

# **Construction of an English Language Teacher Identity: Perceptions and Contrasts in Mexico<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Whilst the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Mexico heavily emphasises communicative and meaningful language use, less attention has been paid to identity and emotions in the classroom and especially teacher identity and emotions. In this article, we take the specific example of Mexican BA students who are studying to be EFL teachers. We examine how their affective attitudes influence their self-perceived identities as teachers and how their BA programmes have worked at fostering those identities.

## **Resumen**

Mientras que la enseñanza de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL) en México enérgicamente hace hincapié en el uso del lenguaje comunicativo y significativo, se ha prestado menos atención a la identidad y las emociones en el aula y en especial la identidad del docente y sus emociones. En este artículo, tomamos el ejemplo concreto de los estudiantes mexicanos que estudian la licenciatura para ser profesores de inglés. Examinamos cómo sus actitudes afectivas influyen en sus identidades auto-percibidas como maestros y cómo las programas de licenciatura fomentan esas identidades.

## **Introduction**

English Language Teacher (ELT) education programmes in Mexico generally have the clear-cut and straightforward aim of producing *en masse* enough teachers to satisfy the growing demand for qualified instructors throughout the private and public sectors of the country. By following a pre-established and neatly sectioned programme taught by teacher educators, student teachers are expected to learn and put to use established methodologies and the so-called four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) along with grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Teacher training programmes focus on the ideational (Halliday, 1973/1997) aspect of teaching by striving to make sure that prospective teachers have the necessary pedagogical knowledge and competence in order to teach effectively. This knowledge and competence is to be attained from studying courses or modules on didactic areas such as teaching methodologies and materials design. Upon graduating from the programme, therefore, the prospective language teachers should be ready for the classroom. Missing from this equation, however, is the interpersonal (Halliday, 1973/1997) dimension which includes personal and interactional abilities. Personal abilities reflect how the teacher feels and wants to

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come across whilst the interactional abilities reflect how he or she wants to relate to others. Such interpersonality and interactionality, however, seem quite scarce in teacher education programmes in Mexico, primarily because the student teachers' personal identities, values, and attitudes are rarely considered in the programmes and less so their feelings and emotions in interacting with others (Ramírez-Romero & Pamplón Irigoyen, 2012).

Consequently, the purpose with this article is to explore this aspect of teacher learning. This exploration involves an open-ended questionnaire applied to student teachers studying at Mexican BA programmes in teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). This leads us to first explore the nature of student teacher identity and values in critical language teacher education (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) in order to understand how the student teachers position themselves personally in the classroom; secondly, to examine the importance of the student teachers' feelings and emotions as part of critical applied linguistics (Benesch, 2012) in order to recognize how they attempt to interact with others; and thirdly, to examine how student teachers critically examine their role in the EFL classroom (Widin, 2010). The results indicate that student teachers are more aware of their identity than they are of their need to question current theory and work toward change in Mexican society.

### **Teaching Self and Identity**

Teacher education courses invariably involve the Self and identity. What do we mean by these terms? The Self, first of all, can be considered "people's sense of who they are" mainly according to their own perceptions (Ivanic, 1998, p. 10); that is, the Self can be distinguished from the "person" which is thought of as one's sense of her/himself as based on external views and social practices (1998, p. 10). Mixing the "person" and the "self" results in "identity". This can be considered as our "who"-ness as formed by how we understand ourselves and how we consider that we are understood by others (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 152). This at once internalized and externalized "who"-ness or identity can be generalized as well as specific, pertaining to one's particular affiliations such as family member (family identity), writer (writer identity), and teacher (teacher identity) (Hyland, 2006, p. 314).

