

## **Thai EFL Student Teachers' Challenges of Classroom Implementation Using Cooperative Learning Practices**

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### **Abstract**

To foster pre-service English language teachers' positive motivation for their teaching practicum is a must, as English language teachers' training in Thailand faced various challenges, including training content, knowledge, and experiences, and training activities. Therefore, This study investigated the challenges of using cooperative learning practices to enlarge Thai EFL student teachers' implementation of the approach in Thai elementary school as it promotes students' collaboration, academic achievement, positive attitudes toward teaching, and social skills. However, challenges in implementing were found in their classrooms, such as teachers' lack of confidence, insufficient administrative support, and training in the Cooperative learning approach. Therefore, 19 Thai student teachers of the English language were selected through purposive sampling to get training in CL based on the framework for Language Teacher Education in Thailand and (RE) Making a Modular Model by Kumaravadivelu (2012, p. 12), it divided into three stages of developing cooperative learning practice. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observation protocols, and reflective journal protocols. The thematic analysis was used to analyze the essential challenges in implementing cooperative learning. The research findings indicated that five important challenges were student teachers' low confidence and content knowledge, student teachers' preparation and planning, classroom management, students' engagement, and individual classroom assessment, respectively. These challenges pointed out the complexity of implementing cooperative learning and highlighted the proper need to support student teachers for effective implementation and facilitate successful implementation.

*Keywords:* cooperative learning, challenges, English language classroom, classroom implementation

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## **Introduction**

English language teacher training in Thailand faces countless challenges in enlarging pre-service teachers' teaching competence and confidence, one of the founding principles of teacher preparation. These challenges include implementing theory into practice, teaching skills, content knowledge, limited classroom management experiences and lack of pedagogical confidence (Damnet, 2021; Imsa-ard et al., 2021; Richards, 1998). According to Tique (2023) highlights that student teachers gained valuable professional experiences, including adapting to students' English proficiency levels, teaching multi-level classrooms, employing diverse strategies, engaging in professional development, and using effective facilities.

Implementing cooperative learning in teacher training could significantly enhance their pedagogical skills and content knowledge, preparing them for a real classroom context. To promote teacher students' competence, cooperative learning is an effective pedagogical approach to foster motivation, critical thinking, communication, and student participation as it enhances collaboration through group activities and actively engages students in constructing knowledge while developing essential social skills (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Slavin, 1995). This could also deepen student teachers' understanding of classroom dynamics, effective classroom management, and strategies to foster student engagement, as indicated in Castañeda-Trujillo and Aguirre-Hernández (2018). Moreover, educators must carefully design cooperative learning activities that align with learning objectives while balancing structure and flexibility to accommodate diverse student abilities and learning preferences. Overcoming these challenges requires thoughtful planning and effective classroom management strategies. Based on the aforementioned studies, this study investigated the challenges of using cooperative learning practices to enhance Thai EFL student teachers' implementation in Thai elementary schools.

## **Research Objective**

To examine Thai EFL student teachers' relevant issues and challenges in implementing CL in the actual language classrooms.

## **Literature Review**

### **Pre-Service Teachers' Challenges in Teacher Training**

Teacher training plays an important role in preparing pre-service teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to become effective teachers in the future. However, pre-service teachers face challenges during their training, including classroom management, planning lessons, building confidence, and applying what they learned in real classroom situations (Farrell, 2007; McIntyre, 2003; Richards, 1998). These challenges often create a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, which leads to difficulties for pre-service teachers to fully prepared for real classroom contexts. As a result, pre-service teachers feel overwhelmed when they have to deal with classroom realities and diverse students.

