

## **Investigating Reading Strategy Use: Korean University EFL Students in an Intensive English Program**

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In this study, the researchers explored the metacognitive awareness and reading strategy use of 41 Korean university EFL students attending an intensive English program in Korea. It examined if there were any differences in reading strategy use over the course of the semester as well as differences in reading strategy use by gender and by self-rated English reading proficiency. The study found that Korean EFL students reported using more reading strategies in the pre-test than in the post-test. Problem-solving strategies were the most preferred strategies while support strategies were the least used. Males reported using more strategies than females, although the difference was not statistically significant. Finally, the participants who rated their English reading proficiency as being at the intermediate level reported using more strategies than those students who rated their English reading proficiency at the beginning level, and the difference was statistically significant.

*Keywords:* metacognition, reading strategies, learning context, EFL, Korean university students

### **INTRODUCTION**

Learning a new language can be challenging and requires a great amount of effort and time to reach a proficient level in the target language. Language learning can be influenced by many factors, such as learning context, motivation, and learner's individual differences (e.g., age, gender, learning styles, or prior linguistic knowledge; Koda, 1994). Among these factors, learning context has a significant impact on learner's language acquisition and development (Collentine & Freed, 2004). For instance, learning a language in a second language (SL) setting where a learner is exposed to the target language all the time can

be easier than learning in a foreign language (FL) setting where a learner is exposed to the target language mainly in a classroom. Research has noted that the learning environment also influences reading in a SL or FL context (Dewey, 2004; Freed, 1998; Huebner, 1995). The consensus of the research studies indicates that readers' reading comprehension, reading proficiency, and confidence were improved when they studied a language in an SL context or an intensive language program context.

Intensive language learning programs have been utilized in the field of English language education as a format of learning as their context allows for significant amounts of L2 contact time. The intensive English program (IEP) is designed to maximize the exposure to the English language and optimize the learning time (Mukundan et al., 2012). Research has found that the intensive learning environment of IEPs has a great impact on English language learners' language learning behaviors and strategy use (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Nasiri & Shokrpour, 2012). It was also noticed that learners in IEPs tend to be more strategic, motivated, and metacognitively aware of their learning by planning and monitoring their learning and managing their time (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006).

Over the decades, numerous research studies have been conducted in order to investigate what readers do when reading in English to increase their comprehension (Hong-Nam, 2014; Hong-Nam & Szabo, 2018; Koda, 1994; Sheorey & Baboczky, 2008). To date, many studies on readers' metacognitive awareness of reading strategies have examined ESL and EFL readers in various contexts. However, little is known about the metacognitive awareness of reading strategies used by Korean university EFL students in an intensive English learning context in Korea. Finding out which reading strategies are employed in an IEP, by which kinds of students, and how they are employed will be helpful to both the teachers and the students themselves in having students become more successful readers.

In this study, three ideas were explored. First, the overall reading strategy use of Korean university EFL students enrolled in an IEP were investigated to determine strategy use before the semester started and at the end of the semester to see if there were changes. Second, the relationship between reading strategy use by gender was examined. Finally, reading strategy use by participants' self-rated English reading proficiency was explored.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Framework

Learning requires that students self-regulate during the learning process. Metacognition is the idea of thinking about one's thinking and adjusting that thinking when new learning occurs that does not match what is already thought (Flavell, 1976, 1979). Metacognition is the ability to self-assess both the knowledge one has and the strategies one uses, and to self-correct when the knowledge does not match existing knowledge or the strategies used are not providing comprehension. In this study, Korean university EFL students were asked how they approached learning tasks and which strategies they used to monitor their comprehension. They were also asked to assess their English reading proficiency.

### Reading Strategies

Reading strategies are identified as the actions deliberately used by readers to enhance reading comprehension and manage interactions with text for effective reading comprehension (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). Reading strategies also refer to practices or thought processes that assist readers to comprehend the text (Cohen, 1998; Fazeli, 2011) and “help students make sense of the text they are reading” (Hong-Nam & Szabo, 2018, p. 399). The appropriate use of strategy contributes positively to reading comprehension, and readers use various reading strategies consciously or unconsciously “to make reading easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 8).