Furthermore, identities are often "constructed in interaction, rather than fixed" (Silverman, 2004, p. 62). One example would be a "student teacher identity" fostered by teacher education courses which include teaching practicums. As stated earlier, these courses are often neatly segmented into discrete units which, after taken successively, result in teacher certification. As Kumaravadivelu (2012) states, current programs in teacher education courses usually move the student first through language development courses and then on through didactic courses, culminating in a teaching practicum in a classroom (p. 126). This teacher education approach, according to Kumaravadivelu (2012), follows a "transmission" model whereby the teacher educator relays "easily digestible bits and pieces of personal and professional knowledge to student teachers" while fostering a "master-pupil relationship" which prevents the student teachers from creating "their own visions and versions of teaching" (p. 8). These teacher education courses reflect Halliday's ideational approach (1973/1997) where understanding content and logical explanation and the experiences of teacher educators are key to teacher

development. In contrast, an interpersonal approach is much more concerned with "the expression of our own personalities and personal feelings on the one hand, and forms of interaction and social interplay with other participants in the communication situation on the other hand" (Halliday, 1973/1997, p. 36). Rather than being subjugated to following a prescribed method and techniques, student teachers are encouraged to develop their own beliefs, attitudes and values and relate them to their histories and experiences taken from their first language and in the target language.

Purely focusing on the content components in teacher education courses promotes what Freire (1993) sees as a "banking approach" (p. 53). In such an officious environment, student teachers depend on the expert teacher for knowledge and development. Drawing parallels between learning and filing documents, Freire describes the teacher handing students "communiques" in the form of sheets of paper and the students simply storing those papers in a filing container (1993, p. 53). Following up on Freire's satiric analogy, Kumaravadivelu (2012) offers an alternative scenario. He argues that "achieving desirable goals in teaching depends on the kind of teaching Self that teachers bring with them, and understanding the teaching Self is all about understanding one's identities, beliefs and values" (*ibid.*, p. 68). It hence seems the local teaching and learning context allows student teachers to recognise and define their own identities, beliefs and values. In a wider sense, then, identity involves constructing individuality as an evolving and open-ended process; as a result, one is able to confirm and strengthen one's beliefs and values as well as to question, discard and replace them. Generally speaking, "beliefs" can be considered "views, propositions and convictions one dearly holds, consciously or unconsciously, about the truth value of something" (*ibid.*, p. 60) while "values" can be considered "beliefs about what is right and good" (Johnston, 2003, p.10).

To this end, Kumaravadivelu (2012) calls on teacher trainers to encourage their students to examine different postnational, postmodern, postcolonial, post-transmission and postmethod perspectives. In examining such viewpoints, student teachers can reflect on how they approach the teaching of English as a foreign language. More specifically, as Kumaravadivelu (2012) explains, the postnational perspective requires the teacher educator as well as the student teachers to consider both the local and global in terms of culture and economics; the postmodern perspective, the diversity of knowledge and identity; the postcolonial perspective, the importance of combating the vestiges of coloniality in the educational environment; the post-transmission perspective, the possibility that teacher-education programs may affect social transformation; and the postmethod perspective, the capacity of teachers to theorize from their daily practice (p. 11). These four perspectives make student teachers aware of "principles" rather than methods or methodology. One such "principle" is that termed "particularity". This principle holds that learning must be situated contextually: "Any teacher education programme must therefore be sensitive to the local individual, institutional, social, and cultural contexts in which learning and teaching take place; if not, it will soon become ineffective and irrelevant" (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 13). The practicality principle questions the division between theory and practice and calls on practising teachers to engage in constructing meaningful classroom knowledge. Another principle is that termed "possibility". Following Freire, the "possibility principle" calls on teachers and

learners to “contest practices of domination...by making the relationship between language and power explicit” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 14). This approach to teacher education positions teacher identity as a pro-active participant within a specific context who questions and challenges the *status quo*.

In this research study, we are interested in how student teachers see their own such identity both inside and outside the classroom. It is important to mention here that the student teacher identity, as with any sort of identity, remains in flux or in constant construction (Casanave & Vandrick, 2003, p. 6). It would be continually discovered, reaffirmed, and negotiated by the person (in this case, the student teacher) who repeatedly situates her/his Self within her/his relationships to others, within with her/his own socio-cultural history, and within the shared understandings of her/his community such as that of English educators (Hyland, 2006, p. 314; Tsui , 2007, p. 660).

