



Pre-Service EFL Students' Perceptions of Scripted vs. Improvisational Drama Play in Enhancing Spontaneous Speaking Fluency

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of pre-service EFL students regarding the role of drama play in enhancing their speaking fluency. Speaking fluency is a critical skill for Indonesian EFL learners, particularly for those preparing to be educators. Despite the integration of drama-based learning in language education many existing methods focus on memorization and scripted dialogues, which may not adequately foster spontaneous speaking skills. This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach and collects data using semi-structured interviews and journals from pre-service teachers in Samarinda. The study found that drama play significantly enhanced students' confidence, vocabulary, and pronunciation. However, while scripted drama enhances structured speech fluency, they did not significantly improve students' ability to engage in spontaneous conversations. In contrast, improvisational elements of drama play were perceived as more effective in promoting real-time communicative competence. This study highlights the need for a balanced approach that integrates both scripted and unscripted drama techniques to optimize speaking fluency in EFL education. These findings provide valuable insights for educators and curriculum developers focused on developing strategies to improve learners' communicative skills in English.

Keywords: Drama-Based Learning, EFL Speaking Fluency, Pre-Service Teachers, Spontaneous Speech, Memorization, Communicative Competence, Improvisation, Language Learning Anxiety, Role-Play, Scripted Dialogue

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1. Introduction

Fluency in English is one of the most important skills for a foreign language EFL pre-service teacher in Indonesia. Effective communication is important for instructional delivery and classroom management (Abrar et al., 2018; Purwati et al., 2023). Nonetheless, Bohari (2024) notes that most Indonesian EFL learners find it hard to speak fluently because there is little chance for casual conversation in English. Moreover, they become more self-conscious



and frustrated with their ability to speak due to sociopsychological issues such as anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (Purwati et al., 2023; Bohari, 2024 Aminah et al., 2019; Arbain et al., 2017).

Drama-based learning has been recognized as an effective pedagogical tool for improving speech delivery, confidence, and vocabulary retention (Kumar et al., 2022; Arbain & Nur, 2017; Arbain & Rohman, 2023). The application of drama to teaching EFL promotes full participation so students can practice speaking in a low-anxiety setting. Research has shown that incorporating drama-based learning can significantly reduce language anxiety and **promote their** confidence (Amarullah & Rachmawaty, 2020; Gracella & Nur, 2020). However, while scripted drama plays help students develop structured speaking abilities, it is often debated whether they enhance genuine communicative competence or simply reinforce memorization techniques (Suseno, 2023). This raises concerns about whether students learned under such methods can transition effectively into spontaneous, real-world conversations.

To address these concerns, it is important to analyze the impact of drama-based learning activities on speaking fluency. This research analyzes pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of the effects of drama on their confident and fluent speaking abilities. The results of this research examine the impact of drama on EFL learners and how these learners overcome the difficulties they face with spontaneous speaking.

1. 2 Project-Based Drama Learning

Project-based drama learning (PBDL) is an instructional approach that integrates dramatic activities with language education, promoting deep and hands-on learning. PBDL falls under the constructivist approach as students take part in role play activities where they perform various speech acts such as negotiating, making apologies, and making requests (Sirisrimangkorn, 2018; Kusmaryani, 2022; Nur, 2020). his type of learning helps students acquire the ability to articulate words and phrases within particular contexts which improves language skills. Research suggests that PBDL significantly increases student motivation and participation, as it provides a meaningful and interactive way to develop language skills (Ellis,



2003; Schenker, 2020). With PBDL, students are aided in achieving fluency while controlling rehearsal conditions to enhance pronunciation and vocabulary retention (Mardiani & Hanifah, 2023; Erliana & Arbain, 2020).

Project-based drama learning has its foundation set firmly on constructivism, a learning theory concerned with knowledge to be perceived as something that is constructed by learners during interaction and experience (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky et al., 1978). In terms of pedagogy for teaching languages, this implies that learners will do better when actively participating in tasks that seek to put the language to use (Jonassen, 1999). The drama activities in PBDL achieve this aim by placing learners in situations that foster communication, motivating them to hone language proficiency skills through active engagement as opposed to passivity (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Maley & Duff, 2005).