Even though there is a wide variety of reading strategies that readers can employ while reading, readers may not be aware of them or not aware of which strategies to use and when to use them. Research in the field of good readers and poor readers in both L1 and L2 reading contexts has found that good readers in both contexts use more reading strategies instantaneously, intuitively, and effectively than poor readers (Pang, 2008; Pressley et al., 1992). Both good L1 and L2 readers are more strategic and more metacognitively aware of what strategy to use and when to use it (e.g., before, during, or after reading; Gaultney, 1995). A number of studies in L2 reader research have shown that good

L2 readers who were more aware of their cognitive process tended to monitor and evaluate their reading process and reported using more strategies than poor readers (Pang, 2008).

## **Gender**

Some research has shown that strategy use is impacted by learner characteristics such as gender (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Wharton, 2000). Unlike the research on language proficiency, the findings of previous research on reading strategies and gender are mixed. Some research has shown that females use more strategies than males (Green & Oxford, 1995; Kaylani, 1996; Sheorey, 2006; Sheorey & Baboczy, 2008), while other research shows that there are no differences between males and females in the strategies they used (Poole, 2005; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Young & Oxford, 1993). The research also found that gender did not have a big impact on how often reading strategies were used or the types of strategies used while reading an academic text (Poole, 2005). Thus, this variable needs to be examined further when studies on strategy use are conducted.

## **Reading Proficiency**

Some research has noted that there is a close relationship between L2 language proficiency, reading proficiency, and strategy use. Research has shown that the level of language proficiency may determine the types of reading strategies used (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Hong-Nam & Szabo, 2018). L2 readers with advanced language proficiency tend to use a wider variety of reading strategies frequently and effectively (Fazeli, 2011; Hong-Nam, 2014; Rao, 2016; Zarei & Baharestani, 2014). The research on the relationship between readers' perceptions of their reading proficiency and reading strategy use has also reported similar findings, indicating that the readers with higher reading proficiency perceptions reported use of a greater number of and more frequent use of reading strategies (Hong-Nam & Page, 2014).

## **METHOD**

This study was designed as a pre-/post-test non-experimental design.

A pre-/post-survey method was employed to collect data from 41 Korean university EFL students who were attending an intensive English program (IEP) in Korea. The Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) was distributed to the participants at the beginning and end of the semester to collect the information about the participants' reading strategy use. Two statistical procedures (i.e., descriptive statistics and a paired sample *t*-test) were used to analyze the collected data.

## Participants

The participants in the current study were 41 freshmen university students attending a university in Korea and majoring in various disciplines: humanities (4), social studies (5), science/engineering (6), and art/music (26). They were all native speakers of Korean and learning English as a foreign language. The participants were composed of 15 (37%) males and 26 (63%) females with a mean age of 20.6. The Korean students were asked to self-report both their overall English language proficiency and their English reading proficiency on both the pre- and post-test.

As shown in Table 1, for the pre-test, 22 students (54%) rated their overall English language proficiency at the beginning level while 19 students (46%) reported their English language proficiency at the intermediate level. None of the Korean students felt that they had advanced English language proficiency. However, this changed in the post-test, as 20 students (49%) self-rated their English language proficiency at the beginning English language proficiency level, 18 students (44%) reported themselves to be at the intermediate language proficiency level, and three students (7%) reported their English language proficiency had grown to the advanced language proficiency level.

When asked to self-rate their English reading proficiency, almost half of the participants (20) rated their reading proficiency at the beginning level (49%), and the other half reported that they were intermediate (51%) readers. No one felt they were advanced readers of English in the pre-test. However, in the post-test, 17 students (42%) felt they were still beginning readers, 23 students (56%) thought they were intermediate readers, and one student (2%) felt he was an advanced English reader.

**TABLE 1. Self-Rated Overall English Proficiency and Reading Proficiency**

Proficiency		Beginning		Intermediate		Advanced	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Overall English Proficiency	Pre-test	22	54	19	46	0	0
	Post-test	20	49	18	44	3	7
Reading Proficiency	Pre-test	20	49	21	51	0	0
	Post-test	17	42	23	56	1	2

In addition to self-rating their overall English language proficiency and their English reading proficiency, the Korean university students were asked to rate if the IEP was helpful in promoting their English language skills and their English reading skills. Using a 5-point Likert scale, 20 students (49%) either *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the IEP was beneficial, while 14 students (34%) believed it was somewhat beneficial. Furthermore, 8 students (17%) marked either that they *disagreed* or that they *strongly disagreed* that the IEP was helpful to them.

