned modes is carrying out.

SAMPLE 1 TASK PRESENTATION IN FC OF NOTICE

<p style="text-align: center;">开业酬宾启事</p> <p>主营家用电器的ABC连锁超市定于明日(11月8日)开业, 开业头三天所有商品一律八折, 免费为所有顾客办理会员卡, 前300名顾客送100元现金券, 零消费可参加10万金砖抽奖。购买冰箱、洗衣机、空调、彩电、厨卫指定型号满1000元返150元起。购家电套餐可立减500-3000元, 满6666即送32寸液晶(mplife,2013)。大型货物市内免费送货上门。</p> <p>欢迎广大新老客户光临惠顾!</p> <p>超市地址: XX市XX区XX路26号</p> <p>联系电话: 6665533</p> <p style="text-align: right;">ABC连锁超市有限公司 11月7日</p>

SAMPLE 2 TASK PRESENTATION IN CS OF NOTICE

<p>请按下列提示, 写一则启事。</p> <p>主营家用电器的ABC连锁超市定于明日(11月8日)开业。为答谢各界的厚爱, 特在开业头三天推出以下酬宾活动: 所有商品一律八折, 免费为所有顾客办理会员卡, 来就送100元现金券(前300名), 零消费抽10万金砖大奖; 购买冰箱、洗衣机、空调、彩电、厨卫指定型号满1000元返150元起; 购家电套餐, 可立减500-3000元, 满6666即送32寸液晶(ibid); 大型货物市内免费送货上门。</p> <p>超市地址: XX市XX区XX路26号</p> <p>联系电话: 6665533</p> <p>要求: 1. 要写成意思连贯的不少于150字的启事。 2. 用自己熟悉的句子将要点表达清楚即可, 不可逐词翻译。</p>
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Sample 3 Task presentation in context-situation in English of notice

SAMPLE 3 TASK PRESENTATION IN ES OF NOTICE

Name of the chain store: xxx Branch Store of ABC chain store Co., Ltd.

Reason for special offer: New opening of a chain store

Special Offer: 20% reduction for all goods; free membership card; 100 yuan cash vouchers (first 300 customers), lucky draw program of 100,000 BRIC Award for zero consumption; refund by 150 yuan over 1,000 yuan in specific model of refrigerators, washing machines, air conditioning, color TV, kitchen; refund up by 500-3000 yuan in appliance package, free 32-inch LCD for total price over 6,666 yuan; free delivery to door of large items within urban area.

Activity Time: at first three days, from Nov. 8- Nov. 10

Address: 26, xxx Road, xxx district, xxx city.

Telephone: 6665533

C. Procedures

The experiment was carried out in the normal classroom teaching in the 4th semester of Business English majors. The subjects had the same course book and followed the same syllabus. The experiment took up 18 class hours. That is, according to the arrangement of 4 hours of writing classes a week, the experiment lasted 4.5 weeks. Before the experiment, the subjects' scores of the writing section of CET-4 were analyzed through SPSS 16.0 and no distinctive difference was found among those three classes.

In experiment, the author gave instructions to the three classes in line with the procedures stipulated in literature review (see figure 1) almost the same way except various modes of task presentation and instructions on how to deal with it in different class. After discussing and analyzing the target task and feature of a specific genre, the students were required to compose the text in 30-45 minutes in class. The post task teaching activities were implemented as usual, and the final revised version of each task and its assessment was not in consideration of the experiment but served as a reference of the subjects' behavior grade of this course. Therefore, what I analyzed in this study is the draft of each task, not the final version.

D. Data Collection and Analysis

The students' compositions were assessed by using a writing scale that was designed by the researcher based on a text analysis of the participants' writing samples in class. The rating involves four equally weighted subscales: 1) task achievement (content relevance), 2) coherence and cohesion, 3) grammar and spelling, and 4) language (appropriate use of vocabulary) (see Appendix 1) - it is the modified version of criteria of CET-4. After the participants completed 3 pieces of paperwork writing in their portfolio collection, a *t* test was used to compare the participants' scores in three groups of each genre to see if there was any significant difference among the three sets of scores (Chou, Mu-hsuan, 2012).

In order to further the research, after experiment, I provided all three modes of the task presentation at the same time in teaching practice of three other genres such as "report, agenda and minutes" and ask the subject to choose one of them. Then a questionnaire focusing on the effectiveness of mode was given out in Chinese to the participants. The questions were the following: 1) which mode do you prefer in practice, why? 2) What do you think it is the most difficult thing you encounter in composition in previous experiment: ① to convey ideas concisely, ② to organize the text well or ③ to deal with language points? 3) Do you think the given time for each task in class in previous experiment is ① enough, ② nearly enough or ③ not enough? The responses were collected, classified into similar categories, and then analyzed.

V. MAIN FINDINGS

A. The Questionnaire

110 questionnaires were distributed and 90 were received. The statistics to question 1 reveals 56% subjects prefer ES, 18% prefer CS and 26% prefer FC; Main reason for their choice of ES is as follows: it can greatly reduce the language difficulties; it provides an authentic environment in English; it leaves larger space for the author to convey his or her ideas. The statistics to question 2 and 3 shows different modes bring different result (see table 1). So it can be drawn that the task presented in English situation can reduce both the difficulty of the writing and the student's anxiety, hence it help the students develop confidence and a greater willingness to write. Therefore, ES is more beneficial than the other two in teaching practice.

