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## Using Assignments as a Method of Assessment of postgraduate students' achievement

استخدام الواجبات كطريقة لتقييم تحصيل طلاب الدراسات العليا

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### ملخص الدراسة:

كان الدافع وراء هذه الورقة البحثية ما تم ملاحظته من استخدام لامتحانات كوسيلة رئيسية، إن لم تكن الوسيلة الوحيدة للتقييم في برامج الدراسات العليا في قسمي اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الزاوية والأكاديمية الليبية. كان الهدف من الدراسة هو البحث في استخدام الواجبات كطريقة أخرى لتقييم تحصيل الطلاب وتجربة هذه الطريقة.

لتحقيق هذا الهدف قام الباحث بتدريس الطلاب في القسمين بشكل منفصل ومتوافق إحدى المواد، وهي مادة طرق تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية وبدلاً من إعطائهم امتحاناً نصفياً تقليدياً، تم إعطاؤهم واجباً يقومون من خلاله بتقييم مدى ملائمة كتاب في تدريس وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية، وتحويره وتعديله ليكون ملائماً للبيئة الليبية. كما تم إعطاء نفس الطلاب امتحاناً نهائياً تقليدياً في نهاية الفصل الدراسي.

ومن خلال مقارنة درجات الطلاب في كلتا الطريقتين تبين أن نتائج الطلاب في واجب النصفية كانت أفضل من نتائجهم في الامتحان النهائي. وهذا عزز من النتائج المتحصل عليها من الاستبيان الذي تم إعطاؤه للطلاب بنفس السياق، كما تبين أن نصف الطلاب فضلوا استخدام الواجبات على استخدام الامتحانات كما بينت أن عدداً لا بأس به قد فضل استخدام الطريقتين معاً، وأن عدداً قليلاً فقط اختاروا الامتحانات كطريقة أفضل في التقييم.

لذا توصي الدراسة بضرورة استخدام الواجبات كطريقة لتقييم تحصيل الطلاب في برامج الدراسات العليا في الجامعات والأكاديمية الليبية نظراً لأهمية دورها في تطوير مهارات وقدرات الطلاب العملية وفي تعزيز فهم وإستيعاب المواد المدروسة.

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### **Abstract**

This research paper was motivated by the observation that exams are the main (if not the sole) method of assessment in the postgraduate programs in the English departments in the University of Zawia and the Libyan Academy. The aim was investigating and experimenting the use of assignment as another method of assessing students' achievement.

To fulfill this aim, the researcher taught the students in the two English departments separately and simultaneously one of the subjects, namely ELT Methodology. Instead of giving them a typical midterm exam, students were asked to do an assignment in which they evaluate the suitability of some textbooks in teaching and learning English as a foreign language and adapt these books to be suitable for the Libyan context. The same students were given a formal and final exam at the end of the course. The comparison of the scores of the two assessment methods has shown that students did better in the assignment than in the exam. This has supported the results of the questionnaire which was given to the same students. These results indicated that half of the students preferred using assignments to using exams while another considerable number preferred the use of a mixture of assignments and exams. Only a few students selected exams as their preferred method of assessment.

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Therefore, it is recommended that assignment as a method of assessing students achievement should be integrated into MA programs in Libyan universities and academies due to its role in improving the students' practical skills and abilities and enhancing their understanding of the learned subjects.

#### **Introduction**

Assessment as defined by Maki (2002) is “a means of discovering- both inside and outside of the classroom- what, how, when, and which students learn and develop an institution's expected learning outcomes”. An assessment method, therefore, is a procedure used to gather information that can be used to determine the level of achievement of key learning objectives students have reached. Theoretically, a variety of assessment methods can be used. In the postgraduate level, for example, assessment methods may include examinations, assignments, research papers, projects, portfolios, etc. However, in practice, the most common method of assessment in Libyan postgraduate programs is formal examinations. Relying on only one method of assessment may not be sufficient to gauge and reflect all achievement aspects of students. Also, it may be difficult to assess these achievement aspects using a single assessment method. For example, using written examinations will show little about the students' oral skills if they are not accompanied by another method that gages the students' oral abilities such as presentations, interviews and group discussions.

