

Motivation for Learning English among Japanese University Students

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Abstract

A sample of 283 Japanese first year university students enrolled in both compulsory and elective English classes were surveyed in order to obtain answers to the following questions : (1) Why are students learning English ? (2) What is their level of commitment to learning English ? (3) Do they believe that they have the personal resources to learn English ? (4) What are they actually doing to learn English ? And (5) Do students who voluntarily study English differ motivationally from students who are forced to study English ? The results indicate that student motivations tend to be utilitarian and that while students tend to claim high levels of motivation, they typically invest insufficient effort in actual learning behaviors. In addition, students did not differ in any major way depending on whether they were studying electively or non-electively.

Motivation is undoubtedly an important factor in foreign language learning (FLL) success (Gardner, 1985b, and Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, cited in Oxford & Shearin, 1996), and has been extensively investigated (Lai, 2000; Lin & Warden, 1996; McClelland, 1998; Ogane & Sakamoto, 1999; Oxford, 1996; Oxford & Shearin, 1996; Shmidt, Boraie, & Kassabgy, 1996; Teweles, 1996; Warden & Lin, 2000; Yamshiro & McLaughlin, 2001) Some have gone so far as to call it the “primary” factor (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997). “Motivation” can be and has been defined in many ways. Gardner, Tremblay, and Masgoret, for example, define motivation as “the individual’s attitudes, desires, and effort” (1997, p.345). An alternative definition, and one that corresponds more closely with the ordinary language expression, is that motivation is the amount of energy mobilized in the pursuit of goals (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). Motivation in this sense is under voluntary self-control and is the product of incentives (Brehm & Self, 1989; Wright & Brehm, 1989, cited in Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). That is, motivation to accomplish a given goal will depend on how attractive the goal is felt to be and how attainable it is believed to be. Thus, motivation would appear to be importantly related to outcomes, by way of effortful activity.

What had previously been thought of in the Gardner and Lambert tradition as motivation, i. e., reasons for undertaking the activity, has more recently been renamed “orientation”. Whatever the name, it is certainly reasonable to suppose that an individual’s reasons for doing something or seeking a goal will have an impact on what he or she actually does in pursuit of it.

One variable of obvious motivational relevance that has largely been neglected in past research is how “self-concordant” (Sheldon, Elliot, Ryan, Chirkov, Kim, Wu, Demir, & Sun, 2004) the goal is. Asian students who have been studied, in particular, have typically been enrolled in English classes compulsorily. It would not be

surprising if such students differed in their motivations and hence behavior and learning outcomes.

The present exploratory research seeks the answers to the following questions: (1) Why are students learning English? (2) What is their level of commitment to learning English? (3) Do they believe that they have the personal resources to learn English? (4) What are they actually doing to learn English? And (5) Do students who voluntarily study English differ from students who are forced to study English?

METHOD

Overview

Data were obtained via a series of questionnaires, administered on separate occasions to different subsets of the same student sample. A questionnaire was designed to assess students' reasons for learning English, their beliefs about the value of learning English and their capabilities for learning English. Reasons provide incentives, and incentives lead to intentions, which when combined with appropriate efficacy beliefs, should theoretically result in outcomes, in this case, study behavior, rather than actual goal accomplishment. A second shorter questionnaire was administered to a subset of the sample ($n=57$), in order to explore the relationships between study behavior, fatigue, mood, interest in English, self-perceived progress in learning English, and confidence that the student's English learning goals would be accomplished.

Study 1

Method

Participants. Participants were 283 first year university students (male = 196, female = 87, average age 18.8 and 18.5 respectively), information studies majors, enrolled in both compulsory (210 students) and elective (73 students) English classes at Bunkyo University in Chigasaki, Japan. The compulsory and elective classes were taught by the same teachers, were identical in content, and differed only in whether or not the students enrolled voluntarily.