### **The Challenges of Cooperative Learning**

Despite its widespread implementation and positive perceptions, various obstacles may confront educators when implementing cooperative learning in their classrooms. Challenges

such as the curriculum and students' attitudes are also found to be significant barriers to this approach. Teachers encounter hurdles when setting up cooperative learning exercises (Hämäläinen & Vähäsantanen, 2011; Van Leeuwen et al., 2013). These challenges include organizing suitable group tasks, forming teams, and managing class time (Gillies & Boyle, 2010). According to McManus and Gettinger (1996), students expressed considerable dissatisfaction with group conflicts during collaborative work. This sentiment was also confirmed by a study of Phipps et al. (2001), who found that fewer than 20 % of the students in their study believed that group work positively influenced their learning. Hinson (2015) noted that students exhibited increased engagement and motivation when completing assignments in a team setting. However, the study highlighted challenges teachers face in implementing cooperative learning, including time constraints and the need for support among educators. In the international context, Keramati and Gillies (2021) investigated challenges across two cultural settings in Iran and Australia. The challenges in Iran included a preference for traditional teaching methods, limited knowledge of teamwork fostering, and inadequate access to current teaching materials. Conversely, challenges in Australia involved adapting courses, collaborating with external students, addressing individual learning needs, and nurturing positive interpersonal connections when implementing cooperative learning. Similarly, Slavin (2014) & Wossen (2011) identified challenges such as implementing cooperative learning in large class sizes, inadequate classroom organization, insufficient teaching materials, and a lack of well-trained instructors. These findings underscore the importance of providing educators with comprehensive support, resources, and training to overcome these obstacles.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of 19 Thai EFL student-teachers selected for training as an extracurricular activity aimed at enhancing students' competencies. All student teachers have been studying in the Department of English, Faculty of Education. This specific group was targeted because they were at a stage where they received fundamental theoretical knowledge and needed to implement it in actual classroom settings during their teaching practicum.

### **Setting**

The current study is conducted at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, as it represents the academic environment where the student teachers are currently enrolled, which provides access to the specific group of student teachers targeted for the study.

### **Research Instruments**

#### ***Classroom Observation Protocol***

The cooperative learning observation protocol was used to investigate how the student teachers implemented the CL practice. Student teachers were asked to cooperate in pairs while being observed by the researchers. The observation protocol was adapted from a study by George (2017), which was used to support student teachers' perceptions of their classroom implementation.

### ***Reflective Journal Protocol***

The reflective teaching approach was part of the teaching and learning process that mirrored the student-teacher learning journey, adapted from a study of Cañabate et al. (2019). The reflective journal protocol in this study consisted of four elements: (1) identifying the situation, activity, or experience; (2) identifying prior conceptions, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences; (3) focusing on and probing the core of reflection, context, and professional context; and (4) understanding the process of transformation by establishing, articulating, and transferring students' concrete learning objectives, followed by the implementation of new action plans.

### ***Semi-structured Interview***

The semi-structured interview was employed to investigate student teachers' challenges of classroom implementation using the Cooperative Learning. This enabled the researcher to gather in depth information of individual experiences. The interview questions were designed to elicit responses regarding the difficulties encountered by student teachers during cooperative learning implementation.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from semi structured interview were transcribed and coded into themes. Each transcript was coded using open and axial coding methods based on Strauss and Corbin (1998) Data obtained from written documents were also analyzed using similar techniques, which allowed the researcher to identify and clarify interrelated challenges in the implementation of cooperative learning.

## **Result**

Implementing cooperative learning can be challenging for student teachers who are in the stage of developing their teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge. The current study identifies five main challenges, including student teachers' low confidence and content knowledge, their preparation and planning, classroom management, student engagement, and individual classroom assessment.

### **Student Teachers' Low Confidence and Content Knowledge**

Many student teachers expressed that teaching in a real classroom setting brought them a mix of emotions and challenges, especially when confronted with unexpected classroom scenarios. Many participants shared that linguistic insecurity and lack of confidence play significant roles. This lack of confidence makes it difficult for them to implement cooperative learning strategies effectively. They feel overwhelmed by trying to manage multiple tasks at once and ensuring that all students participate equally. Some also expressed anxiety about not being able to answer students' questions, as they reported, as indicated below.