However, using any method of assessment will depend on some factors including goals of the program, the nature of the subject or module and the content assessed, the available resources and the usefulness of the outcomes obtained from using a particular method of

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assessment. Another important factor is the students' preferred approach of studying (Scouller, 1998: 453). While some students prefer a deep approach, others prefer a surface one. In the deep approach the emphasis is on meaning and understanding whereas in the surface approach the focus is on recall and reproduction (Marton and Saljo 1976; Biggs 1979). However, students do not always have the choice. In fact, it is the method of assessment which may determine the choice of one approach rather than the other. It is obvious as some research suggests that a surface approach is more applicable in examinations in which students prefer rote-learning to recall what they have studied before they sit their exams ((Ramsden 1992; Entwistle and Entwistle 1992; Beard and Senior 1980). On the other hand, research suggests a tendency among students to use a deep approach when doing written assignments (Thomas and Bain 1984). This is due to the nature of assignments in terms of the degree of control over the task and the time available to students to complete the assignment. In other words, students have more time and freedom to use analytical and critical thinking and to understand when doing assignments than when doing examinations.

Still, the connection between the surface approach and examinations from one hand and the deep approach and assignments from the other is not always straightforward. Some studies (Prosser and Webb 1994; Biggs 1987c, 1988) have shown that a surface approach may be used by some students when writing their assignments which results in poor work reflected in a form of telling knowledge and listing unrelated facts. By contrast, an examination paper may show a deep understanding and reflect ability to criticise, analyse, synthesise and evaluate material.

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Both exams and assignments as methods of assessment have advantages and disadvantages. The following is a brief account of these advantages and disadvantages adapted from Race (1998):

#### ***Examinations***

Examinations are advantageous due to being time efficient and cost-effective. They provide equal opportunity to the examinees and there is less chance for plagiarism if they are carefully controlled. Another advantage of exams is that they are more familiar to teachers, which makes them easy to conduct. Finally, they encourage learners to concentrate on and learn certain material.

However, examinations can be problematic for several reasons. Firstly, they do not measure group work, leadership and creativity. Secondly, they motivate surface learning especially when exam questions are not carefully written. Thirdly, marking exams is sometimes boring and, thus, it is done quickly. Fourthly, they rely more on memorization and do not provide opportunity for practice and learning in situations. Fifthly, little feedback is given to learners, and, finally, handwriting, neatness and presentation are also assessed at the expense of content. (Race 1998)

#### ***Assignments***

Assignments, like examinations, have benefits and drawback. One of the benefits of assignments is that they allow for individuality. They also give opportunity for demonstrating understanding and awareness of the relevant topics and materials. Another advantage is that they also involve assessing writing style as a skill. Moreover, assignments can show students improvement and progress in the

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subject being assessed and allow them to develop their practical skills and abilities by linking theory to practice. They reflect students attitudes and values. Finally, they help students to learn how to manage their time.

As for the drawbacks, assignments may not provide equality if some students have not gone through the experience of doing an assignment before. Another disadvantage of assignments is that they are time consuming for students and for teachers to correct and mark. Also, the possibility of subjectivity in marking is high. Finally, cheating is also possible. (Race 1998)

From my experience as a teacher in postgraduate programs in the Libyan Academy and in The University of Zawia, I have noticed that the most common method of assessment in these programs is formal examinations. The dominance of this method is attributed to several factors including the large number of students, lack of resources, and the nature of the subjects assessed. However, the most important factor is the conventions of assessment in these institutions which demand the use of both midterm and final exams leaving not much freedom for the teacher to use other assessment methods.

