

FAMILY LIFE, SOCIAL REALITY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS' NEEDS

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Abstract

This paper reports on eight case studies that look at the relationship between the home lives of adult migrant students and their families and their English language learning in New Zealand. The study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the student participants, from China, Korea and Japan, were studying English at an upper-intermediate level in a tertiary institution in Auckland, New Zealand. The second stage was conducted a year after their completion of the course. The research seeks to bridge the gap between the two worlds of language learner: the personal and the classroom. The paper discusses motivational factors and reviews some of the literature in this area. Other factors arising include first language maintenance, social identity and power, opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom and attitudes of family members. Three significant findings have emerged: a motivation internal to family relationships; the strength of feelings about power and social identity; and the role of English classes in limiting outside language opportunities. The implications of these findings and possible responses by English as an additional language (EAL) programme designers and practitioners are also discussed.

Introduction

Despite teaching English to adult immigrants for many years, I am reminded regularly of the hardships EAL students endure in their attempts to make a better life in a new country. Students' anecdotal evidence and diaries frequently indicate that while they are still learning English, their dreams for a better life are a long way from being fulfilled. Often the whole family undergoes a high degree of stress. The investment of these families in their future is immense and students must be highly motivated to complete their courses successfully. To inform an analysis of students' needs, curriculum planners and teachers need to understand what motivates these students and the factors affecting their ability to study under different cultural conditions.

Statistics from the New Zealand Immigration Service (2002) show that in recent years the number of immigrants from Asian countries has increased significantly. The total Asian population is projected to rise from five percent of the total population in 1996 to nine percent in 2016 (Statistics New Zealand, 2002). Many of these immigrants come to New Zealand under the General Skills immigration category and have valuable skills and considerable experience. However, they are a highly mobile population and frequently move on to other countries or return to their homeland because they find it difficult to become part of their new society and fail to find satisfying work (Ho and Leung, 2000; Collins, 2001). The New Zealand Immigration Service considers that "English is a key to successful settlement" (1995, p.10) and White, Watts and Trlin's (2001) comprehensive

study into the expectations and experiences of immigrants found that English language competence was perceived as being of primary importance in settlement.

This paper reports on a two-stage study of eight adult English language students from China, Korea and Japan, and their families. Firstly, the paper discusses some of the research into motivational factors affecting language learning. The study is described and the results are used to explore, in some detail, issues related to motivation. Other issues discussed are the role of first language maintenance in the participants' lives, the sense of identity and power, opportunities to communicate in English outside the classroom, and the attitude of family members towards the student's language learning. Finally the paper discusses the implications of these issues for planners and teachers.

Motivation

Successful language learning can only take place if the learner has goals, and an inner drive to achieve these goals (Crookes and Schmidt, 1991). As a major factor in language learning, motivation has been well researched, (e.g., Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985; Skehan, 1989; Brown, 1994; McGroarty, 1996; Tudor, 1996; Dornyei & Clement, 2001). The edited volume by Dornyei and Schmidt (2001) is representative of the current state of thought in the area.

Research has focused to a large extent on the two models postulated by Gardner and Lambert (1972): instrumental and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation refers to the need to acquire a language as a means for attaining goals such as career advancement or successful further study. Integrative motivation refers to the desire to learn a language in order to become closer to the culture and society of the target language group (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Horwitz and Young's (1990) study found that instrumental motivation was more predictive than integrative motivation for language learning success in the Philippines where people wanted English for career advancement. However, integrative motivation was a better predictor of success for English-speaking Canadians who were learning French to become closer to the French speaking Canadian population (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992).

Graham (1984) makes the further distinction between integrative and assimilative motivation. He maintains that assimilative motivation "is the drive to become an indistinguishable member of a speech community" (cited in Brown, 1994, p.155). This requires many years of contact with the target language culture.

