



# Students' Perceptions on Multicultural Classroom: A Case Study in One Private University in Medan

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**Abstract.** Culture and language are interconnected. Language teaching today is very sensitive to cultural issues, and rightly so. Being multicultural is inevitable in Indonesia, and diversity is national identity. Indeed, multicultural issue is something important in Indonesia due to the uniqueness and cultural diversity. This research was to explore students' perceptions on multicultural classroom and their cultural awareness to cultivate with the situation they face in the class. There were eight students participated in this research, they were the students of fourth semester in a major of English education study program in one private university in Medan. Case study qualitative research method design was used in this research. Collecting the data was done by using semi-structured interviews. Based on the findings, there were some major themes such as 1) The importance of multicultural classroom, 2) The uniqueness of multicultural classroom, 3) The challenges and barriers in the multicultural classroom, and 4) The ways to foster cultural awareness in a multicultural classroom. It is highly recommended that there will be a future research on the views of teachers who handle the multicultural classroom.

**Keywords:** English Language Teaching · Multicultural Classroom · Students' cultural awareness

## 1 Introduction

International English can be used both locally, among speakers of many cultures and languages within a single nation, and globally, among speakers of several nations. Kachru (2005) offers a model that portrays the classification of localized and nativized forms of English, known as World Englishes, using three concentric circles: Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle. First, inner (normproviding), the primary language acquired as a native language and used as dominant language such as United States, England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Second, outer (normdeveloping) has a colonial history; acquired as a second language and primarily used in major institutions and in multilingual contexts such as Malaysia, Singapore, India, Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi. Third, expanding (normdependent), no colonial history; learned as a foreign language (EFL) and used for international communication;

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no distinct status or function in institutional domains such as China, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Brazil, Russia, and many other nations. In short, language learners need to know deeply about the issue of English status in the world in term of a means of communication, the function of culture in learning English, then teachers of English language also need to dig much deeper about their role especially in teaching methods that can support on the constructive development of the English language learners do have, however, the potential to use the language as a conduit for fostering a multicultural identity, surprising as this may sound at first. To begin with, they may not be conversant in each other's languages and cultures when they speak among themselves. They must therefore acquire some degree of cross-cultural flexibility, which entails a steady accumulation of insights into other cultures' norms, beliefs, and behavior patterns, in order to completely understand the interlocutor's message and to be reasonably understandable. The urge to strengthen interlocutors' cultural adaptability for communication purposes will unavoidably grow over time as users contribute to them through their own regional or national identities, eventually leading to the emergence of a multicultural identity.

Moreover, to link us with people around the world, we need a means to communicate. English, of course, as the very appropriately flexible means to use as our communication means. There are still many other languages that known by people. But the most popular and useful is English. For few decades, English explores most countries in the world. It is used by people in anywhere and anytime. Therefore, it is vividly correct to say that English is as a world lingua franca. Nowadays, mastering English is such a special need. Indeed, there are a lot of ways to do to learn English especially in Indonesia. It can be done through both formal and informal education at school by many ways like tolerate diversity, learn the language through its culture, understand its context, and know methods that can make easier learning English.

In line with the explanation above, many people are interested in learning and mastering language than any other languages. Malaysia, as for instance, their national language is Malay actually but more than 80% people use English in their daily life. Besides Malaysian, Indian is one of the most country which used English as their major means in communication. Their first language is Hindi but they also master English. They use English in every occasion. Since English is benefit for all aspects of life like political and economical aspects, science and technology, knowledge and education. Thus, people become more excited and attracted to master English today. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, English has been taught started from kindergarten up to university level. The advantages of learning English is to know the development of language, science, and technology since most of the books, articles, journals, news, are written in English. Realizing the importance of English, the Indonesian government treats English as the first foreign language and set is as a local content subject for elementary school, compulsory subject for junior and senior high school, then public major language for university level.

In this case, education offers an interesting case to learn it. Schools are competitive to develop their methods for teaching English in order to take parent's interested to believe their children to study. It is not odd to find many schools in Indonesia doing constructive ways to get attention not only in state schools but also most private schools. They try to offer the very best education such as renew their teaching methods, involve English as their teaching instruction (for bilingual school), provide a major teaching strategy.

