

Reflections on Action Research Roles, Networks and Implications in English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reflect on what and how the author perceives action research is and will be in future. To be a good practitioner on conducting action research, a researcher needs to take its roles, relevant research variables and the guiding processes in conducting action research into account. With the special features of the research processes, they empower a researcher to reflect on or judge if each step can be pursued or flexibly re-taken. Moreover, since the author perceived the feasibility of conducting the action research networks through the varied topics of research proposals among nations from the SEAMEO RELC action research course, the implications to action research collaboration is thus supposed to be promoted and suggested as one of the possible solutions to research barriers in the paper.

Keywords: action research, reflections, English language teaching, empower, research collaboration

บทคัดย่อ

บทความฉบับนี้มุ่งสะท้อนถึงแนวความคิดของผู้เขียนว่าการวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการนั้นคืออะไรและจะเป็นอย่างไรในอนาคต การที่จะเป็นผู้ฝึกหัดทำวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการที่ดีได้นั้น นักวิจัยจำเป็นต้องพิจารณาถึงบทบาท ตัวแปรต่างๆที่เกี่ยวข้องและอีกทั้งกระบวนการขั้นตอนในการทำวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการ ด้วยลักษณะพิเศษของกระบวนการทำวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการนี้ ผู้ทำวิจัยสามารถได้รับรองหรือตัดสินใจเองได้ว่าจะดำเนินกระบวนการวิจัยนั้นต่อไปหรือจะปรับเปลี่ยนรีบมกระบวนการใหม่อีกรอบหนึ่งก็ได้ นอกจากนี้องค์การผู้เขียนได้เลิ่งเห็นถึงความเป็นไปได้ต่อการทำวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการในรูปแบบของเครือข่ายจากหัวข้อที่หลากหลายในโครงงานวิจัยของกลุ่มประเทศต่างๆที่นำ

เสนอในหลักสูตรการทำวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการของทาง SEAMEO RELC ดังนั้นแนวความคิดต่อต้านความร่วมมือในการทำวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการจึงควรถูกส่งเสริม และเสนอแนะให้เป็นหนึ่งในวิธีการแก้ปัญหาต่ออุปสรรคต่างๆในการทำวิจัยไว้ในบทความนี้

คำสำคัญ: การวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการ ผลลัพธ์ ห้องเรียน ภาษาอังกฤษ มีอำนาจ ความร่วมมือในการทำวิจัย

INTRODUCTION

The paper presents the author's notions and experiences of action research and her reflections on it after she had had an opportunity to broaden her expertise in the area of English language pedagogy through attending the course in action research for language teachers at Southeast Asian Ministers of

Education Organization, Regional Language Centre (under the familiar acronyms--SEAMEO, RELC) in Singapore.

The point of arrival: EIL as a country agent

Singapore is a very good Asian setting in which English is used as an International Language (EIL) amongst the surroundings of a blend of multi-cultures and languages. As pointed out in McKay (2002), indicator/s of the role of English as an international language can be proved through the intelligibility and/or comprehensibility of different English varieties among communicators.

It is not alien anymore in Singapore seeing the people with Asian looks interchangeably converse in 'English' with their various native accents. In addition to their mutual English-language communication, the Singaporean normally share their communicative understanding with their native-language lexicons in conversation. To illustrate, a Chinese Singaporean frequently enjoyed code-switching through the use of her native Chinese verbal lexicon (e.g. 'Cheong' is known as 'to wander') in an English language sentence (i.e. "Let's *cheong* around the market after the class!") with her Hindi Singaporean classmate who, in turn, expressed her understanding through a spoken response (i.e. "Sure! I wanna *cheong* and get something to eat."). The significant role of English is emphasized in the country in the sense that English is regarded as the official language, while the Singaporean's native languages (e.g. Chinese, Indian, Hindi or Tamil) are considered as the second languages in Singapore. The prominent role of English in Singapore as previously mentioned raised the author's awareness on the official status of English and a question on a possibility of its role as EIL in Thailand.