Yet another dimension of the motivation construct is the degree to which learners are extrinsically or intrinsically motivated. Deci (1975) describes extrinsically motivated behaviour, as operating in the anticipation of an outside reward (in a similar way to the instrumental model), while intrinsic motivation stems from the satisfaction of the activity itself, that is, there are no obvious rewards. Noels (2001, p.45) states "intrinsic orientations refer to reasons for L2 learning that are derived from one's inherent pleasure and interest in the activity". According to Brown (1994), research on motivation strongly favours intrinsic orientations especially for long-term retention. This is supported by Noels (2001, p.50) who suggests "people who have an intrinsic or self-determined orientation are likely to feel positively about the activity and put in more effort over a longer period of time". This extrinsic/intrinsic dimension does not exactly match the postulated instrumental/integrative dimension. Each model focuses on a particular aspect of motivation. Later work creates even more complicated models that cross these dimensions.

McGroarty (1996, p.8) refers to a study by Gardner (1985), who suggests that motivation may be an indirect rather than direct influence on achievement and operates in combination with other factors to affect language learning. Clearly motivation for second language learning is a "complex of constructs" (Noels, 2001, p.44).

In recent years a number of different frameworks have been proposed, to describe this complexity. Current thinking seems to be summed up in Dornyei and Clement (2001) who suggest a synthesis of the constituents of these different constructs into seven dimensions.

Affective/integrative dimension, referring to a general affective "core" of the L2 motivation complex related to attitudes, beliefs and values associated with the process, the target and the outcome of learning, including variables such as "interactiveness," "affective motive," "language attitudes," "intrinsic motivation," "attitudes toward L2 learning," "enjoyment" and "interest;"

Instrumental/pragmatic dimension, referring to extrinsic, largely utilitarian factors such as financial benefits;

Macro-context-related dimension, referring to broad, societal and sociocultural factors such as multicultural, intergroup and ethnolinguistic relations;

Self-concept-related dimension, referring to learner-specific variables such as self-confidence, self-esteem, anxiety and need for achievement;

Goal-related dimension, involving various goal characteristics;

immediate learning environment (i.e., classroom) and the school context; and

Significant others-related dimension, referring to the motivational influence of parents, family, and friends.

Dornyei and Clement (2001, p.400)

Motivation is recognized as an important factor in the language learning process, and different kinds of motivations are important to language learning success, depending on the circumstances. Programme planners need to discover what major motivating factors drive their students, and to utilise this knowledge in programme design.

The case study

This case study of eight adult students and their families was carried out in two stages. Data for the first stage was gathered in 2001, using questionnaires and audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes with the students, and in some cases, family members. Topics raised related to the practical problems of studying, the benefits of study, support from the family, confidence and a sense of social identity, motivation for learning and future aspirations. Stage Two took place a year after the students had completed their English language course and comprised a recorded, semi-structured interview with five of the original participating students. This follow-up interview drew information about the participant's current situation and asked them to reflect on their English language learning experience.

At the time of the first stage, the students were studying for a Diploma in English which caters for international and immigrant learners at a post-intermediate level of English language proficiency. The minimum entrance requirement for this programme is a score of Band 5.0 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or 525 in the

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). At the time of data gathering, there were 130 students in the programme of whom 70 percent were immigrants. The others were international students. Students were informed of the project and immigrant students were invited to volunteer for the study.

Participants

In the first stage of the study thirteen people representing eight families answered the questionnaires and were interviewed. The New Zealand wife of the Korean student completed a questionnaire but was not interviewed.

Table 1: Details of participants

Ethnicity and gender of student surveyed and interviewed	Age group	Previous occupation	Length of time in NZ	Family members also surveyed and/or interviewed
Chinese (M)	40 - 49	Engineering Professor	3 years	Wife
Chinese (F)	40 - 49	Electronics Engineer	5 years	
Chinese (F)	30 - 39	Doctor	3yrs 10mths	Husband
Korean (F)	50 - 59	Lecturer communications	1yr 9mths	Son
Korean (F)	30 - 39	Florist	5yrs 6mths	Husband
Korean (F)	30 - 39	Teacher English Lit.	6 yrs	
Korean (M)	30 - 39	Writer & Film director	5yrs 6mths	Wife (N.Z.)
Japanese (F)	30 - 39	Sports Administrator	3 years	Husband (N.Z.)

Seven of the eight students interviewed had successfully completed university studies in their country of origin. Five held bachelor degrees, one was a medical doctor and one was a professor of engineering holding a PhD. With one exception, all partners of the students and the one son interviewed, held degrees. Clearly, the participants were accustomed to working for academic goals.