TABLE 1
RESULT OF QUESTIONNAIRE

	Question 2(%)			Question 3(%)		
	①	②	③	①	②	③
C(FC)	58	10	42	27	36	37
C(CS)	47	13	40	31	35	34
C(ES)	27	35	38	48	24	24

B. Discourse Observation

TABLE 2
STATISTICAL DESCRIPTION AND T-TEST RESULT OF THE THREE CLASSES IN THREE GENRES

Complexity (level)	Genre	Class type	Number	Mean/SD	Compared Class types	DF	T values/ p values
High	notice	FC	39	56.69/11.476	FC V.S. ES	72	-3.842 / 0.000
		ES	35	68.17/14.195	FC V.S. CS	73	-0.945 / 0.348
		CS	36	59.25/11.960	ES V.S. CS	69	2.867/0.005
Low	letter	FC	39	70.69/8.733	FC V.S. ES	72	-4.285/0.000
		ES	35	79.54/9.024	FC V.S. CS	73	-2.887/0.005
		CS	36	76.17/7.588	ES V.S. CS	69	1.708/0.092
Medium	memo	FC	39	68.08/9.535	FC V.S. ES	72	-4.361/0.000
		ES	35	77.66/9.321	FC V.S. CS	73	-2.664/0.009
		CS	36	73.72/8.753	ES V.S. CS	69	1.834/0.071

The data is analyzed through SPSS 16.0 and the statistical description and T-test result of the three classes in three genres states in Table 2. We visibly notice that there is distinctive difference between the writing performances of group FC and ES in all three pairs of samples; there is also distinctive difference between group FC and ES in LETTER and MEMO; distinctive difference between group ES and CS is only found in NOTICE. Although it can be concluded that the difference between the mean of group ES and CS in LETTER and MEMO as well as the mean of group FC and CS in NOTICE is not significant, integrating the mean in all three pairs of samples and results of questionnaires, it can be observed that ES and CS (context-situation mode) is more effective in writing performance and ES outperforms CS.

This analysis of the result shows: context-situation mode is better in enhancing the overall level of composition than full Chinese version, and ES is more beneficial than CS in writing performance. Given the fact that many researches show the utmost shortcoming of Chinese EFL learners' writing inefficiency lies in textual level other than sentence level and grammatical level. It can be recommended in teaching practice of EFL writing, task presentation in English situation is the first choice in arousing the learner's confidence and learning interest, and task presentation in Chinese situation is the second, full Chinese version is the last one.

VI. CONCLUSION

The acquisition of writing proficiency is often perceived as one of the most challenging and difficult skills in EFL contexts. Many prevailing circumstance and different opinions on the solution to low-efficiency of writing teaching attract further investigation and debate of its practical effectiveness. All the general overview of this research is presented in this part.

A. Summary of the Research

This research aims to investigate the effectiveness of three common modes of task presentation based on the framework of task-based language teaching on writing performance in the teaching practice of EPPW in a Chinese context. Contrastive analysis of qualitative and quantitative data reveals the following facts: the mode of task presentation has correlation to writing performance; among the subject 3 modes, ES has the most positive effect on the writing performance. Nevertheless, up to now, nearly all the task presented in textbook or large-scale exam of EFL writing in China is either in FC or SC, so the present study may help us reconsider the necessity of shifting our usual modes of task presentation in teaching practice and exam to ES in order to enhance the students' writing competence.

B. Limitation of the Research

This research tries to investigate the effectiveness of the task presentations on the writing performance of Chinese EFL learners in EPPW. The reliability of the findings of this research is limited for the following reasons: Firstly, the experimental content is in narrow range- only taking the practical paperwork into account other than other types of texts such as academic one. Secondly, the subjects of this experiment lack variety, they all come from the same major and college. Thirdly, numerous factors can affect the teaching effect. Fourthly, this research narrows the total scores of the composition as index, which cannot be equal to writing performance or competence. Therefore, further investigation should base on larger variety of subjects and genres, more detailed analyses of correlation of various factors. Moreover, the cognitive or psychological effect of task presentation can be taken into account as well.

APPENDIX 1. ANALYTIC SCORING SCALE

Task achievement (content)	
20~25	All contents points elaborated without irrelevant or missing information; meet text type requirement.
14~19	Most contents points elaborated; some important information was missing or irrelevant to the content; some inconsistencies in text type requirement.
8~13	Some contents points elaborated; a lot of information was missing or irrelevant, which resulted in insufficient word length (less than half of the word length); many inconsistencies in text type requirement.
2~7	Major information was irrelevant to the task, or insufficient word length (less than one third of the word length).
0~1	The text was neither informative nor relevant.
Coherence and cohesion	
20~25	Transitions were used appropriately; ideas were well-connected; communication was effective.
14~19	A few transitions were used inappropriately, but the ideas were understandable.
8~13	Limited transitions; ideas were not well-connected and subject to misunderstanding.
2~7	Incorrect transitions which led to misunderstanding.
0~1	No coherence at all; sentences were fragmented; or transition was absent.
Grammar and Spelling	
20~25	Wide range of structure; almost no grammatical mistake.
14~19	Good range of structure; minor grammatical inaccuracy that hindered the understanding at lexical level.
8~13	Limited range of structure; Major grammatical inaccuracy that hindered the understanding at syntactic and semantic levels.
2~7	No range of structure; Frequent grammatical mistakes including major and minor inaccuracies.
0~1	Almost all grammatical patterns were inaccurate or no assessable language.
Language	
20~25	Wide range of vocabulary appropriate to its meaning and purpose; no signs of plagiarism.
14~19	Minor inadequacies of vocabulary appropriateness; no signs of plagiarism.
8~13	Moderate inadequacies of vocabulary appropriateness; or minor plagiarism.
2~7	Major inadequacies of vocabulary appropriateness; or excessive plagiarism.
0~1	Almost scatter vocabulary; no assessable language.

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