Further, it is so challenging for all English language teachers to guide the learners to master their English skill. Teachers have many homeworks to deliver their capability in teaching English as it is important nowadays.

## 2 Literature Review

The idea of English as a global language, with a desire to discover and comprehend not only the culture of the target language, such as British or AmHerican culture, but also various cultures around the world. Therefore, it is crucial to increase student cultural awareness in addition to enhancing English learners' linguistic proficiency. This is because providing specialized cultural knowledge (such as target language culture and/or local culture) passively in the English classroom has its disadvantages.

Brutt-Griffler (2002) identifies four central features of the development of global language: (1) Econocultural functions of the language; world English is the product of the development of a world market and global developments in the fields of science, technology, culture and the media, (2) The transcendence of the role of an elite lingua franca; World English is learned by people at various levels of society, not just by the socio-economic elite, (3) The stabilization of bilingualism through the coexistence of world language with other languages in bilingual/multilingual contexts; World English tends to establish itself alongside local languages rather than replacing them, and so contributes to multilingualism rather than jeopardize it, (4) Language change via the processes of world language convergence and world language divergence; World English spreads due to the fact that many people learn it rather than by speakers of English migrating to other areas; thus two processes happen concurrently: new varieties are created and unity in the world language is maintained.

Additionally, it is common for interlocutors to contribute to the cultural context of a conversation in any particular second language while also learning about the culture of the other party. Each cross-cultural interaction will therefore inevitably increase the interlocutor's cultural adaptability through intercultural awareness and open the door to multiculturalism. Every culture seems to seek a place for their brand of English and to be welcomed into the English-speaking world. However, once we leave the English subcultures and enter a global context, we need a standard form of the language that will enable quick comprehension and clear up any misconceptions or ambiguities regarding idiomatic expressions, grammar, phonetics, and/or lexis. Despite the challenges and impediments to English language teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms like Indonesia, effective teaching skills promote healthy learning abilities. As Tania Pattison (2013, p. 23) has observed, effective teaching requires that teachers of English in second language settings possess high levels of personal proficiency and extensive understanding of how foreign language pedagogy can help learners to develop their abilities. In multicultural classrooms, learners are more readily susceptible to learning English if teachers show adequate mastery and high proficiency of English. Effective teaching of English in foreign language classrooms generally demands that teachers get ready to develop a set of digital competencies suitable for this internet age including technology awareness, integrating content into the curriculum, developing new forms of classrooms, and using tools to create new materials.

Once the students communicate common perspectives among themselves, they become an identity group. Bennett (2003) has described cultural identity in terms of individual's relationships to dominant cultural groups. Dominant group can replace the marginal mother tongues and this can be ascribed into new identity. There are two essential responses which effective learning of English can induce in multicultural classrooms. These are inscribed and encapsulated into two paradigms called encapsulated marginality and constructive marginality. These terms have used to describe what happens in group and identity affiliations. He argued that group affiliations can affect the identity of individuals. In other words, effective teaching and learning of English in multicultural classroom has the capacity to transform the identities of disparate, diverse and multilingual people (Moran 2001, p. 103). In Indonesia therefore, English serves as a means of social and group identification with other students from different ethnic societies in the classrooms. Therefore, effective teaching of English can promote cultural hybridity.

### **3 Research Method**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

Creswell (2007) mentions that qualitative data is always in the form of words not numbers and it describes the data on the sets of social and natural. Researcher used case study qualitative research method design and focused on exploratory case study. According to its purpose, this research was done to get participants' views and insights towards the case around them. In short, This research was to explore the students' perceptions on multicultural classroom and to gain insight on their cultural awareness to those situations.

#### **3.2 Data Context and Participant**

Research was done in one private university in Medan. There were eight college students participated in this research. They are all the fourth semester students of English Education Study Program. Researcher selected those eight participants based on their availability and willingness. Researcher also considered essential factor to select the participants, that was students' backgrounds.

#### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

Researcher collected the data by using in-depth interviews with the eight participants. Researcher did the interview with participants individually at the different time. So that, interview was conducted in more than two months. Researcher prolonged the interview until the data was saturated (Creswell 2012). Researcher recorded the interview digitally. Before having the interview, researcher ensured the participants' time availability then set the place to do the interview. So that, each interview was done based on participants' willingness. They were free to express what they want and need. Researcher did not force them. This included the use of language they wanted to use during the interview. Researcher let them free to choose what language they were comfortable with. Creswell (2007) added that the next stage after collecting the data was transcribing and coding.

Researcher transcribed the data. Researcher also coded the data based on their similarities and differences. Researcher, of course, eliminated all pointless data that would not potentially answer the research question. After coding, researcher categorized the data into some major themes and sub-themes.

## 4 Findings

The findings of the research were purposed to meet the research question. There were some major themes such as 1) The importance of multicultural classroom, 2) The uniqueness of multicultural classroom, 3) The challenges and barriers in the multicultural classroom, and 4) The ways to foster cultural awareness in a multicultural classroom.

### 4.1 The Importance of Multicultural Classroom

The development of information, attitudes, and skills necessary for functioning within one's own ethnicity (microculture), the nation (macroculture), other ethnicities, and the global community is a major objective of intercultural education. Therefore, the teaching's implications should be greater empathy, connection, sensitivity to others' needs, a more individualized learning method, sensitivity to learning styles and features, and familiarity with group characteristics (Moran 2001).

**Student 1.** Said that "I learned a lot from having multicultural classroom. I did not only learn about the language but also each individual in the class. Some friends of mine come from different ethnics and races. I learned about how to respect each other".

**Student 2.** Was in line with student 1, "I learned more about individual's differences in the multicultural classroom. My friends and I had many differences in terms of language, status, race, knowledge, and many more. But, we should be together in one class where we learned the same language, that was English. So that we respected each other".

**Student 3 and 7.** Had similar answers, they mentioned that "From the very beginning, I realized that everyone had different background, especially language. I saw my friends were not all from Medan. Some of them were bataknese, 'melayu deli', javanese, indian, chinese and many more. Since that, I should adjust myself with the diversity we have in the class. They spoke their own language in their daily life. Basically, language and culture were bonding each other. Hence, I was multiculturally affected in the classroom. This was why I need to know that multicultural classroom was very important to me. It gave me many things to learn. One of them was to control emotions when we were diverse in giving opinion toward something and so on".

**Student 4 and 6.** Told the same views, "We learn English and also the cultures of those countries that own English. We also learned different accents, gestures used in some countries, pronunciation, and many more. It was so fun and interesting to learn all the things in the same time. Meanwhile, we needed to consider our multicultural differences too. That was totally awesome".

**Student 5.** Said "Multicultural classroom made me interested to learn more about many things. One main thing was that the language used in the classroom. We did not only learn English and its cultures, but we also learn how to bond with the differences".

**Student 8.** Stated that “We would never know if we did not try to understand the situation around us. I believed that multicultural classroom had so many positive impact especially in the way I viewed things diversely”.

## 4.2 The Uniqueness of Multicultural Classroom

Diversity phenomenon, actually, is stated on national symbol “Bhineka Tunggal Ika”, it meant “Unity in diversity”. Indeed, Indonesia’s uniqueness and cultural diversity make the multicultural issue a significant one here. It is impossible to isolate this phenomenon from Indonesia’s political and social transformation. However, Indonesia needs to reconsider its own vision of multicultural education. The multicultural educational system devise the educational institution to respond demands, needs and aspirations of the various groups of students (Banks et al. 2010). Another point that multicultural education is education for cultural diversity, or education for “people of colour”. The term Multicultural education has described a wide variety of programs and practices. This program is related to educational equity, gender, ethnic groups, language minorities, low income groups, and people with disabilities (Banks et al. 2010).

**Student 1 and 4.** Had the same point of view, “the more we knew the diversity of ours, the stronger we will become. The diversity raised our cultural awareness to the fullest. It made us usual with the diversity. We never underestimated people and labelled them based on their gender, equity and ethnic.

**Student 2.** Stated, “it was unique when I got to know that my friends and I were totally different. This uniqueness was not separated us but united us. We become much more spiritfull to enrich our vocabulary and to improve our English skills”.