Questionnaire and Procedure. Students completed a questionnaire assessing their English learning attitudes, beliefs, goals, and reasons. Items were of two types. The first set stated 20 reasons for learning English and students indicated the degree to which they were studying for each reason, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all for this reason*) to 5 (*absolutely for this reason*.) The reasons were those that a demographically identical sample of students ($N=90$) had previously identified as being their own reasons for learning English. Sample reasons were "because English is necessary", "because I want to be bilingual", "because English is useful for finding a job", "because English is cool", and sixteen others (appendix). Attitudes and beliefs concerning learning English were assessed by means of 19 items, which students endorsed, or rejected, or indicated ambivalence toward. Sample items were "It is very important for me to be able to speak and understand English well", "The benefits of English are not worth the effort it takes to learn it", and "Speaking English in public embarrasses me".

The standard demographic questions were included: Sex, age, and overseas travel experience. The final

question asked: “*About how many hours per week, in an average week, do you intend to spend outside of class studying, practicing, or using English (including speaking, reading, listening) ?*”

The questionnaire was written in English, translated into Japanese by a bilingual who was unaware of the purpose of the items, and backtranslated into English following the procedures recommended by Behling & Law (2000), to check for accuracy. The questionnaire items appeared in both Japanese and English (appendix). Instructions specified that there were no right or wrong answers.

Between fall 2002 and spring 2003, several items were dropped and several others were added. Sample sizes accordingly differ for certain items.

The questionnaire was administered in class during the beginning of the spring 2002, fall 2002, spring 2003, and fall 2003 terms.

Items were treated as interval level for some analytic purposes and as categorical for others, on a case-by-case basis. Single sample t tests, independent sample t-tests, one-way ANOVAs, Chi Square, and Pearson Correlation tests were used, dictated by the data and the purpose of the analysis. A Principle Components factor analysis was also conducted in an attempt to identify themes among the reasons, beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and goals.

Results

Reasons for Learning English. A preliminary frequency count of the most extreme responses to each reason (i. e., “*not at all for this reason*” and “*absolutely for this reason*”) revealed a high degree of consensus on some reasons, and little consensus on others, but there was no reason that was not endorsed by at least a few students. The reasons that were most often “absolutely” endorsed were “because of internationalization” (27%) “because it’s necessary” (25%), “because I want to expand my view” (22%), “because English will be advantageous in job hunting” (22%), “because it’s useful for finding a job” (21%), and “because it will be difficult to find a good job without English ”(20%).

More significant perhaps are the reasons that were not endorsed to any degree. The most rejected reasons were “because English will let me express my unique personality” (rejected by 53%), “because I would like to have a job where I use English” (rejected by 41%), “because I want to be bilingual” (rejected by 33%), “because I like English” (rejected by 31%), “because English is interesting” (rejected by 28%), “because I want to watch American movies without subtitles” (rejected by 26%) “because I want to have foreign friends” (rejected by 19%), “because I want to travel to foreign countries” (rejected by 18%) and “because it’s cool to be able to speak English” (rejected by 18%). Table 1 shows the breakdown of responses for the complete set of reasons in more detail (refer to appendix for statement of the reasons).

Table 1. Percentage of students claiming to be studying English for one or more of the reasons listed in Appendix. Column A = not at all (全然); E = absolutely (全くその通り).

Rseason	Not at All	Absolutely	Mean	Standard Deviation	N +
11. English is cool	51	21	2.62	1.18	
12. I like English	87	16	2.23	1.15	
14. Travel	51	44	2.95	1.34	
15. Finding Job	18	57	3.46	1.16	
16. Job using English	117	15	2.05	1.17	
17. English is fun	79	9	2.21	1.06	
18. English is interesting	81	10	2.22	1.08	
19. Expand view	15	62	3.47	1.15	
20. Movies	74	40	2.66	1.39	282
21. Express personality	150	5	1.67	0.89	
22. Cultured	24	41	3.16	1.18	
23. Job hunting	15	63	3.53	1.15	
24. Foreign friends	55	42	2.88	1.33	
27. Bilingual	93	19	2.33	1.24	279
28. Necessary	6	71	3.62	1.06	
29. Global Person	32	45	3.13	1.24	282
30. Useful for finding job	18	58	3.43	1.18	281
31. IT	37	34	2.94	1.21	
32. Internationalization	21	55	3.34	1.18	
34. Song lyrics	41	50	3.04	1.32	

Note: Percentage totals may exceed 100% due to rounding.
+N=283 unless otherwise indicated.