## **Feelings and Opposition**

While Kumaravadivelu (2012) calls on student teachers to develop perspectives and principles in terms of identity, values and beliefs regarding language teaching, Benesch (2012) underscores the importance of teacher emotions in the EFL context as part of critical applied linguistics (CAL). One of the aims of CAL is to “address relationships between language and power, broadening the teaching/learning context to include socio-political dimensions” (Benesch, 2012, p. 32). Arguing that CAL has not paid sufficient attention to emotions, Benesch (2012) focuses on the “struggle between what teachers are feeling and what they believe they ought to be feeling while they’re teaching” (p. 118). Such feelings and emotions may be related to their students, the classroom context, teaching conditions, school practices and educational policies and may range from joy and happiness to anger and frustration. All too often teachers are expected to suppress and hide their feelings and emotions in the EFL classroom. However, such behaviour conceals classroom realities where teachers may have both positive and negative emotions. It is vital to uncover such realities and thereby identify those positive emotions which prove advantageous to the teacher and students. For instance, Zembylas (2005), who identifies “emotions” as ethically, morally, and cognitively situated feelings, contends that that the emotional landscape within the classroom reflects the social, cultural, and political reality outside the classroom (pp. xix, xxv, 201-205). Zembylas further contends that directly being aware of and encouraging emotions shared by teachers and students alike, such as an “intense enthusiasm for poetry writing in English”, is as important as, or more important than, specific didactic techniques (pp. 201-205). Zembylas refers to this as an educationally and socially responsible posture which he calls “wholistic” teaching (p. xxv).

We, therefore, would argue that student teachers need to be guided on managing their emotions rather than trying to subdue them. First of all, student teachers need to know that it is normal to have both positive and negative emotions. Secondly, because classroom emotions can be misinterpreted, student teachers need guidance on deducing students’ feelings. Thirdly, student teachers need to know what resources are available when dealing with emotions. In this article, we are interested in identifying student teachers’ emotions as a first step towards “emotion management” (Benesch, 2012, p. 129).

Further underscoring the importance of socio-political dimensions to ELT, Widin (2010) notes that "the spread of English is not necessarily benign" (p. 14). All too often, English is seen as opening up a land of opportunity which is often promoted by ELT materials: "Textbooks often depict dominant western societies as problem free, and this leads to notions of idealised societies where students can think there are no injustices, discrimination and social disharmony" (Widin, 2010, p. 15). Furthermore, there is the self-assumed expertise of the BANA (Britain, Australia and North America) countries: "The ELT field, dominated by "so-called native speaking countries", continues to think itself the leader in teaching English, that it has the correct, appropriate and exportable approaches and methodology" (Widin, 2010, p. 119). It is therefore important to know how student teachers view and react to sociocultural and political aspects of ELT.

## **Research Methodology**

In order to understand how student teachers seem to view the teaching Self (Kumaravadivelu, 2012), the emotional side to teaching (Benesch, 2012) and their sociocultural environment (Widin 2010), we administered a an open-ended written questionnaire to thirty-five students studying a BA programme in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) at two Mexican universities, *Universidad de Guadalajara* (U de G) and *Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca* (UABJO). The U de G is located in the third most economically advantaged state within Mexico whilst the UABJO is situated within the third most economically marginalised state; in addition, the U de G students are mostly from urban environments, whilst the UABJO students are mostly from rural areas. Together reflecting both urban and rural backgrounds and spanning a wide swath of socio-economic class from the lower working class to the upper middle class, the U de G and the UABJO, when seen as combined, seem to represent the university environment to be found in Mexico at large. However, in the study we do not attempt to compare perceptions and attitudes but rather to include a range of observations and attitudes. At both U de G and UABJO, students in the final year of their BA TEFL programme were selected to participate in the study since they could reflect on their four-year experience as student teachers. The students were between 20 and 25 years old.

We asked the students to reflect on the following questions and write a response of approximately 75 to 100 words for each question:

1. *What is your identity? That is: How do you see yourself?*
2. *Is the way you see yourself (number 1 above) different when you are at the university and from when you are outside of the university? Or is it the same?*
3. *Are the above characteristics, traits, or qualities (numbers 1 and 2 above) necessary to have in order to be a good teacher? Why? Briefly explain.*
4. *Think about those characteristics, traits, or qualities that, in your opinion, make a good teacher. Do you lack any of these qualities? If so, please identify one or two of them, and briefly explain why they are important.*
5. *Is there any specific thing (concept, theory, model, idea, etc.) that you have learned so far in any course within the B.A. program that you think will prove very important for you as a future teacher of English? How will it prove helpful?*