Prior to emigration, all participants had been working in their chosen profession. Although these students were not recent arrivals, at the time of interview, none had been working in their professional field in New Zealand. In a story typical of many EAL immigrants, a husband of one student, unable to find work in New Zealand, had returned to China to work in order to support his family who remained in New Zealand.

The participants gave similar reasons for immigrating. They came to New Zealand to improve the quality of their lives in a healthier environment, they wanted a challenge, and they wanted a better education system for their children. They had heard from friends and contacts that "New Zealand was a so good country to live and grow children" (female Korean student).

All of the students had studied English for varying periods of time in their home countries. However, despite the considerable time each family had lived in New Zealand, only two of the students had previously attended formal English language classes in this

country. When asked about this, most students said that they had been too busy with their families and trying to adjust to their new lives.

Results and discussion

Motivational factors

Instrumental motivation and goal-related motivation (Gardner and Lambert, 1972 and dimensions two and five in Dornyei and Clement's 2001 model above), played a large part in the language learning attitudes of these students. All of the student participants talked of their career goals and said they recognised the need to improve their English if they want to pursue them.

One student wanted to become a translator of Korean books for the New Zealand market and needed a high IELTS score to enter the translation course. Another wanted to help her husband with his furniture making business and to become an interior designer. The Korean film director wanted to write and direct movies in New Zealand.

The professor who came to New Zealand as a university research fellow, wanted to continue his academic career. In his job at Auckland University he had had unlimited opportunities to speak English in social and professional contexts. However, although he could read and write English, he had seldom spoken it before coming to New Zealand so when he ventured into the staff room he was not confident enough to speak with anyone and would take his tea back to his office. He had to rely on his colleagues to present his own research. When his fellowship expired, he was not employed because of his lack of English language skills, although he was told that there was a lot of work for him to do if he had better English.

Some students recognized that they would not be able to resume their previous careers and were studying English in order to access courses leading to New Zealand qualifications. A doctor from China was willing to work as a nurse aide in the short term and eventually to train as an occupational therapist. Another student was a qualified electrical engineer but said that she would like to study for a New Zealand qualification in business or accounting with the goal of eventually setting up a business. An older Korean woman who had taught communications in Korea, wanted to improve her English so that she could work as a volunteer. The Japanese woman married to a New Zealand architect initially came to New Zealand to learn English because as a manager for a women's professional soccer team she was often frustrated when she could not communicate with members of the international teams. She wanted to speak fluently to her husband and to work as a professional in the New Zealand sports world.

Clearly the career goals of these learners were a strong motivating factor. However, the interviews also produced evidence of the affective/integrative dimension (Gardner and Lambert, 1972 and dimension one in Dornyei and Clement's 2001 model). The participants indicated their desire to communicate comfortably with New Zealanders, to make friends within their host society and to understand the culture of New Zealand. These goals were proving elusive and social participation had been largely restricted to the family domain. Research suggests that institutional support in the early stages of settlement is essential to help new settlers move into jobs, and society, otherwise migrants stay in the family domain indefinitely. With the exception of the two students married to New Zealanders, this appeared to be the case with these students. They

perceived this as a language problem. The Chinese professor wanted to “move a big block” in his communication, “to let me open my mouth, expand my range of touching people and feel so intense my confidence.” Throughout his interview he commented on his lack of ability to converse and that “culture, confidence, relationship, friendship with Kiwis – are all related to English.” Six of the students commented that they wanted to become “real” New Zealanders. For example, a Korean student said “I want to live New Zealand forever until I die” and that it was “important to make friends” but her lack of English was a “barrier”.

In this study, however, a further motivation emerged. A motivation *internal to the dynamics of the family* was established as a reason for starting and persisting with English language study. Four of the five couples who each had young, bi-lingual children said that they wanted to learn English, or wanted their partner to learn English, in order to maintain good communication between the generations. It was established from the interviews, that as their children had become more integrated with their New Zealand peers, and their English language proficiency had improved, they had become less willing to converse with anyone in their native language. This perceived language barrier was not only a negative aspect of immigration but also an unexpected one.

These parents were concerned that their children’s growing preference for speaking English was going to hinder communication within the family unless their own English became more proficient.