### **EFL Context**

The study took place at a university and in an IEP in Seoul, Korea. The participants enrolled in at least four freshmen-level university courses (e.g., sociology, psychology, college math, economics, etc.) which were taught in Korean. In addition to the university courses, the students also enrolled in intensive English courses offered by an intensive language institute outside of the university campus. The IEP in this study offered courses in four areas of English language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking), and all courses were taught by native English speakers. The students were given a placement test to determine their English proficiency in the four areas of English before enrolling in the IEP. The program consisted of 20 hours of English classes per week for 16 weeks in both the spring and fall, and 40 hours per week for 8 weeks during the summer. Their English proficiency was measured at the beginning of the first semester. This means that for a year, these students were asked to read, write, speak, and listen in English every day for several hours that included the IEP classes and a few hours outside the classroom in order to complete their homework.

However, the data collection for this study occurred during the first regular semester that they were enrolled in the program.

## **Instrument**

The Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002) was used to collect the data for the current study. However, for this study, the English version of SORS was translated into Korean to maximize the comprehension of the questionnaire and minimize any possible errors from misunderstanding English.

SORS is a survey used to assess the frequency of reading strategy use of English language learners while reading academic material in English. The SORS uses a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*I never or almost never do this*) to 5 (*I always or almost always do this*). This is a self-reported survey, as the participants are asked to read each statement and circle the number that they believe applies to them. Thus, the higher the number, the more frequent the use of the strategy. The 30 items are categorized into three broad areas: global reading strategies (13 items), problem-solving strategies (8 items), and support strategies (9 items). Global reading strategies are intentional and well-planned strategies for monitoring or managing reading. This category includes such strategies as browsing the text and reading the bolded titles and pictures and/or figures in order to set a purpose for reading and create questions about the text. Problem-solving strategies are the strategies used by the reader when they are working directly with the text to understand the textual information that is being read. This category includes such strategies as staying focused on the text and reading more slowly or even rereading when the text becomes difficult. Support strategies refer to basic support techniques to improve reading comprehension, such as using a dictionary. This category also includes such strategies as taking notes, underlining or highlighting information within the text, and creating a short summary for each section read.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study employed a pre/post design, and the SORS was used to collect data. It was administrated at the beginning of the semester as a pre-test, and the same questionnaire was distributed after five months as a post-test. The pre/post design allowed the researchers to determine if

there were any changes in reading strategy use over the course of the semester.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for summarizing demographic information and describing the participants' reading strategy use. The paired sample *t*-test was used to determine if there were any changes in overall strategy use over the course of the semester and to determine if there were any changes or differences in reading strategies used among the three strategy categories by gender and reading proficiency after one semester.

## RESULTS

### Overall Strategy Use

The overall total reading strategies used and differences in strategies used among the three major categories are presented in Table 2. As shown in the table, the Korean university EFL students reported using a variety of reading strategies at a medium level (Pre:  $M = 3.45$ , Post:  $M = 3.36$ ). The paired sample *t*-test revealed the difference in overall strategy use between the pre- and post-test was not statistically significant ( $t = 1.19$ ,  $p = 0.24$ ) at a  $p < 0.05$  level. Additionally, it was found that the mean scores on the pre-test were higher than those on the post-test, indicating that the participants reported using strategies more frequently at the beginning of the semester.

Among the three strategy categories, problem-solving strategies (Pre:  $M = 3.81$ , Post:  $M = 3.55$ ) were the most preferred strategies, followed by global reading strategies (Pre:  $M = 3.37$ , Post:  $M = 3.32$ ), and finally by the support reading strategies (Pre:  $M = 3.18$ , Post:  $M = 3.23$ ). When looking at the difference in strategy use in the three categories, the paired sample *t*-test revealed that there were statistically significant differences in strategy use only in the problem-solving strategy category ( $t = 2.52$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) at a  $p < 0.01$  level.