The mean number of reasons endorsed to one degree or another was 16.2 ($SD=3.9$), and while the elective students endorsed slightly more, this difference was not statistically significant ($t(283)=1.59, p=.131$). Moreover, the reasons cut across factors. Clearly, students' reasons for learning English are not simple.

Some reasons are more motivating than others. While these data are in fact ordinal, it is customary to treat Likert type responses as interval level data, provided that the sample is large enough and the responses more or less normally distributed. Hence, parametric tests can be used to determine how the two sub-groups in this sample (elective vs. non-elective enrollment) differ in their reasons for learning English. Table 1 shows the extreme responses and means for the 20 items.

Interestingly, the most emphatically endorsed reason is simply "because it is necessary". It is not clear what these students believe English is necessary for, but it may simply be that the school authorities say that it is. During the period when the course was compulsory, "because it is a required (*hisshoukamoku*) class" was the most endorsed reason for learning English (32% endorsed it absolutely, while 10% rejected it.).

The elective and non-elective students differed at $p < .05$ or greater in their levels of endorsement of nine of

the 20 reasons. These were items, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 23, and 30. Not surprisingly, the elective students tended to endorse fun related reasons more than the non-elective students, and to endorse job related utilitarian reasons less.

Even the most vehemently rejected reasons were endorsed by some students. While it is clear that the primary “motivation” of these students for studying English is because English is necessary and useful for work related reasons, they are also motivated by an appreciation for English as an instrument by which they can accomplish additional objectives, including identity embellishment and simply having fun.

Some of these reasons are clearly related such that students tend to endorse related sets of reasons rather than a wide variety of reasons. There is, in short, a “factor structure” within the dataset. Factor analysis has traditionally been the method of choice in motivational studies, even though it is no secret that there is a high degree of arbitrariness in the process of factor extraction (Leung & Bond, 1989; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Russell, 2002). Nevertheless, for the sake of completeness, I conducted confirmatory factor analyses on this set of 20 variables, using principle components extraction, followed by varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. This resulted in a four-factor solution accounting for 61.529% of the variance. The factors were readily interpretable: (1) personal development (items 14, 16, 19, 21, 22, 24, 27, 29, and 32 (38.334% of the total variance)), (2) job related (items 15, 23, 28, 30, and 31 (13.615% of the total variance)), (3) intrinsic interest (items 12, 17, and 18) (6.417% of the total variance), (4) pop culture related (items 11, 20, and 34 (5.162% of the total variance)). The first three factors constituted internally reliable scales (Cronbach’s Alpha = .87, .85, and .92 respectively). The fourth factor was only marginally reliable (Alpha = .62).

The mean endorsements for these factors are 2.77 ($SD = .84$) for Factor 1, 3.40 ($SD = .89$) for Factor 2, 2.22 ($SD = 1.02$) for Factor 3, and 2.77 ($SD = .98$) for Factor 4. Clearly, students are primarily motivated to learn English because of its usefulness in finding a job. Interestingly, these students do not want jobs that require the use of English, rather they simply want to know enough English to find a job in the first place.

The elective students and the non-elective students differed somewhat in their emphases on these factors. The non-elective students endorsed Factor 2 more, and Factor 3 less than the elective students (independent sample t -tests (280) = 2.53 and (282) 2.379 respectively, both significant at $p < .05$).

The elective students did not differ from the non-elective students in how many hours they planned to spend studying or using English (t (258) = .03, ns). They planned to devote three and a half four hours per week (to be exact, 3.55 hours, $SD = 3.61$) on English outside of class. However, as Study 2 will suggest, there is often a large gap between intentions and actions. The number of hours actually spent on English was considerably less than three and a half hours.

