

THE STUDENT'S ABILITY AND PROBLEMS IN WRITING INTRODUCTION OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the students' ability and problems in writing introduction section of research proposal. This study has been conducted in an undergraduate English study program a University in Banten. The documentation/selection of students' research proposal was conducted by choosing nine students' research proposals from fifty seven students to represent different levels of achievement. It uses text analysis and in-depth interview to investigate the students' performance in writing a research proposal. These findings implicate that most students faced difficulties in presenting arguments in terms of justifications. Second, most students were not aware that there are standard models in writing a research proposal, especially in terms of its elements and linguistic features, which are widely accepted in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). This study supports the extensive research into academic writing that emphasizes the importance of explicit teaching of the structure of specific written genres, particularly a research proposal, to second-language students.

Keywords: Research proposal, Introduction section, Academic writing

INTRODUCTION

Research proposal is as one of academic texts. The research proposal serves several purposes. As it is prepared by the students for conducting their study, it communicates their intentions by stating the purpose of their intended study and its importance, together with a step-by-step plan for conducting the study (Fraenkel and Wallen, 1993:463). It also provides sufficient information to enable the reader to evaluate the proposed research and provide the reader with a clear indication of what the students are expecting to do, how, when, and why (Emerson, 2007:50). It will be a mechanism for the students to gauge the level of assistance likely to be given by supervisors and the reaction of supervisors to the research plan (Claire and Hamilton, 2002:24). In other words, it can be said that a research proposal is the first step in producing a graduation thesis and intends to convince a supervisor or academic committee that the students' topic and approach are sound, so that they gain approval to proceed with the actual research and write their graduation thesis. Students also learn how to access, select and evaluate information from different sources and to formulate ideas (Anderson and Poole, 2001:4). In other words, academic writing is arguably the most important language skill to English tertiary students whose grades are largely determined by their performance in written assignments, academic reports, term examination and graduation theses (Nga, 2009:112).



Nevertheless, several studies have revealed that even advanced learners at a high proficiency level of English have problems with written academic discourse at the level of text organization (see Braine, 1995; Benson & Haidish, 1995; Bloor, 1996; Casanave, 1995, among others, in Jogthong, 2001:2). Several other studies also show that students often experience problems in particular genres, especially in writing a research report as their thesis. Some studies examine the students' problem in writing the whole thesis (see Kareviati 2004; Emilia, 2009), while some others focus on a particular section, e.g. abstract (see Abdul & Sadeq, 2006), data presentation and discussion (see Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Emilia, Rodliyah, & Gustine, 2009), and conclusions (see Bunton, 2002).

Although many previous studies as mentioned above have investigated the students' problems in thesis writing areas, little research has explored the students' problems in writing a research proposal which functions as the first step in producing a thesis. There is a need to increase research-based knowledge of students' ability and problems in writing introduction section of research proposal since the researcher has found that in the research site, many students find it is difficult to write a research proposal. It is in line with Swales (1990) stating that a research proposal is one of 'occluded' genres; that is, genres which are difficult for students to have access to, but play an important part in the students' lives. Swales and Najjar, (1987) stated that Introduction in research article has become important for obtainable capacity to understand the procedure and how to produce of specialized academic writing.

Thus, this present study aims to investigate the students' ability and problems in writing a research proposal. This study has been conducted in an undergraduate English study program in a university in Banten. This study attempts not only to identify the students' ability and problems in writing a research proposal, but also the possible causes of the problems and the possible solutions that can be proposed to solve the problems based on the students' work.

Typical Language Used in Introduction Move Structure

As it has been discussed earlier, the organizational structure of the Introduction can be said to move from a fairly general overview of the research terrain to the particular issues under investigation through three key moves which capture the communicative purposes of the Introduction, i.e. to establish a research territory, to identify a niche or gap in the territory, to then signal how the topic in question occupies that niche (Swales and Feak, 1994).