Moreover, PBDL puts into practice the theory of communicative competence that has been incorporated by Dell Hymes (1972). This is defined as the ability to use language accurately and appropriately within contextual boundaries, outside of mere grammatical structures, integrating sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions. In PBDL, learners enact practices of English through role-play and drama in manner that is socially and culturally relevant, thereby nurturing fluency, flexibility, and appropriateness in communication. Constructivism and communicative competence, combined, provide the very foundation of PBL to create a holistic approach for EFL learners to nurture their language skills and socialize.

. 1. 3 Scripted Reading or Memorization

Scripted reading and memorization are traditional language learning techniques that have been widely used in EFL classrooms. They require students to practice dialogues for pronunciation, grammar, and sentence formation accuracy (Heidari, 2020; Wang, 2023). Although this approach fosters basic speaking abilities, detractors maintain that it stifles learners' spontaneous speech ability. Recent studies show that the memorized scripts do not necessarily lead to the ability to converse freely because the learners use prepared statements rather than spontaneously created original utterances (Sadri & Firouzi, 2017; Salsabila &



Megawati, 2024; Nur & Jamilah, 2022). However, together with interactive drama techniques, memorization can be a useful scaffolding approach to help learners move toward more fluid and natural speaking patterns.

. 1. 4 Speaking Fluency/Spontaneous Speaking

Speaking fluency is the ability to express thoughts seamlessly without unnecessary delays or breaks (Peltonen, 2023). Unlike instruction focusing on achieving accuracy, which stresses grammatical correctness, fluency-oriented learning aims at the speech production and responsiveness in real time. Studies show that spontaneous speaking skills are best developed through fun interactive activities like role-plays, debates and improvisation (Salsabila & Megawati, 2024). Such techniques enable the learners to think on their feet, formulate sensible answers, and actively participate in conversations without analyzing every single word or structure in grammar. Suseno (2023) states that with the incorporation of these activities into the curriculum, students are bound to gain confidence as well as skills valuable in real-life scenarios.

. 1. 5 Research Gap and Objectives

Recognized as useful for teaching speaking fluency, drama-based learning still lacks understanding in the relative effectiveness of drama-based learning within EFL contexts. Most studies concentrated on the advantages of drama-based learning concerning pronunciation and delivery (Kumar et al., 2022), while few centered around the lack of fostering spontaneous communication skills. Moreover, although drama-based learning has received acclaim for enhancing fluency, not much has been done regarding its retention effects on overall communicative competence. This study attempts to resolve this problem by exploring how pre-service EFL students perceive the impact of drama activities on their speaking fluency. Thus, this research seeks to address the following questions: (1) How do pre-service EFL students perceive the use of drama play in improving their speaking fluency? And (2) How does the



memorization and scripted nature of drama impact students' ability to engage in spontaneous conversations?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore pre-service EFL students' perceptions of drama play in enhancing their speaking fluency. A qualitative phenomenological design was chosen as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and insights (Creswell, 2014). This method enables the researcher to interpret and analyze subjective experiences, making it suitable for examining how students perceive the impact of drama on their spoken language skills.

2.2 Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at Mulawarman University, Indonesia, in the English Language Education Department, where drama-based learning is integrated into the curriculum. The university offers courses that incorporate role-playing, improvisation, and performance-based activities, making it a suitable setting for investigating the influence of drama on speaking fluency. The participants were selected from students enrolled in courses that include drama techniques as part of their learning process. For this research, participants were required to hold significant roles in the drama production, particularly as main characters or essential figures in the storyline. These roles required them to memorize and deliver extensive dialogues, making them ideal subjects for analyzing the impact of drama-based learning on speaking fluency.

The participants of this study were four pre-service EFL students selected through purposive sampling. They were chosen based on their prior experience with drama-based learning and their willingness to provide detailed reflections on their experiences.