I have improved my English since I started English classes. I can understand more when my children speak to me in English. It help me, our close relationships. ... I can share my children’s life better...

(Korean student)

The student who said this, and her husband, recognized the need for at least one parent to speak English well enough to keep the lines of communication open with their children. The husband commented that as he was working in his own business, there was no opportunity for him to improve his English in a formal way so improvement in his wife’s English was important for them all. At the time of this first interview their children were taking Korean language maintenance classes. In the stage-two interview the mother said that her husband’s English was sufficient for work but that he could not communicate as well as he would like with his daughters whose Korean has deteriorated. His wife had been forced into acting as an interpreter and it made her “sad”.

A similar motivating factor was apparent in the language goals of the two couples in cross-cultural marriages. The Japanese woman married to the New Zealander said, “the major reason for learning English now is to understand what my husband’s saying – talk fluently to my husband.” In the follow-up interview, when talking about having children in the near future, she said “I don’t want my child to be interpreter ... I want to help with homework and ... be equal.”

In another stage-two interview, the Chinese electronics engineer spoke a lot about her poor English level in relation to communicating with her son. This problem had not emerged in her first interview. A year later, there was a widening gap between herself and her son who had now become a teenager. She said she needed “to catch up with my son. I think too poor English my son doesn’t respect me.” She wanted to be able to talk “good” English to “communicate” with her son, to speak with her son’s teachers, and to “understand” her son’s friends.

These students were motivated in their English language learning by the need to improve and preserve family relationships. This dimension of motivation emerging from the dynamics of family relationships does not appear to be described in the literature. It is distinguishable from Dornyei and Clement's (2001) dimension seven that refers to family members' encouragement of the student, not a motivation arising from family dynamics. This new dimension deserves further research on a wider scale to uncover its characteristics and relationship to successful language learning, and to explore how it may be used in language programmes.

Children and first language maintenance

Despite wanting to learn better English themselves in order to communicate well with their increasingly bilingual children, at the time of the first interviews, all couples with young children were making efforts to maintain and improve their children's first language. The cultural and communicative advantages of first language maintenance is well established (Shameem, 2001) and there is research evidence to indicate that successful first language maintenance programmes are a positive factor in the acquisition of literacy skills in the second language (Cummins, 1996). At the time of the first interviews in this study, three couples were taking their children to first language maintenance classes. They recognised that the longer the child is in New Zealand the harder it is for them to continue developing their mother tongue. Shameem (2001) acknowledges that language displacement as a result of immigration may occur within the first generation as was the case with the young Korean children in this study. In addition to possible communication difficulties within the family, this deterioration of the first language can lead to other problems, as the example of the Chinese professor illustrates. He came to New Zealand in 1996 as a research fellow at Auckland University and was joined by his wife and son in 1997. When his contract expired, in 1999, they all returned to China with the intention of staying there. However, because their son's Mandarin development was behind that of his peers, the son found it impossible to fit back into the Chinese education system and his parents felt compelled to return to New Zealand.

Social identity, power and culture shock

Related to these motivating factors was a desire amongst the students to regain a sense of social identity and control over their lives. This need was articulated strongly by two of the students interviewed. However, a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language-learning context is yet to be developed. Furthermore, according to Pierce (1995), second language acquisition theorists have not questioned how relations of power in the social world affect social interaction between second language learners and target language speakers.

It is probable that the issue of identity and feelings of powerlessness is related to the effects of culture shock in the lives of new immigrants. People who are learning to live in a new culture commonly experience culture shock. Brick (1991, p.9) talks about the "serious erosion of the individual's feelings of self-worth" as the newcomers undergo a "sudden psychological transition from competent adult to ineffective child". Culture shock manifests itself in feelings of loss, loneliness, anger, unhappiness, frustration, anxiety and loss of confidence. Brown (1994) suggests that culture shock is one of four successive stages of acculturation. The first stage of experiencing a new culture is one of

excitement and interest in the new society. The second stage however, is that of culture shock with its associated negative feelings. This gradually gives way to the third stage of slow recovery overshadowed by a sense of cultural displacement. The fourth stage is one of acceptance and adjustment resulting in an appreciation of the new culture and a confidence about maintaining their own culture. In this study, we can see how the learning of two students at different stages of the acculturation process was affected.