Below are the analyses on move structure in introduction proposed by Swales and Feak (1994), Paltridge and Starfield (2007), and Bunton (2002):

(i) Move 1: establishing a research territory

In move 1, the writer typically begins to carve out his/her own research space by indicating that the general area is in some way significant. This is often done through reviewing previous research in the field. In addition, the writer may choose to provide background information on particular topic being investigated and may



define key terms which are essential for the study (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007), as illustrated below.

- In these areas, reducing groundwater recharge is an *important* step in reducing land degradation caused by salinity (Lewis 2000:1).
- The Magellanic Clouds provide a *unique* environment in which to study *many interesting* and astrophysically *challenging* problems (Amy 2000:1)
- Speech has arguably been the *most important* form of human communication since languages were first conceived (Epps 2000:1)
- The modeling of fluid flow is of *great interest* to Engineers and Scientists alike, with many engineering problems and issues of scientific interest depending upon complex flow phenomena (Norris 2000:1)

The different moves in introduction tend to employ different tenses (Atkinson and Curtis, 1998 in *ibid*). In the extracts above, move 1a, which signals the importance of the general area of research, often uses verbs in either the present tense or the present perfect tense in the sentence which makes these claims to *centrality* (Swales and Feak, 1994). The verbs in the present or present perfect tenses of sentences taken from move 1a are underlined. The writer's use of the present tense suggests that the statement is a generally accepted truth. The use of the present perfect tense, i.e. has been, in the third sentence functions similarly to describe a state that continues up to the present moment. This sub-move also often contains an adjective, shown in italics, which emphasizes the importance or interest of the topic.

(ii) Move 2: establishing a niche

Move 2 points to a 'gap' or niche in the previous research which the research will 'fill'. In move 2 of the framework, the writer typically establishes a niche by indicating a gap in the previous research or possibly extending a current research approach into a new era. It is through the review of prior research that the gap is established (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007). The language of 'gap statements', according to Atkinson and Curtis (1998 in *ibid*), is typically evaluative in a negative way. In the examples listed below, gap statements from the introduction have the gap words and phrases in italics.

- One class of quality improvement which has *not received much attention* is enhancement by broadening the bandwidth of coded speech without an increase in the bit rate. This is surprising since the notion of quality as a function of speech band with is anticipated to become more pervasive (Epps 2000:4)
- Due to the complexity of the flow problems *there are few* analytic models of fluid flows, but the advent of digital computers has stimulated the development of numerical method for the modeling of flow (Norris 2000:1)
- Indeed, there appeared to be a story of female agitation for Aboriginal rights in twentieth century Australia that *had largely gone unnoticed up to that point*, and in the context of contemporary feminist politics was *positively denied* (Holland 1998:1)



- Although it became accepted that episodic recharge might be a factor in the agricultural areas of Western Australia (e.g. Nulsen 1993), *no systematic analysis of* where and when it occurred, and how important it was in the overall picture of groundwater recharge and salinity were carried out (Lewis 2000:6).
- These observations point to the proposition that in order to recognize the mismatches and to begin to understand the consequences of discontinuities, *there is a need to increase* research knowledge of community social practices and interactions with community literacy (White-Davison 1999:2)
- *It is important to take issue* with his criticism of the role of structuralism and post- structuralism (Wakeling 1998:5)

The following list, from Swales and Feak (1994:187), contain examples of typical ‘gap statement’ words and phrases which may be useful for the non-native English speaker.

Verbs

disregard
neglect to
consider
fail to consider overestimate
ignore overlook
is limited to suffer
from misinterpret
underestimate

Adjectives

controversial
questionable
incomplete unconvincing
inconclusive unsatisfactory
misguided

Noun Phrases

Little
information/attention/work/data/research
Few studies/investigations/researchers/attempts
No
studies/data/calculation
None of these studies/findings/calculations

Other forms

Howeve
r
It remains unclear
It would be of interest to



As Swales and Feak (1994) point out, language which identifies weaknesses in the writing of others needs to be used with care to show the identified niche or gap the proposed research will fill. This is particularly the case for thesis writers, who are students seeking to be accepted into a community of scholars.