This paper aims to encourage teachers and administrations to reconsider these conventions to include more methods in the assessment system. It is possible to minimize the negative effects of the disadvantages of both examinations and assignments by including them both in our assessment system. Using multiple methods is beneficial both for students' achievement and for improving and updating the assessment process in educational institutions and particularly in the postgraduate level.

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### **Methods**

A research study can be classified as descriptive, correlational and explanatory or a combination of these three types (Kumar, 2011). This study is descriptive since it describes attitudes and views of students towards the methods of assessment used in MA programs. It is also correlational because it seeks to establish the existence of a relationship between using assignment as a method of assessment and the student's achievement level. Finally, this study attempts to explain how and why using different methods of assessment has an effect on the students' achievement and this makes it an explanatory study as well.

To fulfill the aim of the study the following procedure has been followed:

1. One of the postgraduate program subjects, English Language Teaching Methodology (ELTM), was taught in the autumn semester 2017/2018 to students in the Libyan Academy and in The University of Zawia.
2. Instead of giving them a traditional midterm exam, students were instructed to individually do an assignment in which they were asked to put into practice the theories, principles and concepts they have studied through lectures during the first part of the semester by conducting textbook evaluation to assess its suitability for use in a teaching program.
3. Because this was the first experience of most of the students with assignments of this kind and to ensure that a clear task is set (UTDC, 2004), they were guided through the task by clarifying what to do and how to do it, and by giving them the opportunity to

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ask for clarifications at any time through different methods of communication including personal contact, email, and the Facebook group that was specifically created for the students of the subject to facilitate communication among students and between students and the tutor. Students were also informed in advance of the weight that the assignment carries towards the student's final grade.

4. Unlike formal examinations, assignments are done out of class and not under direct inspection of the teacher. Thus, to eliminate or at least minimize the possibility of cheating, students were assigned different textbooks for external evaluation and different units for internal evaluation. Also, they were informed that assignments will be discussed orally with students individually to ensure that the student has done the assignment by himself/herself.
5. After submission of the assignment, a questionnaire was distributed to the students in which they were asked to state the method of assessment they prefer and to justify their selection of the preferred method. They were also asked to reflect on their experience of doing the assignment and whether they benefitted from it and in what way.
6. A traditional final exam which was given and which only covered the second part of the syllabus. This is so to ensure equality between the exam and the assignment in the amount of material assigned. Then, the results of the exam were compared with the results of the assignment in general and for each student to find if there is any difference between the two and what the implications for such difference are.



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### **Results**

In the social sciences there are two broad approaches to enquiry: qualitative and quantitative (Kumar, 2011). This study combines these two approaches due to the variety of source of the data collected. Data were obtained from three different sources: students' questionnaire, assignment scores and final exam results. The data obtained from these sources are both qualitative and quantitative. In the questionnaire, questions that require selection of the suitable option were analyzed quantitatively whereas open ended questions were dealt with qualitatively. Analysis of the results of the midterm assignment and the final exam was conducted quantitatively.

#### **1. Students' Questionnaire Results**

The target number of students was 49 students. However, only 34 copies were returned.

##### ***Q1. Which method of assessment do you prefer to be used to assess your achievement in your MA study subjects?***

In responding to this question, 17 students representing half of the participants (50%) chose 'assignments' as their preferred method of assessment. On the other hand, 15 students representing 44% of the participants preferred simultaneous use of both assignments and examinations to assess their achievement in their MA study subjects. However, only 2 students representing 6% of the participants see examinations as their preferred method of assessment in MA programs. The following table shows these results.