The supplementary attitude items (see appendix 2) were similarly subjected to an exploratory factor analysis. Again a clear factor structure emerged. Items 36, 37, 38, 42, 44, 71, and 74 constituted the first factor and accounted for 39.24% of the variance. The seven items constituted a reliable scale (Cronbach’s Alpha = .86). This factor is desire and commitment to learning English. The second factor consists of items 47, 49, 51, 52, 68, and 70, and accounts for 14.52% of the variance. It also constitutes a reliable scale (Alpha = .84). This scale assesses negative affect concerning learning English. The third factor consists of items 43, 53, 56, 57, 62, and 63, and accounts for 9.49% of the variance and constitutes an adequately reliable scale (Alpha = .72), and assesses effort beliefs. Endorsement of each modestly predicted the number of hours student’s intended to study English. Pearson r s between factors and intended hours were. 25, for factor 1, -.24 for factor 2 and -.26 for

factor 3., all $ps < .0001$. While these correlations are small, they are highly significant and the direction of the correlation is worth noting. Students who scored high on the desire and commitment scale tended to have (or to claim to have) intentions to study English more, while students who had higher negative affect scores tended to have intentions to study less. Students who had higher effort belief scores also tended to intend to study English less. However, because all of the items express the superfluity or futility of effort, this correlation essentially indicates that students who believe that effort is more necessary tend to intend to study more.

Table 2. Endorsement and Rejection of Reasons for Learning English.

Item	Endorse	Ambivalent	Reject
36	196 (69%)	51 (18%)	36 (13%)
37	116 (41%)	70 (25%)	97 (34%)
38	216 (76%)	39 (14%)	28 (10%)
42	47 (17%)	60 (21%)	176 (62%)
43	52 (18%)	45 (16%)	186 (66%)
44	240 (85%)	25 (9%)	18 (6%)
47	65 (23%)	61 (22%)	157 (55%)
49	69 (24%)	163 (58%)	51 (18%)
51	124 (44%)	82 (29%)	76 (27%)
52	80 (28%)	37 (13%)	165 (58%)
53	12 (4%)	51 (18%)	218 (78%)
56	56 (20%)	56 (20%)	170 (60%)
57	21 (7%)	53 (19%)	208 (74%)
62	21 (7%)	37 (13%)	224 (79%)
63	62 (22%)	48 (17%)	171 (61%)
68	145 (51%)	73 (26%)	64 (23%)
70	115 (41%)	60 (21%)	106 (38%)
71	246 (87%)	21 (7%)	15 (5%)
74	236 (84%)	21 (8%)	23 (8%)

Note: N varies from 280 to 283.

I conducted chi-square tests to compare the distribution of responses to each item by the elective and non-elective students. In view of the fact that 19 separate tests were conducted, I set alpha at $p < .0001$. The only item that the two groups of students differentially endorsed was item 51 (non-elective students tend to feel more than elective students that English is too difficult to learn). Apparently first year students are rather similar in their attitudes and beliefs, whether they are studying English voluntarily or not. Patterns of endorsement, ambivalence, and rejection for the 19 items are shown in Table 2. Of particular interest are items 44 (“I want to be fluent in English”), 42 (“I am confident that I will eventually be able to speak English as fluently as I want to”), and 38 (“The only thing that can prevent me from becoming as fluent in English as I want to is my own lack of effort”). While 85% endorsed item 44, and 76% endorsed item 38, only 17% endorsed item 42. The three items were significantly correlated (for items 38 and 42, $r(283) = .33$; for items 42 and 44, $r(283) = .46$, and for

items 38 and 44, $r(283) = .46$, all at $p < .0001$. Students seem to be saying that they want to speak English well and believe that they can do it if they try. However, the low endorsement rate for item 42 suggests that they do not in fact think that they will try. The reasons for this remain to be explicated.

Study 2

To find out what students are doing in pursuit of their English learning goals, a longitudinal study of a fairly small number of students would of course offer many advantages, some of which are discussed by Beebe (2001). Following an equally well established tradition, I relied primarily on student self-reports.

Participants and Procedure. I administered this questionnaire on December 19, 2002 to a sample of 57 students (40 males, 17 females). All students were enrolled non-electively, and simply by reason of being present on this particular day, the last day before the Christmas break, these students probably represent the most motivated among the class. Thus, the results below are all the more noteworthy. Students were given a questionnaire which asked them to answer the following questions: “How tired are you today?” “How is your mood today?” Both were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all tired/good*) to 7 (*very tired/good*); “How many hours did you sleep last night?” (rated on a 10 point scale ranging from ? 1 to + 8 hours); “How many hours did you study or use English last week ?” (rated on a 12 point scale ranging from ? 1 to + 8 hours); “How much do you feel that your English improved last week?”; “How interested do you feel in English this week?”, and “How confident do you feel that you will eventually be able to achieve your English learning goals?” (all three rated on 9 point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*completely*)).