(iii) Move 3: occupying the niche

In move 3, the writer, by outlining the purposes of their own research, indicates to the reader how the proposed research will ‘fill’ the identified niche or gap. In a thesis, the principal findings will frequently be previewed and theoretical positions as well as methods used may be outlined (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007). It is here that the writer can signal the value or significance of the research (move 3b). Move 3c, in which the overall structure of the thesis is previewed, including a mini-synopsis of each chapter, is considered obligatory. This sub-move (3c) typically contains much metadiscourse. Metadiscourse (also referred to as metatext) refers to discourse about discourse; how writers talk about their writing and the structure of their writing, when they are not talking about the content of their writing (Bunton, 2002). Examples of metadiscourse are phrases such as ‘Chapter 2 examines’; ‘this thesis argue that’; ‘the following section reviews’. Metadiscourse in introduction is likely to take the form of forward reference to what is still to come and to the overall structure of the thesis (move 3c of our framework) but may also be found in the writer’s development of the central argument of the thesis.

METHOD

This study is a case study of undergraduate English Study Program students in a university in Banten. the documentation/selection of students research proposal was conducted by choosing nine students’ research proposals from fifty seven students to represent different levels of achievement –low (research proposals 1, 2, 3 with temporary GPA <3), mid (research proposals 4, 5, 6 with temporary GPA from 3 to 3.5) and high (research proposals 7, 8, 9 with temporary GPA >3.5). It uses text analysis and in-depth interview to investigate the students’ performance in writing a research proposal. The analysis focuses on the elements and linguistic features employed in the introduction of research proposal. The analysis attempts to identify the students’ ability and problems in writing a research proposal, the possible causes of the problems, and the possible solutions that can be proposed to solve the problems based on the students’ work.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis can be seen in Table below.

Moves in students’ introduction

| | | | |
|-------|--|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Moves | Move 1: Establishing a research territory | Move 2: Establishing a niche | Move 3: Occupying the niche |
|-------|--|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|



| Students | a (Optional) | b (Optional) | c (Obligatory) | d (Optional) | a (Obligatory) | B (Optional) | a (Obligatory) | b (Optional) | c (Obligatory) | d (Optional) | e (Optional) |
|----------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9 | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table above shows some important findings. First, from four obligatory sub-moves in CARS typical moves, i.e. 1c, 2a, 3a, and 3c, only two sub-moves found in some of the students' introduction, i.e. move 3a (research proposals 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9); and move 3c (research proposals 4 and 7). All nine students did not write the other two obligatory sub-moves, i.e. move 1c and 2a. Second, student 9 did not write all the sub-moves in move 2. These lead to the students' problems because those obligatory sub-moves are necessary to be included to capture the communicative purposes of the introduction (see more discussion in the next part).

Following are the discussion of each move/element of the introduction and its linguistic features.

A. Elements of Introduction Chapter

Move 1: Establishing a research territory

The analysis focuses on four sub-moves of move 1, i.e. move 1a (showing that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way-optional); move 1b (providing background information about the topic-optional); move 1c (introducing and reviewing items of previous research in the area-obligatory); and move 1d (defining terms-optional).

The result of the analysis shows that not all sub-moves of move 1 were applied by the students. In fact, move 1c as an obligatory sub-move was not applied by all students. It means that no students had introduced and reviewed items of previous research in their research area. The students have only applied optional sub-moves, i.e. move 1a (research proposals 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8); move 1b (research proposals 2, 3, 7, 8, and 9); and move 1d (research proposals 2-9), as illustrated in the data below.

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Move
1a.

Showing that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way (optional)

One of the most important roles of teacher is evaluation. It is the part of learning and teaching process. It cannot be separated in learning and teaching process, it is done



continually by teacher, so teacher can get student's image clearly. (Research proposal 3)

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Move

1b.