Questions 1 and 2 focus on identity and the Self and how students want to come across or be perceived by others. The idea of having more than one identity was probed by asking students whether felt they had different identities inside and outside the university. Questions 3 and 4 asked respondents to reflect on beliefs regarding the characteristics, traits or qualities of "good" teachers and what may be lacking. This indirectly invited respondents to think and write about their emotions and feelings. Finally, question 5 probed the relevance of course content to the student teachers' future professional lives and therefore encouraged critical thinking, especially in terms of Kumaravadivelu's (2012) concepts of particularity, practicality and possibility. In total, by reflecting on and answering all the questions, each student produced a written text of about 375 to 500 words.

## **Research Findings and Discussion**

We present our findings in terms of how student teachers see themselves (identity), how they feel (emotions) and what they are trying to achieve as teachers (critical reflection).

### *Identity*

In terms of identity, respondents often saw their identity in terms of gender, geographical location, community, and profession. For instance, the one UABJO student said: "I am a "Serrana", because I have lived almost all my life in my hometown which is located in the Sierra Juarez." Therefore her identity seems rooted in her community. Meanwhile another UABJO student saw the importance of gender: "I am an Oaxacan woman who wants to finish her degree." By relating gender to an academic degree, this student appeared to see her identity as a struggle to assert herself. A U de G student described herself similarly and started off by saying: "I see myself as a happy woman." Meanwhile, one Oaxacan student saw herself in artistic terms: "I'm a folkloric dancer, so I am quite aware of what I am and who I am so I don't need to pretend to be someone else."

Twenty-four of the thirty-five respondents saw their identity in terms of interacting with others. For instance, one U de G respondent said: "I see myself as a language teacher, who is really patient and who cares about how people feel and react to different aspects in life. I really do this in my daily life." Here it seems that identity is constructed by cooperating with and/or reacting to others. Meanwhile, a UABJO student teacher commented that some of her students see her "as a reference" and that for her "This carries quite more responsibility." She hence seemed to see her identity in relationship to her students. Other students, however, saw their identity in much more individualistic terms. For instance, a UABJO respondent said "I see myself as a teacher that is willing to learn and succeed in life."

When asked to reflect on their identity inside and outside the university, many respondents saw no difference; however, others saw their identity comprised of multiple identities. For instance, this UABJO respondent from Oaxaca stated:

*I know there are at least three different images about me. The first one could be the person I think I am, another, the person that the other people think I am, and finally, the person who I really am (response to question 1).*

The respondent suggests that the identity she wants to project is not perhaps the one seen by others. Likewise yet more specifically, a respondent from Guadalajara stated:

*I adopt a different type of personality when I'm at school than when I'm home. And even when I'm in the front of a class and I'm teaching, I think I'm different (response to question 2).*

This student teacher from Guadalajara apparently realizes that one takes on different identities depending on whether one is at home or teaching in the classroom. But such identities can be difficult to pin down, as implied by another student from the U de G who highlights the hybridity of his/her identity: "I'm a mixture of subcultures and experiences, and I can't see myself as one particular type of person."

The following Oaxacan respondent saw a noticeable difference between how s/he conceives him/herself inside the university and by implication outside the university:

*I think my identity changes depending on the place and the people I am with at a certain moment. To make it more clear, I want to compare my identity in two different places, inside and outside from the university. Inside the university I am a student and my behaviour could be passive but somehow free (response to question 2).*

As seen above, student-teacher reflections on identity demonstrated both fixed and traditional categories, such as gender ethnicity as well as the more progressive ideas of multiple identities and contextual, socially situated, and co-constructed identities. This, in turn, would reveal particularities about the student teachers' identities as English teachers. For instance, their teacher identity seems closely tied to how they perceive their own personality and temperance. In this sense, to continue with this one example, a respectful personality and a patient demeanour would result in an identification with a type of teacher who unquestionably follows the administrative protocols of the school and exhibits understanding and tolerance for the difficulties faced by students in learning English.