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Options	Number of students	Percentage
Assignments	17	50%
A mixture of assignments and examinations	15	44%
Examinations	2	6%
Others	-	-

*Table 1: Preferred method of assessment*

**Q2. Why do you prefer your selected method?**

When answered this question, the 17 students who selected assignment as their preferred method of assessment gave several reasons which can be classified into the following themes ordered according to the number of students who selected them:

- Assignments give the chance to put theoretical knowledge into practice which broadens their understanding, awareness and knowledge of the topic. (10 students)
- In assignments, unlike traditional exams, assessment is not based on memorization which limits the amount of material students can study. (7 students)
- Assignments can improve and enhance learning skills such as writing and research skills and show students' real abilities and traits including their ability to analyze and criticize. (5 students)
- When doing assignments, students feel less stressed and they are under less pressure and this will allow them show their real abilities (3 students)

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- Assignments give students longer time which is sufficient to manage and complete the task, to perform well and to be more aware of the specified subject. (2 students)
- Assignment is a modern way of assessment and universally practiced in international universities. (2 students)

The following statements are quoted from some of the students:

- *“Because assignments enhance learning skills such as writing, analytical abilities, research traits and the most important thing that it provides better understanding, awareness and knowledge of the topic.”*
- *“Assignment gives a chance to apply and practice what I have learnt rather than traditional exams which depend largely on memorization.”*
- *“I think the assignment method is helpful and interesting because it can show breadth of student knowledge and understanding and it allows for individual expression.”*
- *“I prefer assignments because they deal with the practical side of the teaching process, they are also less stressful than typical exams and also most students including myself forget a few things while answering questions in an exam due to stress, and this doesn't happen with assignments.”*

In responding to the same question, 15 students selected a mixture of both assignments and exams as their preferred method of assessment. Their reasons are analyzed and classified as follows:

- There are two chances to offset and get better marks. (6 students)

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- This method allows students to go more in depth with the subject by dealing with both its theoretical and practical aspects. (2 students)
- Having only tests and memorizing materials is not enough. Assignments can show the real level of students and help them learn strategies and techniques they can use in their career as English language teachers. (2 students)
- Students' knowledge needs to be assessed; yet, the real representation of the knowledge which the students can use correctly can be seen through performance. (2 students)
- A mixture of both exams and assignments will satisfy the different learning styles: theoretical, practical, memorization, understanding, etc. (1 student)
- Using both exams and assignments, rather than only one of them, is a fair method of assessment (1 students)

The following statements are quoted from some of the students:

- *"I prefer this method because the student will have two chances to offset. That means in case a student got few marks in one of the methods, he/she will make it up in the other method."*
- *"Having only traditional tests and memorizing materials will get me to nowhere. So, for the current moment I would prefer having them both."*
- *"Teaching is an interactive career, where knowledge is valuable but performance is integral."*
- *"The assignment reflects the actual ability of learners to perform the knowledge gained in the course. Using exams for assessment is also helpful for assessing the knowledge concerned with the theoretical part of the course."*

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Another option which is 'exams' was selected by only 2 students as their preferred method of assessment for the following reasons:

- Exams push students to study the assigned material and accomplish the requirements of the course. (1 student)
- Exams are a familiar method of assessment to students in the Libyan teaching programs. (1 student)
- Exams help students to learn efficiently and seriously. (1 student)

The following statements are quoted from the two students:

- *"I prefer exams as a method of assessment, because exams push me as a student to study the topics chosen or have been studied and accomplish the requirements for the course."*
- *"Some students do not pay attention to study without focus, and the learner often neglects though some students are more serious in their study. "*

Some of the students participating in the questionnaire also suggested adding some other methods to assignments and examinations to assess students' achievement. These additional methods include oral presentations and group discussions as these, as one of the students said *"can reveal a lot to the professor about each individual's thinking"*.