Providing background information about the topic (optional)

As a result, it is not a strange thing that both the lecturers and the students often mix the codes or languages used from *English to bahasa Indonesia* or vice versa in teaching- learning process, especially when students are becoming the presenters, the source of any English material for the others. By doing so, they have applied code mixing. (Research proposal 9)

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Move

1d.

Defining terms (optional)

Retelling the story in reading lesson is aimed to train the students in using their mind and their vocabulary to concept the story that they have been read be different from the author's point of view. When retelling the story, students have to read the story carefully, sentence by sentence or find the best way to get and to comprehend the point of it well. (Research proposal 6)

The extracts show that move 1a describes the student's research space by indicating that the general research area is in some way significant (research proposal 3). Move 1b provides the background information on particular topic being investigated (research proposal 9). Move 1d defines key terms which are essential for the study (research proposal 6).

Although the students had created their research space by writing the sub-moves above, the content of each sub-move did not show explicitly the purpose of move 1 to establish a research territory as the students did not write move 1c as an obligatory sub-move of move 1. As proposed by Swales and Feak (1994) and Paltridge and Starfield (2007), in move 1, the writer creates the research space by indicating that the general area is in some way significant through reviewing previous research in the field (move 1c). Therefore, as the students did not introduce and review items of previous research in the area, they cannot establish a research territory. It indicates that the students need guidance to introduce and review previous research in their introduction.

Move 2: Establishing a niche

The analysis focuses on two sub-moves of move 2, i.e. move 2a (indicating a gap in the previous research, raising a question about it, or extending previous knowledge in some way—obligatory); and move 2b (identifying a problem/need— optional).

The result of the analysis indicates that not all sub-moves of move 2 were applied by the students. In fact, move 2a as an obligatory sub-move was not applied



by all students. In other words, all students did not indicate a gap in the previous research. The students have only applied an optional sub-move, i.e. move 2 b (research proposals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) as seen below.

Move 2b

Identifying a problem/need (optional)

The chief problems in translating are lexical, not grammatical- i.e. words, collocations and fixed phrases or idiom; these include neologisms and 'unfindable' (Research proposal 4)

The extract is an example of move 2b the students write to identify a problem/need. Yet, while almost all students (research proposals 1-8) have identified a problem/need; the problem was not based on the gap in the previous research as proposed by Swales and Feak (1994). Consequently, the communicative purpose of move 2 to establish a niche from previous research cannot be achieved by the students. It can be assumed that the students did not know the importance of previous research in capturing the communicative purpose of introduction. Therefore, as it has been stated, the students need a lot of guidance especially in terms of introducing and reviewing previous research to indicate a gap in their research area.

Move 3: Occupying the niche

The analysis focuses on five sub-moves of move 3, i.e. move 3a (outlining purposes/aims, or stating the nature of the present research or research questions/hypotheses—obligatory); move 3b (announcing principal findings/stating value of research—optional); move 3c (indicating the structure of the thesis and providing mini-synopses/preview of each subsequent chapter—obligatory); move 3d (outlining the theoretical position—optional); and move 3e (describing the methods used in the study—optional).

The result of the analysis reveals that not all sub-moves of move 3 were applied by the students. All students did not apply move 3d. It means all students did not outline their theoretical position. Meanwhile, the other four moves, including the obligatory ones, were already found in some of the students' introduction, i.e. move 3a (research proposals 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8 and 9); move 3b (research proposal 6); move 3c (research proposals 4 and 7); and move 3e (research proposals 6 and 9), as shown below.

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Move

3a.

Outlining purposes/aims, or stating the nature of the present research or research questions/hypotheses (obligatory)

Considering to the explanation above, the writer interested to write about the analysis of word maps to enrich student's vocabulary. (Research proposal 2)

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Move

3c.

Indicating the structure of the thesis and providing mini-synopses (preview) of each Sub sequent chapter (obligatory)



Organization of Writing

The paper of this research is organized as follows.

Chapter I Introduction

This chapter provides the background of the study, formulation of problem, limitation of problem, Objectives, the uses of the research, scope of the study, operational definition, and organization of writing.