2.3 Research Instruments

The primary data collection method utilized in this study was a semi-structured interview. This approach allowed the researcher to gather information and still maintain some



level of flexibility. The interview questions aimed to explore learners' perceptions and experiences with drama play and its impact on their speaking fluency as well as their speech production during scripted drama activities. Sample questions included: "How would you describe your overall experience with drama-based learning in your EFL classes?" and "What do you think are the main benefits of using drama activities in language learning?" Furthermore, questions such as "Do you think drama activities have improved your speaking fluency in English? Why or why not?", "Do you think scripted drama activities help you with spontaneous conversations? Why or why not?" and "Do you think memorizing scripts helps you with spontaneous speaking? Why or why not?" were also posed to delve deeper into the students' experiences. The purpose of including semi-structured interviews was to maintain a minimum uniformity among respondents together with sufficient freedom that participants could communicate their views without too much restriction. Per the participant's selection, the interviews were conducted in English or Bahasa Indonesia. The participants agreed to the interviews being audio-recorded which were then transcribed for analysis.

Reflective journals were another major instrument used in the study beyond the semi-structured interviews. The journal documented the participants' personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings, capturing their reflections during the entire process of learning through drama.

To address a more objective viewpoint beyond the self-perceptions of respondents, this study included assessments of speaking fluency. Every participant took part in a personalized speaking evaluation where they had to give a brief, unstructured monologue pertaining to a specific theme, which was pre-set. These evaluations were graded by a standardized rubric on fluency developed from the descriptors of the CEFR and IELTS (Council of Europe, 2001; IELTS, 2023). The participants were graded on various aspects of fluency such as flow, coherence, pacing, and reticence. Such criteria are authoritative, particularly in the scope of second language assessment, when evaluating speaking skills (Fulcher, 2003; Luoma, 2004).

2.4 Data Collection Procedure



Data was collected through two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and reflective journals.

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Participants were interviewed individually to capture their perceptions, experiences, and reflections regarding drama-based learning. The interviews included open-ended questions that allowed for elaboration and discussion on how drama activities influenced their speaking fluency. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was conducted in either English or Bahasa Indonesia, based on participants' language preference.
2. **Conducting Reflective Journal:** Participants were instructed to write reflective journals documenting their experiences throughout the drama-based learning process. The journals served as an essential tool for participants to record their personal insights, emotional responses, and reflections on the drama activities.
3. **Transcription and Data Organization:** All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the recordings and notes were organized for easier thematic coding.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data collected through interviews and reflective journals were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. **Understanding the Data:** The transcripts and reflective journals were read multiple times to become familiar with the data.
2. **Initial Coding:** Relevant sections of the data were coded to identify key features related to speaking fluency, confidence, vocabulary acquisition, and improvisation.
3. **Theme Searching:** The codes were grouped into broader themes that emerged from the data. Thematic areas included confidence building, vocabulary improvement, challenges with memorization, and the benefits of improvisation.
4. **Theme Reviewing:** The identified themes were reviewed to ensure coherence and relevance to the research questions.



5. **Naming and Defining Themes:** Each theme was clearly defined, and representative quotes from the participants were selected to illustrate the findings.
6. **Member Checking:** To ensure the credibility of the thematic analysis, coding was reviewed by a second researcher familiar with qualitative methods. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus by returning transcripts and preliminary findings to participants for confirmation.
7. **Report Writing:** The findings were compiled into a report, with each theme being discussed in detail.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Research Question 1: How do pre-service EFL students perceive the use of drama play in improving their speaking fluency?

The participants in this study generally expressed positive perceptions about the role of drama play in enhancing their speaking fluency in English. Most participants found drama activities engaging and more enjoyable compared to traditional methods such as lectures and grammar exercises. Aside from functioning as a language skill improvement tool, drama was considered as a means to foster a better and more fun learning environment.

The results of the speaking assessments highlighted the differences in the level of fluency among most participants. Participant 1, for example, was classified as a highly fluent speaker as characterized by largely effortless, fluid, and rhythmic speech with only minimal and limited hesitation. This was in line with P1's reflective journal account where he reported a boosted self-esteem in freely conversing, thanks to an expanded vocabulary due to drama activities.