### **Q3. How do you assess your experience in doing ELT methodology midterm assignment? Have you benefited from it and in what way?**

The responses to 'how do you assess your experience in doing ELT Methodology midterm assignment?' were all positive. They

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asserted that it was a useful and beneficial experience. Here are some extracts of what they said:

- *“I have truly done my best. I read many books and viewed other scholars' work. Also my classmates and I have peer-edited and asked for advice from one another... I think it was really beneficial. I hope all the teachers adopt the assignment methods on midterm and final exams, because what we memorize we forget after the exam but what we practice stays in our memory always”.*
- *“ELT Methodology assignment was unique. I enjoyed working on both technology lesson and material evaluation and adaptation. It was new and useful experience for me, I learned new thing that will certainly enhance my teaching in the future”.*
- *“I really enjoyed doing the assignment and it made me study more and look for more information that we have in the book, I survey in internet to look for more information and for more related materials”.*
- *“The experience I gained in doing ELT Methodology midterm was very challenging, useful and beneficial in that I have been in a situation where I had to make great realistic decisions regarding adapting and evaluating some materials”.*
- *“It was a little bit tough, but challenging at the same time. I as Libyan student have not been exposed to such assignments which require understanding the material and actually applying what I have learned. I am planning to do such assignments when teaching because it is useful and time saver very much more than the tradition pen and paper exams”.*
- *“The midterm assignment was a challenging and worthwhile task. It helped to measure what I can do with resources not just what I can remember”.*

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- *“A great and exciting experience, I have gained many experiences during conducting this assignment ... Now I have an idea about evaluation and adaptation of materials and how to integrate language skills. This experiment was very beneficial for me”.*
- *“The assignment was somewhat challenging but very useful. I learned how to evaluate and adapt course materials which will be very helpful for me when I start teaching. It will save me a lot of time and allow me to choose materials which best fit my student's needs. I believe that having done assignments in ELT rather than a typical exam has had a great impact on me and will help me to become a better teacher in the future”.*
- *“It was a very interesting and educative experience by which I have applied all knowledge I have learnt from the course. During the midterm assignment I felt that I am a real MA student. Thanks to you doctor”.*
- *“It was really good and encouraging experience. It was somehow difficult because it was the first time to do so.”*

## **2. Midterm assignment scores and final exam results**

This section presents the midterm assignment scores and final exam results. The purpose is to find out whether there is any difference between the results of the two methods of assessment: assignment and exam, and whether this difference is significant.

Tables 2 and 3 show these results. As can be seen from table 3, a considerable majority of students (38 students) have obtained higher marks in the midterm assignment than in the final exam (darkly shaded cells in the column of midterm assignment results. On the other hand, only 7 students scored higher in the final exam

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than in the midterm assignments (darkly shaded cells in the column of final exam results. However, the results of only 3 students were the same in both assessment methods (lightly shaded cells in both columns.

<i>Assessment method</i>	<i>Midterm assignment</i>	<i>Final exam</i>	<i>The same score</i>
<i>Number of students</i>	38	7	3
<i>Percentage</i>	79%	15%	6%

**Table 2: The number of students who obtained higher scores in one of the assessment methods**

Students	Midterm assignment scores 50%	Final exam results 50%
1	<b>44</b>	31
2	46	<b>47</b>
3	<b>35</b>	25
4	<b>40</b>	28
5	<b>41</b>	23
6	38	<b>41</b>
7	<b>31</b>	24
8	<b>38</b>	21
9	<b>36</b>	32
10	42	<b>46</b>
11	<b>37</b>	32
12	<b>42</b>	39
13	<b>48</b>	34



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14	35	<b>46</b>
15	<b>27</b>	18
16	<b>38</b>	27
17	<b>46</b>	42
18	<b>43</b>	<b>43</b>
19	<b>35</b>	17
20	<b>43</b>	36
21	<b>44</b>	33
22	<b>44</b>	42
23	<b>43</b>	40
24	43	<b>44</b>
25	<b>46</b>	33
26	<b>46</b>	22
27	<b>42</b>	37
28	<b>41</b>	37
29	<b>42</b>	22
30	<b>42</b>	27
31	<b>46</b>	25
32	41	<b>46</b>
33	<b>45</b>	41
34	<b>37</b>	27
35	<b>39</b>	26
36	<b>40</b>	21
37	<b>37</b>	33
38	32	<b>35</b>
39	<b>39</b>	<b>39</b>
40	<b>47</b>	20