Results

Several interesting results emerged. A large number of students appear to be suffering from sleep deficits. The average number of hours slept the previous night was 4.86 ($SD = 2.03$). Their average self-reported tiredness was 4.41 ($SD = 1.74$) on a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (*not at all tired*) to 7 (*very tired*), but the Pearson correlation between hours slept and tiredness was small and nonsignificant. There was however a large correlation between tiredness and mood ($r(55) = .75$, $p < .0001$). The time spent studying or using English the previous week averaged 1 hour and 15 minutes and this number was inflated by three male outliers who claimed (rather implausibly, based on their classroom performance) 11, 8, and 8 hours respectively. Independent sample t -tests disclosed no significant differences (at $p < .05$, 2-tailed test) between the mean scores for the male and female students for any item. Students rated their interest in English as neither high nor low ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 2.41$) on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*). They rated their improvement in English that week as low ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.48$), and estimated the probability that they would achieve their English goals at below the scale midpoint (5), which one could interpret as “don’t know” ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.78$). There were however several correlations of potential interest. Study and Interest were moderately to highly correlated ($r(57) = .48$, $p < .0001$). Study and Improvement were highly correlated ($r(57) = .61$, $p < .0001$). Study and Confidence were moderately correlated ($r(57) = .39$, $p < .003$), and Improvement and Confidence were highly correlated ($r(57) = .63$, $p < .0001$). Thus, students who studied more felt that they had improved more, and were more confident of ultimate success in achieving their learning objectives.

Discussion and Conclusion

Obviously, high correlations between Study and Interest, between Study and Improvement, and between Improvement and Confidence cannot tell us which is driving which. It is reasonable to suppose that they are dynamically related in such a way that, for example, more study leads to improvement, which leads to still more study, possibly via the increased expectation of success. (See Lai, 2000 for a good example of this process.) Ultimately, it does not matter greatly whether study promotes interest, or interest promotes study, as long as study happens. But in practical terms, it matters very much in the sense that it is the student who must initiate the outside of class self-study activity. In order for this to be likely, in view of the evident extraneous demands on his or her time (judging by their lack of sleep) students will require a reason for taking action. Interest in English is one such reason and a majority of the 283 students discussed earlier claimed to be studying English at least partly because “English is interesting”. But this reason is one of many. The key is not the specific nature of the reasons or attitude, but the intentions and actions that result. Second and Foreign languages are acquired through study, practice, and use, not by motivation, beliefs, or attitudes. What teachers and administrators need to do therefore, is not to find out what student motivations are, but rather find out how to encourage them to study and use the target language.

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Appendix

Studying English Questionnaire

英語学習に関するアンケート

私たちは、学生の英語に対する取り組み方に関心があります。率直な答えをお願いいたします。答えに正しいとか間違いとかいうのはありません。はっきり、きれいに、濃く、書いてください。

名 前：（ローマ字で）

学生番号：

性 別：男 女

年 齢：

左きき 右きき

Why are you studying English? 何故英語を勉強しているのですか。Please answer the questions below using the 1-5 step scale, ranging from 1=not at all for this reason, to 5=absolutely for this reason. 1-5 (1= ~ 5=) のスケールを使って、下の質問に答えてください。

- 1 = not at all for this reason 全然違う
2 = slightly for this reason 少しその通り
3 = generally for this reason 概してその通り
4 = very much for this reason その通り
5 = Absolutely for this reason 全くその通り