### *Emotions*

When it came to describing characteristics, traits, or qualities that student teachers felt they had or considered that teachers ought to have, the respondents answered in terms of individual characteristics, ethical behaviour and positive and negative emotions. Characteristics were often described in terms of static categories, such as being "confident," having a "positive attitude towards life", and showing oneself to be a "patient person". However, these characteristics appeared, more often than not, to form labels rather than describing ways of coming across and interacting. Many answers reflected a moral dimension as student teachers mentioned courage, passion, dedication, sincerity and honesty. These respondents appeared to underscore the importance of ethics and values when teaching rather than just focusing on helping students learn a foreign language.

Answers can also be seen in terms of positive and negative feelings. Positive emotions were often seen as an active dimension as noted by this U de G respondent who sees herself:

*...as a very patient person who wants to have a good relation with the ones that I love I always want to do my best... Maybe I consider that when it comes to students I really care about their expectations (response to question 3).*

Student teachers were not afraid to use the word “love” and “care”, as shown by two U de G respondents who stated (respectively): “I love transmitting knowledge” and “I really care about people and how they would feel whether I’m not at the university or outside.” It seems that they feel passionate about teaching and compassionate about their students. Similarly many respondents were willing to express positive feelings whilst fewer student teachers expressed negative feelings. A notable exception was this Oaxacan respondent who said:

*I mentioned before that effort is another important characteristic for a teacher however I am afraid I have not gotten to that point and I am scared of thinking of quitting or giving up with my students someday. I sometimes get tired and just want to “throw in the towel”. Fortunately I have the hope that it would never happen during my career (response to question 4).*

This student expresses the real emotions that many in-service teachers must experience. Also, expressing dissatisfaction is a U de G student teacher who says that “when things are not like I want them, I feel frustrated and I quit” (response to question 4). Another U de G student recognised that she needs to work on some aspects of her own character or temperament because she is “not very patient and...need[s] to be because students sometimes don’t learn at the rhythm ... [teachers] would like them to” (response to question 4).

These responses show that the student teachers have a wide range of positive, negative, ethical and emotional feelings as teachers. This speaks to the need for teacher education programmes to examine whether open and honest discussions of such aspects would contribute to effective and relevant teacher development and maturity.

#### *Critical reflection*

Kumaravadivelu’s (2012) concepts of “particularity”, “practicality”, and “possibility” (see above) help us ascertain how the student teacher respondents from UABJO and U de G position themselves as to their own context, theory, practice, and vision of social change. First of all, in terms of particularity (context), the respondents were aware that they should take into consideration and interpret their teaching context. Typical comments included the following from U de G student teachers:

*It’s very important to explore different possibilities (response to question 4).*

*I believe that it’s necessary to adopt according to the necessities of each situation I perform according to what I’m required to do in each place (response to question 4).*

*As a teacher who likes to be different who worries about his students’ learning as a Mexican teacher with some lacks in pronunciation but strengths as well (response to question 3).*

There were, however, respondents who put more emphases on methods and techniques rather than on the individual classroom context and the learner. Take, for instance, the following responses U de G student teachers:

*I think the concept of communicate activities will help me a lot in my career because this approach states that students need to learn how to communicate (response to question 5).*

*I was not used to have a plan to cover a lot of possible that can happen in the class, but since I have experienced different situations in the classroom. I think it's very important to be prepared and have a plan before giving information to students (response to question 5).*

Secondly, regarding “practicality”, U de G respondents were often aware of the limitations of theory. For instance, responding to question 5, one student commented that “teaching is not only about grammar but speech acts, jargons, critical incidents & much, much more”; while another warned against following a single method, emphasizing that she has “learned that not all the students learn with a method, so a class shouldn’t be based only in one method.” Generally speaking, however, dependence on method was extremely prevalent among the U de G participants, as seen in the following written responses from question 5:

*The task-based approach, I feel, that will help me in the future. The theory behind this strategy of teaching is good and it has worked for me.*

*I think it's very important to be prepared and have a plan before giving information to students.*

*Strategies and new teaching models: I can apply them to my classes, trying different ways to teach the same topics.*

*Theories of learning and activities that have helped me to implement activities in the classroom focused on one specific aspect to help students.*

Such attitudes suggest that student teachers depend heavily on theory rather than on experience gained in the ELT classroom. This seems partially because the student teachers have yet to gain considerable classroom experience.