According to Kachru's model of the "Three Circles of World Englishes" (Bolton, 2006), English has acquired various roles in different countries worldwide based upon the types of spread of English, the patterns of acquisition, and the functional domains where English is used. The countries (i.e.

the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) where English is regarded as a primary language are placed in the 'Inner Circle'. The 'Outer Circle' contains Asian and African regions in the multilingual countries (e.g. Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Nigeria) where English is the medium of communication in the legal, governmental, or educational areas. The 'Expanding Circle' consists of countries (e.g. Japan, Korea, and China) where English is used as a foreign language. Referring to Kachru's model of world Englishes, it cannot be denied that the current role of English used in Thailand is still placed in the 'Expanding Circle' as a foreign language.

The opening gate to action research

With the meaning of the term 'action research' itself, a layman can define 'action research' as a method of study by means of searching again and again through action until an answer of a research question can be sought. Even though the author had chances, to some extent, in attending action research workshops in Thailand, what is worth attending the SEAMEO-RELC action research course in Singapore is that the course provided hands-on applications and idea exchanges in action research among ten country members like Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. What a rare privilege this journey offers!

The three-week action research course covers three 6-session modules--theories, issues, and challenges; methodology; and data collection and analysis tools--with three experienced lecturers from SEAMEO Regional Language Centre. The combination of the three modules from the course plus the author's personal reflections and experiences on action research can be summarized as follows.

Prior to carrying out a research project, researchers need to have at least basic research knowledge (e.g. research theories, methodology, data collection and analysis). But in fact, success in conducting the research project is not only derived

from the researchers' research knowledge per se, but research barriers (e.g. risk, resources and time) should also be considered as shown in Figure 1.

Research knowledge

Action research background

The concepts of action research emerged in the early nineteenth century (Dewey, 1929; cited in Burns, 1999) and have been more applicable to the field of education in several ESL (English as Second Language) and EFL (English as Foreign Language) settings like North America, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Singapore, or even Thailand. Stenhouse (1975; cited in Burns, 1999: 14) proposes the importance of action research in the field of language teaching and education:

“The uniqueness of each classroom setting implies that any proposal – even at school level – needs to be tested and verified and adapted by each teacher in his own classroom. The ideal is that the curricular specifications should feed a teacher's personal research and development programmes through which he is increasing his own understanding of his own work and hence bettering his teaching... It is not enough that teachers' work should be studied; they need to study it themselves.”

What differs action research from other educational research

Unlike traditional academic research which separates among theory, research and practice (Hopkins, 1993; cited in Burns, 1999), action research provides teachers a worthwhile opportunity to be a part of classroom practice and in a research process of data collection, and a chance to investigate the realities the teachers were confronted with the process of the classroom curriculum (Burns, 1999). The focus of action research is on the practical issues of immediate concern to a particular social group. Elliott (1991; cited in Altrichter *et al.*, 2008: 5) also relates an action research to the study of a social situation with a view to improve the quality of the action within it.

In the field of teacher education, an action research refers to a teacher-initiated classroom research for the purposes of raising the teacher's understanding and critical perspectives of classroom learning and instruction, and of the developments of classroom practices. Action research, being conducted in naturally occurring settings, has been promoted as a means of professional development for reflective practice and as a research method particularly suited to practitioners.

Different models of action research are proposed in several scholars' literature. The concepts of action research in the literature are featured in a

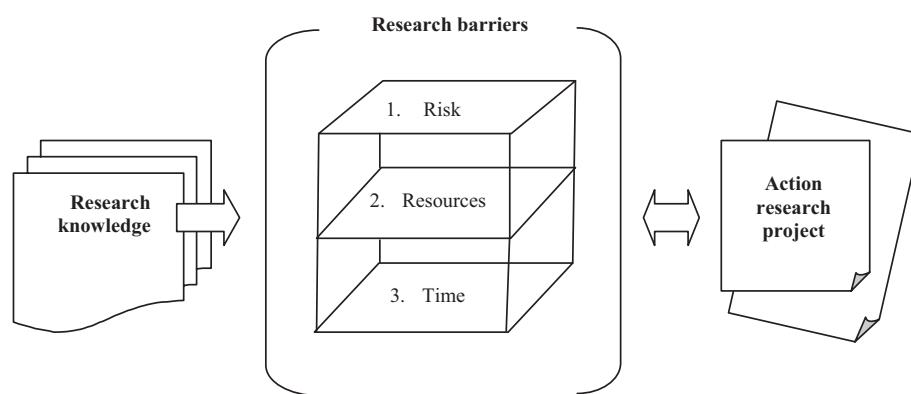


Figure 1 Variables in research practice

(Adapted from the RELC action research course, 2009)