Participant 2 showcased a moderate level of fluency. P2's speech, while generally comprehensible, lacked coherence and had several significant pauses. This aligned with her diary where she reported that despite feeling anxious, she showed signs of improvement.

Participant 3 demonstrated high fluency while conducting both structured and unstructured speech which was clear and smooth in delivery. His fluency evaluation confirmed



that he believed that improvisational activities greatly improved his conversational speed during spontaneous dialogue.

In the case of Participant 4, she was assigned a moderate-range fluency score. Her speech was generally fluent in nature, but there was a moderate excessive use of self-prompting and pausing for thought, particularly with less familiar subjects. This aligned with her journal reflections, where she remarked on the strategies employed to mask some level of confidence, demonstrating positive change but grappling with the challenge of speaking extemporaneously.

These objective results validate the students' perceptions regarding the influence of drama-in education activities on their speaking fluency, confirming the study's thematic conclusions.

3. 1.1 Increased Confidence in Speaking English

Many participants claimed that the use of drama practices helped them gain confidence in speaking the English language. For instance, P1, whose expressive fluency was rated high, commented on the extent to which he was required to step out of his comfort zone in lowering practices prompted by drama activities and how that led to smoother speech. The relationship between self-reported confidence and actual empirical scores on fluency suggests that such confidence is indeed an outcome of the work done through drama.

P1 stated:

"Drama activities enhanced my vocabulary and helped me speak more confidently... it pushed me to step out of my comfort zone"

This was also mentioned by another respondent (P2), with a moderate-level score in fluency, explained that participation in drama enabled her to take more initiative toward speaking English which positively impacted her self-confidence.

P2 stated:

"Drama makes learning English more fun and less boring. It helps us become more confident to speak, although it takes time for some to get used to it"



Participant 3 who also received high scores on fluency, described that tasks requiring improvisation helped him to organize his thoughts and verbalize them rapidly. His subjective perception of fluency was equally high, underpinning the idea that such activities could be more useful in advanced classes.

This aligns with previous research suggesting that drama activities help reduce anxiety and improve self-esteem, thus encouraging more active participation in speaking (Amarullah & Rachmawaty, 2020; Kumar et al., 2022; Suseno, 2023).

P4, who had a moderate fluency score, also found the experience of playing a character in a drama helped her engage deeply with the English language. As “Mrs. Jewel”, she needed to express herself clearly and use varied tones, which was beneficial for her speaking fluency. P4 expressed:

"Playing the role of Mrs. Jewel helped me use a variety of expressions, tones, and sentence structures... It made me work hard to refine my speech"

She also mentioned that drama provided a more flexible learning environment compared to traditional methods, stating, *"In traditional methods, the focus is on grammar, while in drama, we can practice speaking more naturally"*.

While most participants perceived drama as a useful tool, some noted that more practical sessions would be helpful. P1 pointed out that, despite the benefits, *"we need more practical lessons to enhance our speaking fluency"*. This illustrates a need for deeper immersion with the language to complete the balance between theory and practical speaking skills.

This is consistent with previous research arguing that drama activities in language learning improve students' communicative competence in a wide range of areas. According to Kumar et al (2022), drama techniques assist in improving speaking skills including formation of sentences and fluency, which aligns with the participants' perception that they gained confidence through drama.

3. 1.2 Vocabulary Acquisition and Pronunciation Improvement



The majority of the participants found drama-based learning to be particularly beneficial in expanding their vocabulary and improving pronunciation. Participants noted that rehearsing scripts and speaking lines repeatedly helped them to remember words and phrases.

P1 commented:

"I learned a lot of new vocabulary because drama activities bring up many new words, especially in the scripts"

This corroborates with previous studies that highlight vocabulary retention as one of the central advantages of drama techniques in language instruction (Kumar et al., 2022). Through exposure to various contexts and scenarios in drama, students were able to apply and retain vocabulary that they might not encounter in traditional textbook learning.

Moreover, the theatrical context given an opportunity to use English in the practice of pronunciation which was helpful for those who wanted to enhance their spoken fluency.