Thirdly, as to “possibility”, respondents were conscious of their role in society and the need for solutions to current social problems. This seems apparent in the following observations made by U de G student teachers:

*...our society needs good changes and I want to collaborate even when I could give less or more than others (response to question 3).*

*...a teacher is a person who can change a society due to his or her effort and behavior inside a classroom (response to question 4).*

A similar commitment to criticality (cf. Benesch, 2012; as mentioned above) within the EFL classroom was expressed by a UABJO student teacher from Oaxaca:

*I wish all the students could have the opportunity to think for themselves and others as well. I think critical thinking might help our culture to do better teamwork and become more unanimous (response to question 5).*

These comments indicate that student teachers feel that they can, as individuals, make a difference and, in the words of one respondent, combat the “creation of stereotypes

sold by the ‘powerful’ people in society and how these ideas exclude those who are consider ‘not important’ or ‘not productive’” (response to question 1).

## Conclusions and Implications

Now that we have analyzed the data and arrived at articulated findings as to how the thirty-five student teachers in the final year of their respective BA TEFL programmes at U de G and UABJO perceive themselves as prospective English teachers with regard to their identity, emotions, and communal responsibility, we can ask: What larger conclusions can be drawn? What can we add to the academic dialogue and literature on this matter? Sufficient answers to these two questions would go beyond the scope of this article. However, at least taking into account the work of Zembylas (2005), Benesch (2012), and Kumaravadivelu (2012) as referred to above, we can make some points on the contributions made by our study. First of all, as discussed previously, both Zembylas (2005) and Benesch (2010) argue for the importance of a teacher education programme helping students to recognize and then regulate their emotions within the classroom. On a practical level, our study adds to Zembylas’ and Benesch’s studies by producing an inside look at how actual student teachers perceive classroom emotions; and on a more thematic level, our study adds another dimension to Zembylas’ and Benesch’s work by demonstrating the notable degree to which student teachers can be perplexed by the emergence of negative emotions which somehow seem inevitable. We, therefore, would argue that student teachers need to be guided on managing their emotions rather than trying to subdue them; that student teachers need to know that it is normal to have both positive and negative emotions; that because classroom emotions can be misinterpreted, student teachers need guidance on deducing students’ feelings; and lastly that student teachers need to know what resources are available when dealing with emotions.

While our contribution to Zembylas (2005) and Benesch (2010) seems expansionist in the sense of adding an empirical dimension and giving more heed to the negative side of classroom emotionality, our contribution to Kumaravadivelu (2012) seems one of camaraderie in the sense of echoing Kumaravadivelu’s calls to revamp teacher education programmes in terms of identity. The results of our study affirm Kumaravadivelu’s contention that because student teachers often see their identity in fixed ethnic, gender and geographical categories, teacher educators need to ask whether consideration of multiple identities would more accurately reflect classroom realities, especially those of the language students themselves. In addition, our study shows that student teachers may express negative feelings which usually would be suppressed and rarely talked about in teacher education courses. It seems, therefore, that student teachers would benefit from an open discussion of their feelings, as part of their teacher education program. Furthermore, the results of our study corroborate Kumaravadivelu’s argument that student teachers should be encouraged to reflect on the need for a pedagogy of particularity, practicality and possibility. This especially seems pertinent to Mexico’s EFL sociocultural and political reality in which, as emergent from our data, student teachers feel an acute responsibility to not only teach English *per se* but also to positively transform society through English education.

What, now, could be some implications of our study? The widest implication would be that teacher educators need to consider the issues of identity, emotions, feelings and critical thinking as crucial parts of their teacher education courses. A second implication has to do with the influence or impact of English teacher education programmes designed and promoted by North America, Britain and Australia (NABA). In current ELT education studies, NABA is often questioned as to its possible hegemonic effect on those localized ELT programmes designed and operated within non-English speaking countries, such as Mexico (e.g. Widin, 2010). It seems noteworthy that missing from the student teachers' reflections was an examination and evaluation of NABA influences and how they might be challenged and even opposed. This begs for a NABA-related discussion in a teacher education program.

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