Chapter II Theoretical Review

This chapter ... (Research proposal 4)

-

Move

3e

*Describing the methods used in the study
(optional)*

The writer, as one member of the English community at IAIN, is very interested to investigate the facts that lie behind the phenomenon of code mixing, especially when students are having a presentation of any English material. (Research proposal 9)

The extracts show the example of each sub-move in move 3. Move 3a outlines the purposes of student's own research (research proposal 2). However, as previous research is not mentioned to indicate a gap, the student cannot indicate to the reader how the proposed research will 'fill' the identified niche or gap as the communicative purpose of move 3 (Swales and Feak, 1994).

Move 3b is where the principal findings will frequently be previewed and theoretical positions as well as methods used may be outlined. It is here that the student can signal the value or significance of the research (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007). Nevertheless, as the problems stated by the students were not based on the gap in the previous findings, move 3b cannot be found in all students' research proposals. Therefore, the communicative purpose of move 3 to occupy a niche cannot be achieved by the students.

The result of the move 3 analysis supports the result in the previous moves showing that the students need guidance in their writing. Additionally, explicit teaching on the writing technique to identify weaknesses in the writing of others needs to be given to identify a niche or gap the proposed study will fill. This is particularly the case for thesis writers, who are students seeking to be accepted into a community of scholars (Swales and Feak, 1994).

Move 3c is dealing with the typical language in move 3 and considered obligatory. In move 3c, the overall structure of the research proposal is previewed, including a mini-synopsis of each chapter (Bunton, 2002). This sub-move typically contains much metadiscourse and will be discussed further in the linguistic feature section.

B. Linguistic Features of Introduction Chapter

The analysis of linguistic features focuses on the typical language used in each move of the introduction as proposed by Swales and Feak (2004) and Paltridge and Starfield



(2007), i.e. the use of present or present perfect tense and adjective to signal the importance of general area of research (move 1); the use of gap statements to point to a gap or niche in the previous research which the research will fill (move 2); and the use of metadiscourse to reveal the research proposal organization (move 3).

In move 1, students 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 have been able to use verbs in either the present tense or the present perfect tense in the sentence to signal the importance of the general area of research which makes these claims to *centrality* (Swales and Feak 1994) as seen below.

One of the most *important* roles of teacher is evaluation. It is the part of learning and teaching process. It cannot be separated in learning and teaching process, it is done continually by teacher, so teacher can get student's image clearly. (Research proposal 3)

The verbs in the present tense of the student's extract are underlined. This indicates the student's intention to identify the importance of evaluation as general research area confidently as the use of the present tense in this context suggests that the statement is a generally accepted truth (Christie, 2009). This sub-move also contains an adjective, shown in italic, which emphasizes the importance or interest of the topic (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007).

In move 2, the typical language of gap statements was not found in the students' writing as all students did not include previous research to indicate a gap (move 2a). As it has been stated, it is found that while students 1-8 have identified a problem/need (move 2b); the problem was not based on the gap in the previous research as seen below.

Move 2b
Identifying a problem/need (optional)

The chief problems in translating are lexical, not grammatical- i.e. words, collocations and fixed phrases or idiom; these include neologisms and 'unfindable' (Research proposal 4)

The underlined part in the extract was written to identify a problem/need by using a relational process. This indicates the student's intention to identify the chief problems in translating (Eggins, 1994). However, she did not use other languages or processes to identify weaknesses in the writing of others (see the complete examples of typical 'gap statement' words and phrases proposed by Swales and Feak, 1994, in Chapter Two). Therefore, although the problem has been identified, there was no gap indicated by the student as the communicative purpose of this move.

In move 3, to outline the overall structure of the research proposal, students 4 and 7 have been able to use metadiscourse. It shows that the students have been able to reveal the research proposal organization to show the ideas they present and achieve cohesion in the text (Eggins, 2004). Metadiscourse in the students' introduction is likely to take the form of forward reference to what is still to come and to the overall structure of the research proposal (Bunton, 2002), as seen below.