systematic scientific framework. In order to scrutinize the research concepts, the author integrated her action research reflections with the adaptation of the action-research processes. The action-research processes adapted from Freeman (1998) and Burns (1999; 2007) are illustrated in Table 1.

The processes of action research based upon the scholars' studies from Table 1 can be synthesized as a cycle of decision-making steps in Figure 2.

The initial process in the cycle represents the stage of inquiry. A teacher researcher explores problems and elaborates research questions based on the assumptions from his/her background knowledge

situated within the research literature, and from real-world experience in classroom teaching or in his/her students' classroom learning. A research question focuses on identifying problematic situations or issues considered to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice.

Next, to prove if the research plan, developed on the basis of research questions, is practical, the processes of data collection and subsequent analysis are implemented. Since there is no one single perfect approach for data collection and analysis, the data collection and analysis tools are suggested to be as

Table 1 Action research processes

Burns' (1999 and 2007)		
Freeman's (1998)	Individual aspect in action research	
Teacher-researcher cycle	Continual cycle	Process
1. Inquiry: Question/Puzzle	1. Plan	Exploring/Identifying Planning
2. Data collection	2. Act	Collecting data
3. Data analysis	3. Observe	Observing/Intervening
4. Understandings/Assumptions	4. Reflect	Analysing/Reflecting Reflecting/Hypothesising
5. Publishing/Making public		Reporting/Writing/Presenting

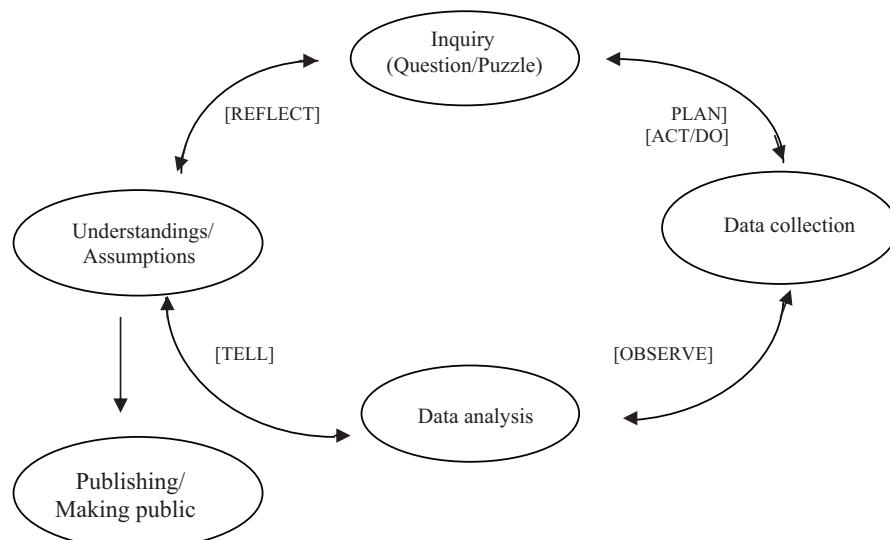


Figure 2 Action research cycle

(Adapted from Freeman, 1998 and Burns, 1999 and 2007)

various as they can be utilized in both quantitative and qualitative approaches. With the triangulation of data in the mixed approaches (Creswell, 2003), the quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered and analyzed, and this will produce more convincing and credible research findings for a study. Additionally, there have been growing concerns about the ethics of data collection in action research. The basic tenet of ethical research is that researchers should gain the consent of those being studied to participate, never abuse the trust of those being studied, avoid any treatment, intervention, or program which may have an adverse effect on the participants, and provide some form of feedback regarding results to participants.