My challenge is my linguistic insecurity, which makes me anxious and less confident. This often leads me to be very quiet and not talk much. I need to start with the easiest steps and try to improve each time I teach in class.... (Tom)

I feel very excited, scared, and anxious about teaching in a real classroom. I'm also very concerned about the content I need to teach and my language proficiency. (Lisa)

...I'm also afraid that I don't have enough knowledge and confidence to teach students. (Anna)

My challenge is my confidence. I sometimes doubt my self. The content I prepare often turns out to be too easy for the students, which makes them bored... (Lizzy)

My challenge is my knowledge. I feel like I need to improve a lot in class. Sometimes I struggle, and it's embarrassing when I don't know the vocabulary. (Phyllis)

I'm worried about whether I know enough. When I prepare, I have to think about what the students will want to know. If I can explain things well, they'll understand because I'm their teacher. But I also have to think about what they might ask. If I don't have an answer, they might wonder why. So, I need to prepare a lot, and it's stressing me out... (Nick)

It was noticeable when they faced unexpected classroom situations, such as struggling to answer students' questions. These scenarios not only increased their anxieties but also impacted their teaching effectiveness and affected the overall learning experience for students. Additionally, their lack of self-confidence made it harder to implement cooperative learning as they often felt overwhelmed by the need to balance multiple tasks and ensure equal participation from all students.

### **Student Teachers' Preparation and Planning**

Preparation and planning emerged as significant challenges for student teachers as they must carefully design lesson plans that focus on students' levels, effective grouping strategies, and appropriate, engaging activities. The student teachers in this study highlighted their difficulties in designing activities that engage all learners and the need to remain flexible when unexpected situations arise. One of the significant challenges was ensuring that the planned activities align with students' level, background knowledge, interests, and language proficiency. The following excerpt illustrates:

Sometimes, an activity aligns with the content but is too difficult for the students, it won't be effective. So, preparing activities that fit the students' level is the toughest part for me. (Nick)

Another challenge is managing confusion and anxiety regarding my teaching methods and unexpected situations during lessons. Sometimes things don't go as planned, and students lose interest or become distracted... (Andy)

...The content I prepare often turns out to be too easy for the students, which makes them bored. Finding suitable lessons that engage them is really challenging for me... (Lizzy)

...Sometimes I feel disappointed when things don't go as planned, but I try to move on and work on improving the situation... (Fiz)

As described above, preparation and planning were significant challenges for student teachers when implementing cooperative learning. Choosing an appropriate activity can be difficult. Additionally, managing unexpected classroom scenarios and adapting lessons on the spot adds to the complexity of the planning process. In conclusion, the lack of real-world classroom experience may cause student teachers to feel underprepared to handle unexpected situations and to prepare effective lessons.

### **Classroom Management**

Managing an environment where students work as a group can be challenging. The participants in the study highlighted that the dynamic nature of group work often leads to noise, distractions, and occasional conflicts among students. The excerpt below illustrates the challenges that student teachers encounter in their classroom management during cooperative learning:

My challenge is how to manage the classroom effectively. It's essential to maintain control during activities to prevent chaos and ensure that students are focused on the lesson. Moreover, having sufficient knowledge to teach them is crucial, whether it's about the subject matter or classroom management techniques. (Luna)

One of my biggest challenges is managing the classroom. If I don't handle it properly, the effectiveness of teaching and learning decreases, and the classroom can quickly turn chaotic... (Andy)

...Students can become very loud, and the classroom can turn chaotic. However, it's easier to manage with a smaller number of students. Cooperative learning is more suitable for small classes rather than large classes... (Lisa)

In conclusion, the participants revealed that classroom management is challenging, especially when students work together in groups, as the dynamic of group work often causes noise, conflict, and distraction, which can create an ineffective learning environment.

### **Student Engagement and Participation**

The analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed that student engagement and participation are significant challenges faced by student teachers. They expressed that some students engage in activities while others let their friends complete the tasks and refuse to share ideas or discuss in groups. The following section explores the difficulties related to student engagement and participation, as shared by the participants in this study:

Students often struggle to collaborate effectively in teams, some often allowing others to take the lead. They prefer choosing their own group or partner, and while some may be upset when the teacher assigns groups but as a teacher, it's essential to consider each team's dynamics. (Emily)

...Some students are interested, while others are not. I have to solve problems on the spot, and that makes me nervous. (Tyla)

The challenge is when students collaborate in groups, some may choose not to share their ideas. (Shasha)

Student engagement and participation highlight a critical area of concern for student teachers. The difficulties shared by participants indicated that some students dominate discussions while others remain passive. Moreover, they also expressed that another challenge was that students sometimes don't want to work in assigned groups; they prefer to work with their friends. This could limit opportunities for diverse interaction and reduce the learning experience.