**Student 3 and 5.** Mentioned that “the most uniqueness thing I know so far was the diversity would never put us away but motivate us to become much stronger. Diversity taught us to see that world was so wide to hate the differences and to see the things by one side merely. Most importantly, in learning English, we did not learn the language only but also its culture. In terms of using the right gestures, choosing the right word for a particular situation, addressing something to somebody, and many more. Therefore, I personally felt that multicultural classroom was absolutely the right place to learn about the language and culture.

**Student 6.** Said, “I learnt a lot about pronunciation and accent. Regarding to its kind of world Englishers pronunciation, I could choose where I need to concern at. For instance, English-American, English-British, English-Australian, and many more. They had the same goals but diverse in some fields. One of them was pronunciation. The way to pronounce such words would be different with others. So that, I could learn much from this”.

**Student 7.** Was in line with student 6, “talking about diversity, I would think that was awesome when I learned English hardly and tried to get a near native accent. On the other hand, I realized that I owned a strong accent too. I am a javanese and it would be so funny when I tried to speak English with this accent. I was trying so hard to speak English well with this strong accent. I learned English for more than seven years but still my Javanese accent dominated my English speaking. Therefore, my friends in class laughed out loud everytime I spoke English with Japanese accent. It did not mean that they mocked me, they even said that I was a unique English speaker, and it could be my

own characteristic. Everytime they listened me speaking English, they would know me without looking at me directly.

**Student 8.** Said that, "This was not my first time to be in multicultural classroom. When I was in senior high school, I also entered a bilingual school. We had multi languages in the classroom. But the most language used in class was English. We rarely used Bahasa. But all students in my class were mostly able to speak in other languages too. Some of them were good at Chinese, some were good at Japan and many more. English united us, we used it as a means of communication. It was so funny when some of us trying to speak with our most favorite language at one time. That situation was chaos and we did not know what we speak about. Then, it was being our joyful moment. We would love to do it everytime we felt bored with the lesson. We made it fun.

### 4.3 The Challenges and Barriers in the Multicultural Classroom

Bennett et al. (2003) has described cultural identity in terms of individual's relationships to dominant cultural groups. Dominant group can replace the marginal mother tongues and this can be ascribed into new identity. This term has used to describe what happens in group and identity affiliations. He argued that group affiliations can affect the identity of individuals. In other words, effective teaching and learning of English in multicultural classroom has the capacity to transform the identities of disparate, diverse and multilingual people (Kachru 2005).

**Student 1.** Said, "It was so hard to understand the differences around us. We argue about many things during the class but we also solved the problems as well. When I was in a good mood, I could adjust myself to the people around me but when I was on another way around, I felt like I could not help myself anymore. The differences put me down. You know, my friends did not care with others' feelings. All they know was just their perceptions and themselves".

**Student 2.** Mentioned, "One of my biggest challenges I faced in the class was having difference perceptions. We all did not come from the same background. One was Chinese, others were Indians, some were Bataknese, and the rests were from others' ethnics. These backgrounds, of course, affect our point of view towards something. Friends of mine in the class believed that the arguments around us were not formed by the diversities but our perceptions, for instance. Even though, I personally thought that point of view was a part of cultural differences because each place has its own way to point on something due to beliefs, customs, and many more".

**Student 3.** Said that, "The challenge and barriers I had was the language and its elements. Since we came from difference places, our teachers obligate us to speak in one language, that was English. My English language skills were not really good. I had adequate vocabulary and many grammatical errors. I could not pronounce the word well. Then, I was not confident with my Javanese accent, it sounded so weird when I spoke English. I was trying so hard to be able to use the language and to improve my English skills too. I always worried everytime I speak English. I worried about somebody's comment, judgement and so on. Therefore, I prefer to choose silent all the time I was in class. I would speak if the teachers asked me".

**Student 4.** Was having the same problem with student 3, "I was difficult to pronounce the word correctly. I could not deal with the accents. My own accents dominate my

English accent. Hence, my English spoken sounded so weird. I practiced a lot to improve my English accent but it failed. This Indian accent sounded stronger than my English accent”.