Organization of Writing

The paper of this research is organized as follows. Chapter I Introduction

This chapter provides the background of the study, formulation of problem, limitation of problem, Objectives, the uses of the research, scope of the study, operational definition, and organization of writing.

Chapter II Theoretical Review

This chapter ... (Research proposal 4)

Overall, the results of the analysis suggest two matters related to the students' ability and problems in writing an introduction chapter.

The first matter is in terms of the students' ability in writing appropriate elements and linguistic features of the introduction. Regarding the elements, some students, to some extent, have the ability to apply some sub-moves of the typical moves of the introduction as proposed by theorists (Swales and Feak, 1994; Paltridge and Starfield, 2007; Bunton, 2002). Regarding the linguistic features, some students have been able to write some typical languages used in CARS moves, i.e. using appropriate tenses, active voice, and metadiscourse.

The second matter is in terms of the students' problems in writing appropriate elements and linguistic features of the introduction. Regarding the elements, the results show two main problems. First, from four obligatory sub-moves in CARS typical moves, i.e. 1c, 2a, 3a, and 3c, only two sub-moves found in some of the students' introduction, i.e. move 3a and move 3c. All nine students did not write the other two obligatory sub-moves, i.e. move 1c and 2a. Second, student 9 did not write all the sub-moves in move 2. These lead to the students' problems because those obligatory sub-moves are necessary to be written to introduce and review items of previous research in the area (move 1c) and to indicate a gap in the previous research, raise a question on it, or extend previous knowledge (move 2a).

Therefore, as all students did not mention previous research and indicate a gap, they cannot achieve the communicative purposes of introduction, i.e. to establish a research territory, to identify a niche or gap in the territory, and to then signal how the topic in question occupies that niche (Swales and Feak, 1994). All these suggest that the teaching of writing and research should allow students to have the capacity needed in writing an introduction chapter, especially in terms of introducing previous research. Regarding the linguistic features, the results show the students' problem in using the typical language of 'gap statements' to indicate a gap in the previous study (Swales and Feak, 2004). These show that they need scaffolding in using gap statement words and phrases to identify weaknesses in the writing of others.

Based on the students' problems above, there are several possible solutions that can be proposed to solve the students' problems. Regarding the elements, two possible solutions can be proposed. First, guidance and assistance in writing an introduction chapter, especially in terms of the content and purpose of each move



structure (see previous study by Emilia, 2009). Second, explicit teaching of rhetorical moves, especially in terms of the need to introduce and review items of previous research in the area (move 1c) and to indicate a gap in the previous research, raise a question on it, or extend previous knowledge (move 2a) in the introduction to help the students achieve its communicative purposes (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007; Emilia, 2009; Bailey, 2003; Hyland, 2004, among others).

Regarding the linguistic features, two possible solutions can be proposed; First, scaffolding to help the students use the typical language properly. Second, teaching writing as a process (Gibbon, 2002) and “direct telling” (Callaghan & Rothery, 1989 in Emilia, 2009) of linguistic features more than once for the students, given that there are so many aspects that need improvement.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Several conclusions can be proposed. First, most students faced difficulties in presenting arguments in terms of justifications. It supports the previous studies by Bunton (2002) and Paltridge and Starfield (2007) finding that presenting arguments in terms of justifications is something many second-language students find difficult to do. Second, most students were not aware that there are standard models in writing a research proposal, especially in terms of its elements and linguistic features, which are widely accepted in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Finally, this study supports the extensive research into academic writing that emphasizes the importance of explicit teaching of the structure of specific written genres, particularly a research proposal, to second-language students (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007; Emilia, 2009; Bailey, 2003; Hyland, 2004).

Furthermore, concerning the results of the study, it is recommended to the practitioners that all the subjects related to writing and research in this site and other English-major programs should allow students to have the capacity needed in research and academic writing, especially in writing a research proposal.

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