### **Difficulty in Individual Evaluation**

Assessing individual contributions in group work poses a significant challenge for student teachers. Ensuring that each student is evaluated fairly becomes difficult when some students dominate tasks while others contribute less. Student teachers often struggle to distinguish individual efforts from group achievements. This issue becomes particularly problematic when students rely heavily on their peers or when group dynamics lead to unequal contributions, making it hard to evaluate. The excerpt below illustrates what student teachers experience when facing this challenge:

When students work together, sometimes only one student takes charge and completes the task. Evaluating the group is difficult, and assessing individual contributions is even harder. (Alisa)

Since students work in groups, some might not engage fully and may not understand the lesson. (Tyla)

I believe we can use cooperative learning as a classroom activity, but not for evaluation. (Phylis)

I start by evaluating students as a group during activities and discussions. Then, I assess them individually when they give presentations; however, cooperative learning is difficult to determine. (Jes)

In conclusion, assessing individual contributions in group work remains a significant challenge for student teachers. Student teachers highlighted that ensuring fair evaluation is quite challenging, as some students take on more responsibilities while others contribute less. As the excerpts show, many student teachers struggle to accurately assess everyone's understanding and participation, especially when students rely on their peers. Moreover, some student teachers also suggested that cooperative learning is effective for classroom activities; however, it presents difficulties in terms of evaluation.

### **Lesson Observation Protocol**

#### ***Cooperative Group Responsibilities***

The challenge emerging from lesson observation protocols and anecdotal evidence was the concept of group responsibilities. Throughout various lessons, student teachers attempted to foster a sense of responsibility within cooperative groups by assigning specific roles, encouraging collaboration, and designing tasks that required teamwork. However, the effectiveness of these strategies varied based on the complexity of tasks, clarity of instructions, and structure of group roles. In some lessons, challenges arose due to task difficulty and lack of role clarity, which limited active group participation. When tasks were

too basic, students had little incentive to cooperate, contribute, or share ideas. Furthermore, as student teachers did not clearly define roles, some students were unsure of their responsibilities within the group, leading to a situation where some students dominated tasks while others became passive observers. The excerpt below illustrated the student teachers' challenge in assigning group responsibilities:

In Lisa's sports equipment vocabulary lesson, circling vocabulary items on a single worksheet reduces opportunities for each group member to contribute actively, often leading to one or two students taking charge while others remain passive.

In Emily's crossword puzzle activity, unclear instructions left students uncertain about what to do, resulting in minimal group teamwork, and only a few students actively participated.

Andy's activity involved only one worksheet per group, which allowed a few students to work actively while others just observed, making each student feel less responsible for the group's activity.

### ***Classroom Interaction and Student Engagement***

One key theme was the importance of classroom interaction and student engagement. Effective teaching goes beyond content delivery; it involves creating an interactive and engaging learning environment that actively involves students in their learning process. The interaction between teacher and students, as well as among students themselves, is essential to engagement, participation, and comprehension. This feedback highlighted the need for stronger strategies to enhance classroom interaction and engagement. In some lessons, there was a lack of interaction, with students having limited opportunities to practice vocabulary and sentence structures in meaningful ways:

Sally's lesson started off engaging but lacked clear objectives. The vocabulary was too narrow, and there was no pronunciation practice or challenging activities.

Lisa's objectives were unclear, leading to an ineffective lesson structure. Activities didn't align with the learning objectives, and tasks were too easy for students. Moreover, when the teacher presented content, it was mostly teacher talk.

Emily's activities, such as the ice-breaking activity and vocabulary introduction, didn't align with the objectives. The teacher read from the slide and did not encourage students to practice.

Nick followed the lesson plan but seemed unsure as he considered what to do next. This disrupted the lesson flow and highlighted a need for more transparent structure. Students struggled to understand what he was trying to convey.

The excerpt above illustrates the importance of clear objectives and structured activities for effective classroom engagement. It highlights how lessons with unclear goals, tasks that do not fit students' levels, or limited interaction can often hinder student understanding and engagement. Moreover, it also emphasizes the crucial role of classroom interaction and student engagement. Overall, lessons without clear objectives, engaging tasks, or sufficient interaction often decrease students' understanding and engagement.