It is observable that if the data gathered cannot answer the research questions, there will be a mismatch between the research questions and the research plan. To solve such problem, the research plan can be revised. The research topic can be refined. The process of inquiry in the plan can be

intervened and repeated as a spiral (See Figure 3) to generate the logical research questions as long as the data collected can respond to the research questions.

The data collected and analyzed further bring about the refinement of the assumptions and understandings. The assumptions and knowledge reflected and constructed from the research processes are concluded and revealed for the improvement in classroom practices (Figures 2 and 3).

As far as the author is concerned, action research is built around the idea that the action can change what we do in practice in the classroom. In an action research cycle, researchers can complete and return to any stage. Then, the research cycle can differ in the number of research decision-making steps as the action research spiral (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1990, cited in Burns, 1999).

Research barriers

Researchers with good knowledge of research

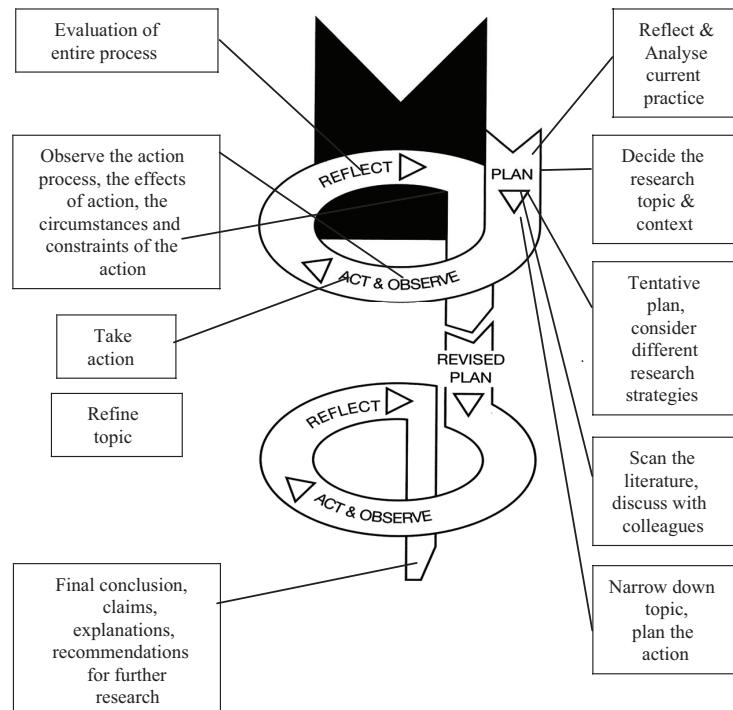


Figure 3 Action research spiral

(Adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart, 1990 in Burns, 1999)

background are not necessarily research practitioners unless they can overcome problems in research practice. Problems or barriers of research practice from Figure 1 cover researchers' fear of taking risks and availabilities of resources and time.

“Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.”

T. S. Eliot (cited in Hubbard and Power, 2003: 206)

As a basically shared and well-known business notion, the continuum of the relationship between risk and return represents: high risk--high return, low risk--low return, and definitely no risk--no return! Such notion becomes universal to any field of studies particularly in conducting a research. Willingness to take **risks** is welcomed to be one of the characteristics of good researchers. One of the most obstacles on doing a research is a researcher's fear of taking risk along the processes of conducting the research.

Does taking risks guarantee a success in conducting a research? How can we deal with a failure if it comes to visit after taking risks? Action research appears to be the answers for both previous questions. Regarding the term 'action research', the research can be conducted through 'action' which involves risks. A success, like the ability of getting a result to answer a research question, will be a final product after a word f-a-i-l-u-r-e is erased in the process of revision for another new action research cycle in action-research spiral (Figure 3). In other words, action research specially accommodates high possibility of success in that it allows a research process to be revised in any stage in the action research cycle if failure tends to visit in the cycle.

The author personally believes in taking potential risks that we can handle if a situation is not as expected. Taking risks offers us a chance to measure and realize our own strengths and weaknesses of doing a research. In spite of being able to overcome the fear of taking risks, researchers can be from time to time stuck with a barrier of the

availability of **resources**. The question of where we can find research literature and information appears less raised as a result of the easy and free access of online resources for library search, journal search, or database search (e.g. <http://scholar.google.com>; <http://www.eric.ed.gov/>; <http://tesl-ej.org>) available these days.