P4 expressed that the drama context helped her refine her tone and pronunciation, saying:

"I had to speak clearly to convey my character's emotions, which really pushed me to focus on how I pronounce my words"

This aspect aligns with studies that emphasize the importance of practicing pronunciation in authentic contexts, such as drama activities, to improve speaking fluency (Salsabila & Megawati, 2024).

3. 1.3 Engagement with English in Real-Life Contexts

One of the benefits that participants reported was that they could use English in a more authentic way. Unlike typical classroom activities which may seem separated from real communication, drama activities enabled participants to role-play.

P2 shared:

"Drama allows us to learn English in a real situation. We get to practice how to speak formally and informally, and express emotions like happiness or anger"

Furthermore, P4 noted how drama helped her break away from the rigidity of traditional methods:



"In traditional methods, the focus is more on structure. Drama is more flexible, and that makes learning easier and more fun"

The participants were consistent in describing how effective drama was in making English learning more contextual. The high-level fluency participants, P3 and P1, shared that drama portrayed authentic communication. Their fluency levels indicate that they are able to use English in realistic situations. Apology and request role plays offered P2 and P4 some value, even if their assessments pointed to difficulties with real-time implementation. Therefore, all the participants acknowledged the value of drama for contextualized learning; however, their performance levels highlighted their deeper developmental stages.

The flexibility of drama allowed students to concentrate on the message rather than being overly concerned with the rules of grammar, which eases the process of speaking. This type of creativity in the classroom resonates with the work of Hymes (1972) on social interaction and participation in learning as the learners use language meaningfully in different situations to develop their communicative competence.

3. 2 Research Question 2: How does the memorization and scripted nature of drama impact students' ability to engage in spontaneous conversations?

Participants in this study shared varying opinions about how memorizing and following scripted drama activities impacted their ability to engage in spontaneous conversations. While many agreed that memorized dialogues contributed to improving their pronunciation and vocabulary retention, they felt that these activities did not fully prepare them for real-time, unscripted conversation.

3. 2.1 Memorization and Structured Speech Fluency

While drama activities were praised for building fluency in structured settings, participants felt that memorization did not significantly improve their ability to speak spontaneously in real conversations. Memorizing lines and following a script helped students articulate their ideas more clearly, but it was often seen as a limiting factor when it came to engaging in unscripted conversation.



P2 stated:

"Memorized scripts helped me with pronunciation and fluency, but they didn't improve my ability to engage in spontaneous conversations"

In the same way, P3 noted that memorization was useful for practicing dialogues but did not help with spontaneous speaking in unpredictable situations:

"I don't think it helps me very much, or perhaps other people. Because again, scripted drama, right? It's scripted, so you have to memorize dialogue. And it doesn't really help you with spontaneous conversation because you're not going to have that ability to think spontaneously if you're just memorizing things."

P3 expressed that:

"Because again, spontaneous conversation requires critical thinking, right? It requires you to think as fast as possible. And more like, scripted drama requires memorization, which are two different skill sets that you need."

Moderate-range scorers P2 and P4 claimed that while memorization equipped them with vocabulary, it did not allow for unrehearsed conversation. Their assessments did highlight unscripted speech supporting the theory that structured placements do not foster spontaneous abilities.

On the other hand, P1 and P3, despite high placed fluency scores, voiced the concern around the effect of memorization on non-rehearsed speech. Their performance, however, indicated that these students were likely to have been more positively impacted by the combination of tasks involving memorization and improvisation.

The inability to improvise in memorized scenarios seemed to hinder students' confidence in speaking off-script. This problem is examined in detail by other studies which concluded that scripted exercises improve vocabulary and pronunciation, but they do not foster the creativity and flexible thinking required for free conversation (Salsabila & Megawati, 2024). In line with these findings, participants in this study indicated that while memorization



was useful for learning specific phrases, it did not fully support their ability to navigate the complexities of real-time interactions.

3. 2.2 Impact of Improvisation on Spontaneous Speaking

While memorized drama was viewed as somewhat limiting for spontaneous speech, improvisation proved beneficial in enhancing the students' ability to speak more naturally. Many participants reported that the need to improvise or go off script helped them to think faster and use language in a more fluid and free manner.