11. [] Because it's cool to be able to speak English.
英語が話せるのはかっこいいからです。
12. [] Because I like English.
英語が好きだからです。
14. [] Because I want to travel to foreign countries.
海外旅行をしたいからです。
15. [] Because it will be difficult to find a good job in the future without a good knowledge of English.
十分な英語の知識がなければ、将来良い仕事を見つけるのは難しいからです。
16. [] Because I would like to have a job where I use English.
英語を使う仕事がしたいからです。
17. [] Because English is fun.
英語は楽しいからです。
18. [] Because English is interesting.
英語は面白いからです。
19. [] Because I want to expand my view.
自分の視野を広げるためです。
20. [] Because I want to watch American movies without subtitles.
字幕なしでアメリカ映画を見たいからです。
21. [] Because English will let me express my unique personality.
英語により私のユニークな人格を表現できるからです。
22. [] Because I want to be a cultured person
教養のある人になりたいからです。

23. [] Because English will be advantageous in job hunting.
英語は就職に有利だからです。
24. [] Because I want to have foreign friends.
外国の友人を作りたいからです。
26. [] Because it is a required course.
必修科目だからです。
27. [] Because I want to be bilingual.
バイリンガルになりたいからです。
28. [] Because it's necessary
必要だからです。
29. [] Because I want to be a "global person".
グローバルな人間になりたいからです。
30. [] Because it's useful for finding a job.
求職に役に立つからです。
31. [] For IT(computers, and internet etc)
ITの為です。(コンピューター、インターネットなど)
32. [] Because of internationalization.
国際化に対応する為です。
34. [] Because I want to understand English song lyrics.
英語の歌詞を理解したいからです。
-
36. [] It is very important to me to be able to speak and understand English well.
英語が上手く話せたり、理解できたりすることは、私にとって大事なことです。
37. [] I am determined to accomplish my goal of being able to speak and understand English well, no matter how much time and effort it takes.
どんなに時間や努力が必要でも、英語をよく話し理解できるようになるという目標を、絶対に達成するつもりです。
38. [] The only thing that can prevent me from becoming as fluent in English as I want to, is lack of my own effort.
私が望むほど流暢に英語を話せないとすれば、それは私自身の努力不足です。
42. [] I am confident that I will eventually be able to speak English as fluently as I want to.
私は最終的には、自分が今望むぐらい流暢に英語を話せるようになる自信があります。
43. [] If I fail to learn English, it will be because of things that I have no control over.
もし私の英語学習がうまくいかないとしたら、それは私の力ではどうすることもできない何かのせいでしょう。
44. [] I want to be fluent in English.
英語を流暢に話せるようになりたい。
47. [] English doesn't interest me.
英語は面白くない。
49. [] If English weren't a required course I wouldn't study it.
もし英語が必修科目でなかったら、私は勉強しません。

51. [] English is too difficult for me to learn.
英語は難しすぎて、私にはわからない。
52. [] If English weren't necessary for job hunting, I wouldn't study it.
もし英語が求職活動に必要なければ、私は勉強しません。
53. [] The benefits of English are not worth the effort it takes to learn it.
英語で得られるものは、英語を習得するためにする努力の価値もありません。
56. [] Japanese people who have learned English well were probably born with genes that gave them a gift for learning languages easily.
英語が良くできる日本人というのは、たぶん語学が簡単に学べる才能をもって生まれているのです。
57. [] If you can't speak fluently and understand everything, then it's better not to try to learn at all.
もし流暢に英語を話すことができず、ほとんど理解できないならば、学ぼうとするのはやめたほうがいいです。
62. [] If the teacher is excellent, I would not need to make an effort to learn English.
もし先生が素晴らしければ、英語を学ぶ努力をしなくてすむでしょう。
63. [] Speaking with other Japanese people in English won't help me get better at English.
他の日本人と英語で話しても、英語の上達には役に立たないでしょう。
68. [] Speaking English in public embarrasses me.
公の場で英語を話すのは、恥ずかしい。
70. [] Learning English is painful.
英語を習うのは苦痛です。
71. [] A little English is better than no English.
少しの英語でも全然できないよりいい。
74. [] I admire Japanese like me who can speak English well.
私は同じ日本人で英語がうまく話せる人を尊敬します。

About how many hours per week, in an average week, do you intend to spend outside of class studying, practicing, or using English (including speaking, reading, listening)? 授業外で英語を勉強したり、練習したり、使うことに（話したり、読んだり、聞いたりする事も含めて）だいたい週何時間ぐらい使う予定ですか。 時間 =

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