Besides the barriers regarding risk and resources, another frequently-problematic issue impeding a chance to conduct a single research is of the **time** constraint. Sharing experiences within the teaching community, some of us may say, "Conducting an action research consumes a great deal of time. How can we deal with it if we still have our teaching workload?"

A possible solution: Collaborative action research

Teachers formally investigating teaching practice in their own isolated classrooms may frequently experience the time barrier of conducting an action research. In fact, the original intention of conducting the action research is to bring about change in social situations as the result of group collaboration and group problem solving. With such intention, research collaboration is likely alleviate teachers' time constraint and make research practice possible. Besides healing the constraint of time, an individual researchers' other research barriers (i.e. risk and resources) can be also lessened and diversified through collaboration.

The dimensions of collaboration allow two or more individual teachers to identify common problems and work co-operatively as a research community to examine particular action-research focused problems as a whole. Collaboration can be done between teachers across, for example, different subject areas, different educational institutions, or even different countries to solve problems of a broader scale of curriculum or policy. As a result, teacher collaboration in carrying out an action research has been considered a contribution to teacher professional development (Kleinsasser, 1993; Sato and Kleinsasser, 2004; Hongboontri, 2006).

Action research networks

The action research course requires all the course members to present their research proposals as the output of the course completion. To share

research networks within and among countries, the areas of research proposals of the ten country members were presented under the following topics in Table 2.

Table 2 Country members' research topics

Country	No.	Research topic
Brunei	1	Enhancing year 5 pupils' vocabulary acquisition in a remote school in Brunei
Darussalam	2	Darussalam through the use of language games
	2	Use of the narrow reading technique on the reading motivation of secondary 3 students in a public secondary school in Brunei Darussalam
Cambodia	1	The use of pictures to increase weak teacher trainees' speaking skills at pre-school teacher training center
	2	Error analysis of Cambodian EFL students' writing: a study from Phnom Penh
Indonesia	1	Using collaborative digital storytelling to improve third semester students' speaking skills of English education study program, FKIP SRIWIJAYA University
	2	The use of flexible-mutually collaborative learning strategy on improving students' understanding and awareness on theoretical concept of English morphological processes at English education department, Yogyakarta State University Indonesia
Laos	1	The use of the oral mother tongue personal feedback to improve low proficiency of the 2 nd year undergraduate students to write good paragraph at the department of English, FOL, NUOL
	2	The use of graphic organizer to help weak year 2 undergraduates to write good paragraphs at the department of English, FOL, NUOL
	3	The use of newspaper in improving reading comprehension skills of year I special English course students at the National University of Laos
Malaysia	1	The use of English songs to increase secondary vocational school students' motivation in speaking more English
	2	Use of dialogue scripts to enhance speaking skills in the classroom among low English proficiency form 4 vocational students in Sabah, Malaysia
Singapore	1	The implementation of uninterrupted sustained silent reading (USSR) to improve the reading interest of primary 5 pupils in a neighbourhood primary school in Singapore
	2	The use of comic stripe to improve English reading comprehension skills of primary 4 pupils in Jiemin Primary School
	3	The use of cooperative learning to increase pupils' engagement in reading comprehension
	4	How effective are reading circles in injecting interest in students' reading of supplementary readers in a neighbourhood secondary school in Singapore?
	5	The use of formative assessment in the STELLAR Programme in a primary school in Singapore
Thailand	1	Using consciousness-raising activities to promote the understanding of grammatical features of English major first year students in Udon Thani Rajabhat University
	2	The effects of error feedback on writing accuracy of the low-proficiency students in EFL classrooms at Mae Fah Luang University in Thailand

Table 2 (continued).