The older Korean woman student, who had been a television anchor-woman and later a successful communications consultant in Korea, talked about her loss of social identity and power in terms of culture shock. At the time of the first interview she was feeling depressed, unconfident and frustrated at her lack of ability to communicate well in English. Communication, after all, had been her profession. "After I arrived New Zealand I was shocked by my poor English. I thought my English was at everyday level but it was not. I was depressed by culture shock, emptiness, feeling of losing ... I taught communication in my country but now I have big problem"...

Her son observed, "She lost her self-confidence so she decided to study English, and during her study she lost her self-confidence because even though she studying English she thought she not good enough – a circular thing..."

This student had high expectations of her ability to learn quickly. She initiated the immigration. Her husband was reluctant to move but now he spoke better English and was enjoying his life here more than she did. She saw English as a key to regaining her sense of identity and power but, still deep in the throes of culture shock, she perceived that her learning ability was limited. In her follow-up interview she said that she felt her English was much better and she was enjoying life much more as a consequence.

The Korean film director commented in his first interview on his feelings of loss of power and status when he first arrived in New Zealand. Prior to joining this English language course he had become a casting agent because, in this position, he thought he was able to regain some sense of identity, and power. He said that, "as a foreigner, people usually tell me what to do - but in this job, actors and actresses respect me. People usually do what I tell them. I say go this way and they go ... I get asked to parties." As his English improved he felt that he was gaining more control over his life. He was then prepared to pursue the bigger goal of becoming a writer and director of movies in New Zealand. He said that he considered this goal was more in keeping with his self-image and would ultimately be more satisfying. To achieve this goal he recognized he needed formal English language classes and at the time of his interview he was feeling confident and satisfied with the progress of his language learning. It is also significant that at this same stage he was happily adjusted to life in New Zealand.

The examples of these two students suggest that learners' English language progress may depend on where they are on the acculturation pathway. It also suggests that the pathway itself is affected by their language progress. This circular process needs careful consideration in programme planning and further research is indicated.

Opportunities to use English outside the classroom

One of the problems identified by the research of White, Watts and Trlin (2001), was the limited opportunity students encountered to speak English in the community. This was also seen as a problem by the participants in the current study and was linked directly by the students to the fact that they were attending a full-time class.

Lack of time was acknowledged as the major reason for limiting opportunities to speak English. Several of those interviewed said that they had withdrawn from the very activities and socializing that might help their English. The students talked about this in relation to communicating at work, interacting in the community and using English in their homes.

Prior to this course, several of the students in this study had worked part-time but only one of the students interviewed was still working. Four of the students had been involved in their local community before enrolling in the English language class. However, at the time of interview, they had all withdrawn citing lack of time. For example, one student had withdrawn from her local swimming club, and the engineering professor had stopped attending the professional association of engineers.

Attitudes of family members

Seven of the eight students interviewed felt that they were supported and encouraged by their partners in their English language learning. One Korean student, however, whose husband did not want to take part in the interview, commented that her husband said learning English was "her business" and he did not want to be involved. She felt he "doesn't have a positive attitude" about his life in New Zealand. On the other hand, she made it very clear that she was totally committed to New Zealand and said "I want to live New Zealand forever until I die. I don't want return Korea."

Another student felt that there was some conflict at home with her in-laws who lived with her. For work reasons, her husband lived most of the time in China and although he encouraged her to take classes, his parents, who did not speak English, wanted their daughter-in-law to stay at home with them or take them out.

Overall, however, there is evidence of a feeling of support from the students' families. One partner said that he was very proud of his wife's English learning progress.

I am very proud of my wife because when we came here I had to study and manage all the things of our family because she can't understand and speak English. So now is good. She can do something for our whole family, educating my daughter and a lot of things.

This, of course, had helped his wife's confidence and she said that now she felt "more in the centre" and "it gives me much more power".

Students with younger children felt that after an initial period of adjustment, the children too, were supportive. Two of the mothers thought that their children had become more independent since they had undertaken their studies and one said that "showing the children that Mummy is studying is good for them". This student also commented that her communication with her children had improved since her study began.