**Student 5.** Told that, “I was still trying to comprehend the way my friends speak in the class. Their background impacted so much on the way they speak. For instance, some friends of mine who were genuinely Bataknese would speak with high tone and strong accent. Meanwhile, some of my Javanese friends were always confused on why their Bataknese friends could not speak slowly and calmly. They thought that their Bataknese friends always speak like that in almost all situation and condition. They were not even angry with somebody, that was the way they speak. I myself knew it actually but I still questioned it on my mind. Even though, I realized that was one of the effects of their background. It was challenging me so much”.

**Student 6 and 7.** Expressed the same views, “My emotional intelligence was my biggest challenge and barrier in this class. We had a lot of differences and I ought to learn to comprehend it all. I need to control my emotional everytime I got stuck on something that was not in line with mine. For instance, my friends and I debated about some different words between American and British English. They were written differently but they have the same meaning. Thus, we argued about it. That was a simple thing but it happened for many times where I could not handle and control my emotions. The teachers told us that we need to learn to accept the differences, including opinion differences”.

**Student 8.** Said that, “It was challenging me on how to deal with the things we all bring to the class. We were not the same in many aspects like point of view, beliefs, customs, gestures, skills, and many more. We were together for more than 2 years but I still did not find the way to deal with it especially when the diversities hit and put us on arguments. I still considered that mine was the correct one and I forgot to respect somebody. I tried so hard to wake me up that I was in multicultural class and I need to learn to be more comprehending the differences”.

#### 4.4 The Ways to Foster Cultural Awareness in a Multicultural Classroom

The English language classroom provides an obvious multicultural context for learning, and teachers need to help students understand and appreciate the differences and similarities among the various ethnic, religious and cultural groups. Positive values, for example, an acceptance and conceptual understanding of difference, are important to success (Jenkins 2011). Students can learn about their own cultures by watching adults who are conscious of their own culture and how it affects how we approach lessons. Students are continuously exposed to our ideals by the way we speak—or do not speak—about specific people and those from various cultural backgrounds. Multiculturalism must be injected or infused into the curriculum if we want our children to comprehend culture and how it affects others.

**Student 1.** Told that, “I realized that we all were different and these differences unite us to be better. Therefore, I respected the differences by ignoring my personal matters”.

**Student 2 and 5.** Had the same views, they told that, “I appreciate the differences and similarities among us by understanding individual’s personal life. I thought that there was nothing more important than our uniqueness to be involved in this class. We were multiculturally formed by each other. So that we needed to understand it well”.



**Student 3.** Said that, "I awared that there would be positive impacts for everything. Hence, I needed to put positive values on myself first. When I was in positive way, there would be positive things too".

**Student 4 and 8.** Had the same statements, "I choose to not talk and complaint about each individual matters in the class because I realized that we brought different background to the class since the very first time. One way I did to deal with this was I tried to blend myself with all people. I meant, I did not want to make friends with those who were from the same background with me only. I was trying to build good relationship with everyone. So that we could learn each other".

**Student 6.** Stated that, "More less, I learned about my friends' cultures too. Learning someone's culture would bring me to the point on how to understand others too. I explored many cultural differences from this class. If I got the differences I could compete with, I would be more grateful but if it was on the other hand, I meant it was not based on my expectation, I would try to understand it slowly".

**Student 7.** Stated that, "I believed that both accepting and understanding were crucial in this case. I accepted all the differences we had by not mocking and comparing it with mine. Then, I also understood it by realizing that we were borned differently and everyone has their own uniqueness".

## 5 Conclusion and Suggestion

Indonesia is full of culture. One province includes many diversities. There are more than thirty provinces. So, there are totally more than one hundred diversives. It, of course, is huge things to consider before deciding to be English teachers. They need to know students' characteristics at first. Since students have different backgrounds include status social, knowledge, skill, so on. Teachers have to know that every student comes with different thing to the table. Then, teachers' duty is to unite them in term of teaching and learning English. In this case, teachers should view and consider many angles. It seems not easy to teach students with a lot of different backgrounds. Teaching multicultural class is for sure hard but challenging. As a teacher of multicultural classroom, teacher must move forward to find any solution that can help them to be successful in teaching the students.