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41	<b>47</b>	28
42	<b>45</b>	40
43	45	45
44	<b>43</b>	32
45	<b>43</b>	32
46	<b>39</b>	30
47	<b>39</b>	27
48	<b>39</b>	36

*Table 3: Scores of the students in the Midterm assignment and the final exam*

Conducting a Descriptive Statistics analysis in SPSS (version 20) of these results has shown that the minimum score in midterm assignment results is 27 while the maximum score is 48 with a mean of 40.85 and a standard deviation of about 4.5. On the other hand, the Minimum score in final exam results is 17 while the maximum score is 47 with a mean of 32.75 and a standard deviation of 8.4 which is an indication that the variation in final exam results is higher than that of midterm assignment results.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Assignment Results	48	27	48	40.85	4.510
Exam Results	48	17	47	32.75	8.416

*Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the assessment methods results*

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### **Discussion**

The results of the students' questionnaire have shown that 50% of the participants prefer using assignments as a method of assessment in their MA program. These results are legitimately consistent with the results of the students in the midterm assignments and the final exam since 79% of the students have scored higher marks in the midterm assignments than in the final exam. It would be logical to assume that students would do better if their preferred method of assessment is used. However, 44% of them believed that both methods should be used simultaneously in their assessment. On the other hand, a minority of participants representing 2% stated their preference of using exams as a method of assessment of their achievement in the MA program. This is also reflected in the students' scores; only 15% of the students obtained higher scores in their final examinations than in their midterm assignments. These results indicate that using the students preferred method of assessment would motivate them to do better than if the method used was not preferred.

According to Scouller (1998:453), one of the important factors in preferring a certain method of assessment is the students preferred approach of studying. This was expressed by a considerable number of students who preferred using assignment which favors a deep approach to examination which mainly relies on rote-learning and memorization. Students who selected assignments as their preferred method also believe that assignments allow them to translate their theoretical knowledge into practice which enhances their understanding and awareness of what is being learned. In addition, their research and writing skills such as the ability to analyze and criticize information will be improved. This is also in harmony with

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Thomas and Brain's (1984) findings which suggest a tendency among students to use a deep approach when doing written assignments and in which students tend to analyze and criticize rather than memorize material.

Other advantages of assignments, according to the students, are that they are not dependent on memorization and that they give sufficient time to them to manage and complete their tasks. This also puts them under less pressure which would help in showing their real abilities and skills. These opinions are supported by the students' answers to the third question of the questionnaire. (See the analysis of the student's questionnaire in the Results section). In these answers, all students, irrespective of their preferred method of assessment, expressed their benefit from the experience of writing the midterm assignment in many positive ways. This is consistent with Race's (1998) view that assignments are advantageous in several ways including giving opportunity to the students for demonstrating understanding and awareness of the relevant topics and materials and allowing them to develop their practical skills and abilities by linking theory to practice.

### **Conclusion**

This research paper has investigated the students' attitudes and views towards methods of assessment used in MA programs in the Libyan academy and in the University of Zawia. The results have indicated that 50% of the participant students show interest in using assignment in assessing their achievement in MA program subjects. A considerable number of the students (44%) expressed their preference of using a mixture of both assignments and exams while using exams was only selected by 6% of the participant students. The results of the

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experiment conducted and in which students were given the chance to be assessed through both methods indicated that the majority of students obtained higher scores in the assignment than in the exam. Based on these results, therefore, we recommend the use of multiple assessment methods including assignments and exams which will provide evidence of how well students achieved the desired outcomes. We believe that limiting these methods to traditional and formal exams will limit the students' creativity and deprive them from practicing their knowledge and translating it into practical activities to enhance their experience and improve their awareness and understanding. Also, it is rational to assume that using a multiple method of assessment will enable us to eliminate or, at least, minimize the negative effects and drawbacks of using a single method.

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