P4 shared:

"When I forget my lines, I have to improvise, and that helps me improve my fluency"

For these learners, improvisation was useful because it helped them develop an immediate responsiveness to questions, which is crucial for free conversation.

The benefit of improvisation aligns with research suggesting that unscripted role-play activities are particularly effective in fostering the ability to engage in spontaneous communication (Salsabila & Megawati, 2024). Students become more flexible in their thought processes by practicing improvisation. This approach is aligned with the theory of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in terms of the emphasis placed on language use in actual contexts. Thus, it appeared that while the students benefited from being provided with a framework through memorization, improvisation was what refined their ability to speak spontaneously.

Teachers can employ numerous improvisation activities to encourage the development of spontaneous speech skills in the classroom. These include, role-play construction where students are provided with a particular setting and prompt and are required to converse with their classmates without any prior preparation. So-called 'situation cards' can also be implemented, requiring learners to talk through common social challenges or everyday situations using actual speech in real time. Another effective technique is deep freeze improvisation where students are prompted to stop mid-scene and change characters or direction instantly on a given cue. All these techniques resemble controlled but relaxed



instruction that promotes active proactive responsiveness or interaction with materials and the environment, therefore assisting students in gaining fluency of their skills.

Teachers can adopt these improvisational techniques to ensure the provision of a context that encourages learners to test the boundaries of language with minimal apprehension. Studies suggest that unscripted drama activities promote the autonomous and flexible usage of language, thus enhancing communication competence (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Maley & Duff, 2005). In addition, such scenario-based improvisation and extemporaneous dialogues are reported to enhance fluency and self-confidence of students learning English as a foreign language (Even, 2008; Stinson & Winston, 2011).

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of pre-service EFL students regarding the use of drama play in improving their speaking fluency, as well as the impact of memorization and scripted drama activities on their ability to engage in spontaneous conversations. The findings revealed that drama-based learning has a significant positive impact on students' speaking fluency, especially in terms of confidence, vocabulary acquisition, and pronunciation. Most participants affirmed that drama activities provided them with an opportunity to use English contextually which caused them to feel more comfortable as well as fluent while speaking.

The application of dramatization in EFL lessons has enabled learners to speak, both in an organized manner and freely. The participants, especially those who took part in the improvisational activities, noted that improvisation assisted them a great deal in the area of thinking on their feet and reacting to conversations in real-time. This aligns with existing research suggesting that spontaneous speaking requires the ability to be flexible, which is best cultivated in contexts that necessitate real-time decisions that have to be made on the spot. However, as beneficial as the memorization of scripts was in vocabulary accumulation and pronunciation enhancement, it did not promote the flexibility required in spontaneous



speaking. Therefore, an optimal approach, which incorporates both scripted and unscripted drama, seems to be the best strategy for enhancing speaking fluency for EFL learners.

Despite the positive impacts, the study also revealed some challenges, particularly in terms of the limitations posed by scripted drama activities. Participants felt that memorization hindered their ability to engage in more spontaneous conversations, as it encouraged reliance on pre-learned responses. This leaves a gap that suggests although drama has considerable merits for learners of English as a foreign language, further research is needed to find the ideal balance between scripted and unscripted activities to nurture genuine fluency in conversation.

Furthermore, although participants recognized the benefits of improvisation in drama course, some challenges impeded its proper and effective use across EFL classes. One of the most noted issues was the insufficient instructional time. In many cases, time constraints regarding the coursework and examination go hand-in-hand with a lack of time for improvisational activities. Participants also described some form of stage fright when performing improvisational activities, especially when done on the spot. Several participants highlighted feeling anxious when put on the spot to perform an improvisation, and without time for preparation.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has certain limitations. The small sample size, limited to a single university, restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader EFL populations. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data from interviews and reflective journals may introduce biases such as social desirability and inaccurate recall. Another limitation is the study's focus on scripted and memorized drama activities, with limited exploration of other drama techniques like physical theatre or interactive storytelling. Future research should address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples, employing objective speaking assessments, and examining a wider range of drama-based strategies to improve speaking fluency.



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