Country	No.	Research topic
	3	An investigation of pair-work peer editing on first-year Thai EFL undergraduates' writing ability of English
The Philippines	1	The use of vocabulary activities to improve the reading comprehension skills in English of struggling grade iv pupils in Mangaldan Central School in the Philippines
	2	The use of interaction-based activities to improve senior high school students' participation in the English class in Canumay National High School Valenzuela city, manila, Philippines
Timor-Leste	1	Using dictation to improve listening skills of 1 st year secondary students of SERAN-KOTEK, Timor Leste
	2	The effect of role-play on listening skills at junior high school of Lautem, Timor Leste
Vietnam	1	The use of topic discussion technique to motivate the 1 st year students' speaking skill at Danang University of foreign languages in Vietnam
	2	The use of role play to enhance students' confidence in speaking skill of ESP students, department of tourism, college of economics, the University of Danang, Vietnam

The research topics from Table 2 indicate the course members' varied perception on demanding skills of English, and this reflects on the different emphases on the roles of Englishes in the country members. Based on each member country's educational levels and systems, cultures, and classroom contexts, demanding skills of English were differently scoped as follows:

Country	Demanding skills of English
• Brunei Darussalam and the Philippines:	- Vocabulary and reading;
• Cambodia:	- Speaking and writing;
• Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam:	- Speaking;
• Laos:	- Writing and reading;
• Singapore:	- Reading;
• Thailand:	- Writing and grammar;
• Timor-Leste:	- Listening

In regard to the author's research proposal topic on pair-work peer editing, the author decided to launch her proposal in order to investigate and solve students' problems observed from her ELT classes and to extend the study from the findings of

her research study into students' writing ability (Puengpipatrakul, 2009). Simultaneously, to attain course objectives of the University's first-year undergraduate-level English-language curricula, the author focused on improving her undergraduate students' skills of writing and grammar that were proportioned as the highest rank in summative assessment of the foundation English courses. In addition, as she experienced her time-consuming corrective feedback provided in her individual students' journal writing tasks, she then proposed pair-work peer editing in her new research project. Pair-work peer editing may likely save time in learning and teaching in process writing. More importantly, it effectively equips students with the integration of cooperative learning and writing practices, and this will hopefully raise students' awareness in the importance of writing ability. Although the topic under peer editing is not a brand-new one, the author believes in the uniqueness of individual students and each classroom setting; thus, the research findings will possibly provide some insights into English language learning and teaching.

However, the completion of the course at RELC was not at the finishing but starting point of the action-research mission. The course members'

research proposals need to be individually or even collaboratively pursued within or across nations until making public for the ELT development in Asian settings which will in turn benefit EFL learners' language learning outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In Thailand, owing to the fact that research on language teacher professional development is still at its dawn (Hongboontri, 2006: 33), this opens a good opportunity for researcher teachers to implement action research to create their reflective practice, and thereby help to promote their pedagogical development. Teachers' self-motivation in launching an action-research proposal also needs to be implanted, ignited and promoted in every EFL educational level in Thailand. For this, action-research workshops or training courses are recommended to build up research atmosphere and practice to those who are in the teaching profession particularly research novices.

Flexibly, the research proposal can be pursued at any level of research perspectives. At the micro level, action research allows individual teachers' reflections to help teachers better understand their own teaching profession and development. At the macro level, collaborative action research is potentially more empowering since it offers a framework for entire educational institution change. Consequently, every single action research that is suggested to be implemented at either micro or macro level can be helpful in one way or another to students' learning outcomes in the future.

With the hope of the action-research collaborative networking in the future, it might be possible for teams of teachers in Thailand to work collaboratively across countries. Since Englishes used among research groups of countries will be shared and become more intelligible, action research can bridge and welcome to the possibility of the official status of EIL (McKay, 2002) in Thailand.

CONCLUSION

The reflections on action research concepts and experiences, in this paper, are addressed in terms of action-research background knowledge, barriers and visions to be considered in conducting an action research. The unique purposes of action research enhance reflective practice in natural classroom settings, awareness of individual language teachers' professional understanding and development, and practical concerns to particular social groups' collaborative problem-solving for improvement in a wider scale of educational environment. With the flexible and empowering feature for altering any decision-making steps in the research spiral, action research is expected to promote collaborative networking across countries in the future for the sake of the English-language learners' effective learning and language proficiency, teachers' professional development, and the growth of English as an International Language in Thailand.

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