There are many ways for students to adapt themselves in multicultural classroom. First of all, students should realize that they differ each other. When they know they are different, teachers can play their role, that is to guide students to respect one to another. Notice them that diversity is not racist, they have to hold hand each other. Based on our Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, Indonesia never distincts their Indonesian, everyone has their own right to have better life. So, it is similar to the education. Everyone is definitely having their own right to have better education. Therefore, students must tolerate the diversity. They should respect their friends all the ways they are, it is not merely about their different races but also in different opinions. By these things, teachers have to be really carefull. Their place is in the middle and as the central for those students. Teachers should mediate students in every corner. It is crucial to educate students about tolerance in the very beginning because if it is not educated at the first, they will never know that they are different and this way will not make them hate each other but unite them in

diversity. After they get to know about it very well, students will respect their friends including respect a little thing like argument about different opinion. When they put it in their mind, it can be seen definitely that the process of teaching and learning will be helpful.

Moreover, teachers look like a driver who takes handling a vehicle to the purpose, if they drive well then they will reach the purpose in right but another way around, if they drive it carelessly, they will never reach their goal but come into wrong hole. In this case, it is clear to see that teachers have important place in teaching and learning process. In the multicultural classroom, for instance, teachers need to be smart to place themselves in any situation among the distinctive students. They may not choose to those smarter or better students, they must be wise for all. They should treat the students in the same way no matter where the students come from and what they are. Students have their own right to get the same treatment. However, to solve these variances, teachers ought to mix them during the process of teaching and learning in the classroom. Students may not group based on their community or race but they should be combined to make them aware that there will be no gap in the classroom. This way, for sure, will give good impact because students are going to share everything together in terms of their divergence.

It is not only students who demanded to tolerate the differences but also the teachers. It occurs when teachers face a situation where the students give different point of view. A wise teacher will understand and accept any diversities. It is shown in a form of understanding those diversities by not directly saying it to the students. Teachers should have trick to deliver their misconception to the students in very polite way to avoid sensitivity of the students. In Indonesia, many teachers break students' intention to learn English through this way. They sometimes do not realize that they did mistakes. Teachers with bad attitudes will bring students down. So that many students do not really want to learn English. Some of them think that English is difficult and they do not have purpose to learn it. It is mostly happened that students lose their self-confidence and feel reluctant to learn English because of the teachers. When they make mistake, teachers directly correct them on the spot and it makes them shy. Meanwhile, their friends will mock them through their mistakes then the teachers do nothing for that. They just go flowing and let anything happened. They do not think the future impact even they never think that it will influence the students' intention. In short, from previous case, a teacher in multicultural classroom should be provided with very positive attitudes to face those diversities of students.

Moreover, a multicultural student should involve the target culture when learning English following with Indonesian culture. It is one of important things to be included in English learning because the formula of learning English is also to know deeply its culture. Learning English without learning the culture will be meaningless. This, for example, a student who learns speaking must explain much more about how a good speaking in the occasion of native speaker. The way people speak between Indonesian and native speaker is much different so that students need to make them clear. Students can pick suitable conversation in the right situation. More details, students need to know what possible to use or useless if they talk to native speaker then they need to distinguish every culture in Indonesia itself. If they speak to people who come from java and people from Sumatera (especially in South and North Sumatera), these both provinces consider

different ways in speaking. Javanese speak smoothly and politely. On the other hand, Sumatera people speak loud and rough even it does not mean that they are being mad but their nature. In short, this proves that learning English equal learning its culture.

To sum up, English is as a means for communication that link people from one country to another. Its status, of course, is very vividly said as international language which unite all countries around the world. Knowing its position in the eyes of the world, even there are many other languages, English is one of much crucial languages that needed to be mastered. Learning language equals learning its culture because language and culture are both things interconnected. Besides, based on the explanation above, by realizing how important English is and its culture, there are many ways that can be done by multicultural students. To state them briefly, first, students need to realize that they have to treat their friends who come from different background in the same way. Second, students should not be grouped, they must interact with others. Students need to be taught about respecting others. They also need to give more understanding about the differences so that they will love the diverse among them all. The diversity is not all that matters as long as they respect each other. Next, to help students, it is far more important to understand learners' needs and apply the most appropriate teaching model to benefit them in terms of improving their linguistic competence, helping them to develop their intercultural communicative competence and also raising their multicultural awareness. The more teacher gives an exposure about the culture of the target language the better the student's English understanding and skill will be.

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