### ***Challenges of Classroom Management***

An important theme from the researcher's classroom observations was classroom management and the challenges teachers face in maintaining a structured and engaging learning environment. The unclear instructions and lack of engagement strategies led to classroom chaos, creating an unproductive learning atmosphere. In some cases, tasks that didn't align with students' abilities or interests led to disengagement, as students either finished an easy task too quickly or felt demotivated to participate, as illustrated by the following examples:

Phylis's lesson lacked effective strategies for managing interactions between the teacher and students. She did not set time limits for practice activities, which caused the lesson to run over time, leaving the teaching process incomplete with only practice and no production or wrap-up phase. Additionally, only one worksheet was provided per group, and Phylis did not ensure that each student was actively engaged and participating, resulting in some students being excluded from the activity.

Lisa's lesson was affected by overly simple tasks that students completed quickly, which affected the lesson flow and overall classroom control. The content was not suited to their skill level, and once students finished the tasks, they lost interest in continuing the lesson and became less attentive.

Emily's lesson was affected by poor management, primarily because of unclear instructions that left students uncertain about what was expected of them.

Nick's lesson was often interrupted by pauses between activities, as he took time to decide on the next steps. Students became disengaged and felt uncertain about what to do next.

### ***Assessment and Evaluation***

Assessment and evaluation were noted in the classroom observation as essential components of effective teaching. They measure student comprehension and provide valuable feedback to students, helping teachers identify areas for improvement in future lessons. However, the observations revealed that lessons lacked structured assessments.

Assessment and evaluation were almost entirely missing from Nick's lesson, making assessing student understanding and progress difficult. There were no quizzes or individual tasks to evaluate students' abilities in the lesson.

In Andy's lesson, the lack of structured assessments was evident, as there were no checkpoints to evaluate student comprehension throughout the activities. For example, rather than using short quizzes, reflective questions, or quick written responses at the end of each activity, Andy moved directly from one task to another without checking students' understanding.

Tyla used worksheets for assessment, but the questions mainly focused on basic memorization. This made it difficult to assess students' comprehension since the worksheets didn't encourage them to apply concepts in new ways or think critically.

Lisa used a worksheet in her lesson, but it was done as a group activity, which made it hard to see each student's individual understanding. The questions on the worksheet were also too simple, offering little challenge and not encouraging critical thinking.

### Discussion

Five important challenges in implementing cooperative learning for student teachers in the classroom include student teachers' low confidence and content knowledge, their preparation and planning, classroom management, students' engagement, and individual classroom assessment. Teacher confidence and knowledge are crucial issues in shaping student teachers' training. Many student teachers expressed significant concerns about their confidence and knowledge in facilitating cooperative learning, especially when managing group activities and responding to student questions. Moreover, they revealed that linguistic insecurity is one of the main issues causing them uncertainty and lack of confidence in front of the classroom, as they feel unsure about their teaching performance and content knowledge. This aligns with Moges (2019), who found several challenges when implementing cooperative learning, including instructors' limited knowledge, inadequate administrative support, lack of instructional materials, and insufficient training.

The preparation and planning for student teachers were essential yet challenging. The participants revealed that they must consider how to group students and engage in tasks and activities since planning requires the selection of cooperative learning strategies that align with both the students' proficiency and levels (Johnson et al., 2013). Another key challenge was designing tasks that were suitable for students' levels and promoted individual accountability while encouraging positive interdependence among group members. According to Slavin (2014), well-structured cooperative learning tasks require clear guidelines and well-defined roles, which help prevent unequal participation. The findings also emphasized the challenges that student teachers face in the preparation and planning phase of cooperative learning. This stage was particularly crucial as it directly impacted the effectiveness of the learning activities and students' engagement. Through the semi-structured interviews, a common challenge was aligning activities with the students' proficiency levels, knowledge, and age. This challenge becomes harder when student teachers need to quickly change their plans due to unexpected situations in the classroom. Effective lesson planning was often one of the most challenging aspects for teachers, particularly in aligning activities with student needs and adapting to classroom dynamics (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Richards & Bohlke, 2011). Additionally, the anxiety and uncertainty about unexpected classroom situations and the effectiveness of their lesson plans align with findings from Borko (2004), which highlighted that novice teachers frequently feel unprepared for the unpredictable nature of classroom environments. The lack of real classroom experience exacerbates this issue, suggesting a gap between theoretical training and practical application. This is supported by Darling-Hammond et al. (2005), who emphasize the need for stronger practical training components in teacher education programs to better equip student teachers for classroom management and practical instruction challenges. In addition, Abramczyk and Jurkowski (2020) also point to factors such as class size, group formation, task design, diverse student needs, and teachers' attitudes toward cooperative learning as significant challenges for classroom implementation.