Summary

This study explored the relationship between the homelives of eight adult migrant students and their English language learning. It went beyond the perceptions of the students and embraced the viewpoints of other family members. The impact of learners' personal lives on their learning and the impact of the requirements of the language programme on their personal lives has been examined within the contexts of motivational factors, first language maintenance, issues of identity, power and culture

shock, opportunities to use English outside the classroom and the attitudes of family. From this study, three significant findings have emerged.

Firstly, a motivation internal to family relationships was established. Communication in English within the family was recognized as essential for maintaining good relationships with young bi-lingual children and with native-English speaking partners. This conflicted with the desire of some parents for their children to maintain the first language. Nevertheless, it appeared to be a driving force behind much of the learning.

Secondly, the feelings of loss of social identity and power played a significant role in language learning attitudes. These feelings appear strongly linked to the stage the learner is at in the acculturation process. Progress in the learning of these students seemed to depend to a significant extent on these factors.

Thirdly, opportunities to use English outside the classroom were often limited by the time pressures created by the demands of the language programme itself.

Each of these three findings can guide us as planners and teachers to develop our programmes so that we acknowledge the needs and difficulties students experience while learning English. They can encourage us to create activities and opportunities that help build bridges between the classroom and their homes.

Implications for programmes

A research project of eight case studies cannot produce generalisable conclusions, but it can indicate areas that warrant further investigation and it can suggest possible actions.

The description of an additional form of motivation coming from within the dynamics of the family provides us with a new means to encourage the students. As well as ensuring that topics and tasks are relevant to their goals of integration with their host society, it may be effective to draw resources directly from the students' family lives. For instance, teachers could set homework exercises that require students to communicate with their children, for example, asking them to discover teenage vocabulary that they could bring back to the classroom, or to write dialogues for a family occasion involving an English language speaker. Students could ask their children to contribute problems they have encountered at school and school counsellors could be invited into the classroom to answer questions prepared by the students in consultation with their children and partners. According to Tudor (1996, p.85) personalising the learning content of the tasks will increase the intrinsic interest students have in their learning. For those students whose prime aim lies elsewhere, these family motivational contexts may add an extra dimension to their language.

Many immigrants, when they first arrive in New Zealand, are not prepared for the physical and psychological effects of moving from a familiar culture to a totally new culture. Culture shock, is a recognizable syndrome that can curtail normal functioning for varying periods of time. As teachers, we need to alleviate its effects. One way to do this is to inform students that the four stages of acculturation are commonly felt by most newcomers and to set tasks that help the students identify and talk about the stage they are at that moment. Students who have passed through the second stage will be able to talk about their own experiences and give advice and support to others.

Further research is indicated into the effects of the acculturation process on the progress of language learning. For example, is learning from their own mistakes counter-productive to students who are in the second stage of the process? Their errors could be

seen as a further example of failure, thus increasing anxiety and undermining an already fragile confidence. On the other hand, tasks that push students to explore the language and make errors might produce exactly the sort of challenge that would be productive to a student in the third or fourth stage of the pathway.

For all students the empowerment engendered by language is likely to be an effective force. Designing language tasks that have immediate, explicit empowerment outcomes are therefore indicated. An example is to practise a dialogue that might help in a difficult social interaction such as when faced with racial taunts or returning faulty goods.

With the exception of the two students married to English speaking New Zealanders, the participants in this study found that the opportunities to use English outside the classroom were limited. If attending an English language course actually curtails some students from participating in the very community activities that teachers encourage, perhaps teachers have a responsibility to ensure that interaction in the community becomes an integral part of their programmes. For example, homework concessions could be made in favour of attendance at a community event or a classroom session could be replaced by attendance at a local function or meeting. Students would prepare for the event in the classroom and be expected to report back afterwards.

Conclusion

The relationship between the personal lives of students and their public lives as language learners is a symbiotic partnership creating both problems and opportunities. Education providers have a responsibility to recognise and respond to students' needs, minimise their problems and take an active professional role in helping students make use of their opportunities. By understanding more about the impact of language learning on their lives and the impact of their personal lives on their language learning, programme planners should be better able to fulfil this responsibility and help their learners achieve the dreams they and their families came here to find.

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