The classroom management was also crucial in implementing cooperative learning. According to Johnson & Johnson (2018), structured cooperative learning settings need clear guidelines and organization to ensure all students engage. Effective classroom management

in this context includes establishing well-defined roles and responsibilities for each group member, fostering accountability, and ensuring students have clear objectives and tasks (Slavin, 2015). It involves actively monitoring progress and providing feedback, with teachers playing a crucial role in supporting students throughout each stage of group work (Gillies, 2016). However, in this study, student teachers faced several challenges when implementing cooperative learning, including student distractions from group activities, noise, and a lack of effective strategies for managing interactions between students in groups. These findings are consistent with Slavin's (2014) and Wossen (2011) research, who similarly identified classroom management challenges such as the difficulty of managing large class sizes and inadequate classroom organization.

The engagement and participation of students posed another challenge for student teachers. The results indicated that students struggle to motivate students to work in groups, as some students were leaders while others remained passive learners. This aligns with a study by Molla (2015), which indicated that some students may dominate group discussions while others remain passive, resulting in unequal participation and limited learning outcomes. Furthermore, when students lacked accountability for both their learning and their peers.

In addition, the challenge of individual evaluation in cooperative learning, separate from the overall group effort, was also found in this study. Since cooperative learning prioritizes teamwork and shared problem solving, assessing each student's performance becomes complicated. Moreover, students' levels of participation can vary; some contribute more than others, while some may engage less in the activity, making it harder to ensure fairness in individual assessments. The semi-structured interview revealed that they struggled to assess students individually. Additionally, it was found that some participants did not know how to assess students due to the ineffective activities or tasks given to students and their roles within their teams. This aligns with Blatchford et al. (2003) once students work together, some may contribute more significantly than others, making it difficult for instructors to assess each student's performance accurately.

In many cases, dominant students may assume leadership roles, completing tasks on behalf of the group, while others may contribute less or fail to engage fully. Moreover, Slavin (2011) highlighted the challenge of evaluating individual contributions in cooperative learning and pointed out the importance of designing assessments that account for group and individual performance. Without clear ways to track each student's work, there is a risk of relying too much on group outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

Teacher training plays a fundamental role in preparing student teachers or preservice teachers to become effective educators in the future, as it equips them with essential pedagogical knowledge, classroom management strategies, and practical teaching experience to handle real classroom settings. Despite the advantages of implementing cooperative learning in the classroom to promote students' social skills, critical thinking, and engagement, student teachers still encounter several difficulties when applying cooperative learning. These challenges include low confidence and content knowledge when teaching, preparation and planning, classroom management, student engagement, and individual classroom assessment. Therefore, to help student teachers overcome these challenges, the educator must provide support by enhancing training programs focused on developing confidence, effective classroom management, and appropriate assessment strategies. The findings from this study

shed light on critical areas that teacher training must address to support student teachers or educators in implementing cooperative learning effectively. However, a limitation of this research is that it did not include a training program to build student teachers' confidence.

### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The current study utilized AI-assisted programs such as Grammarly, ChatGPT, and Qillbot to improve the coherence of our writing. Grammarly helped us refine grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. ChatGPT also supports our writing by paraphrasing and rewording to enhance overall fluency. Moreover, we use Qillbot to paraphrase and summarize complex ideas and improve paragraph fluency. While these AI tools were used to refine writing, all intellectual content, analysis, and interpretation remain entirely my own.

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