**TABLE 2. Mean Score of Overall Reading Strategy Use and Paired Sample *t*-test**

Variables	Pre-test		Post-test		<i>t</i>	Sig.	Difference*
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Global Reading Strategy	3.37	0.19	3.32	0.25	0.73	0.47	–
Problem-Solving Strategy	3.81	0.30	3.55	0.34	2.52	0.01	Pre > Post
Support Reading Strategy	3.18	0.20	3.23	0.28	-0.46	0.65	–
Total	3.45	0.14	3.36	0.24	1.19	0.24	–

Note. \* $p < 0.01$ .

## Gender

As shown in Table 3, when looking at the total mean scores of reading strategies used by gender, the male students (Pre:  $M = 3.53$ , Post:  $M = 3.41$ ) reported using strategies more frequently than the female students (Pre:  $M = 3.41$ , Post:  $M = 3.33$ ), although the observed differences did not reach statistical significance. In addition, among the three categories, both the male and female students reported a higher use of problem-solving strategies. However, only the differences in the male students' scores between the pre- and post-tests (Pre:  $M = 3.95$ , Post:  $M = 3.58$ ) were statistically significant ( $t = 2.48$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) at a  $p < 0.05$  level.

**TABLE 3. Difference in Reading Strategy Use Between Pre- and Post-test by Gender**

Gender	Variables	Test	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig.	Difference*
Male	Global Reading Strategy	Pre	3.47	0.19	0.53	0.60	–
		Post	3.41	0.22			
	Problem-Solving Strategy	Pre	3.95	0.22	2.48	0.03	Pre > Post
		Post	3.58	0.39			
	Support Reading Strategy	Pre	3.19	0.17	-0.37	0.71	–
		Post	3.25	0.26			
	Total	Pre	3.53	0.12	0.88	0.40	–
		Post	3.41	0.24			
Female	Global Reading Strategy	Pre	3.31	0.19	0.51	0.61	–
		Post	3.27	0.26			
	Problem-Solving Strategy	Pre	3.73	0.33	1.45	0.16	–
		Post	3.52	0.32			
	Support Reading Strategy	Pre	3.18	0.15	-0.28	0.78	–
		Post	3.21	0.29			
	Total	Pre	3.41	0.15	0.79	0.44	–
		Post	3.33	0.24			

Note. \**p* < 0.05.

As shown in Table 4, when looking at the difference in strategy use among the three strategy categories between the males and females, the study revealed that the differences were not statistically significant. However, it was interesting to note that both the male and female students reported less use of both problem-solving strategies and global strategies at the end of the semester but reported using more support strategies.

**TABLE 4. Difference in Reading Strategy Use in Three Categories by Gender**

Test	Variables	Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig.	Difference	
Pre-test	Global Reading Strategy	M	3.47	0.43	1.04	0.30	–	
		F	3.32	0.44				
	Problem-Solving Strategy	M	3.95	0.47	1.25	0.22	–	
		F	3.76	0.58				
	Support Reading Strategy	M	3.19	0.42	0.07	0.95	–	
		F	3.18	0.47				
	Total	M	3.53	0.34	1.04	0.31	–	
		F	3.41	0.39				
	Post-test	Global Reading Strategy	M	3.41	0.47	0.84	0.41	–
			F	3.27	0.51			
		Problem-Solving Strategy	M	3.58	0.62	0.31	0.76	–
			F	3.52	0.57			
Support Reading Strategy		M	3.25	0.51	0.25	0.81	–	
		F	3.21	0.54				
Total		M	3.41	0.49	0.50	0.62	–	
		F	3.33	0.49				

*Note.* M = Male, F = Female.

### Self-Rated Reading Proficiency

The participant data on self-rated reading proficiency was grouped into three categories (i.e., beginning, intermediate, and advanced level). It was found that no one rated himself or herself as an advanced reader in the pre-test, while one student rated himself as an advanced reader on the post-test. When comparing strategy use among reading proficiency levels, the advanced level in the post-test was eliminated because of the extremely small size of the sample. Therefore, strategy use by the beginning- and intermediate-level students was compared and is presented in Tables 5 and 6.

The paired sample *t*-test results for the use of strategies in the three categories by self-rated reading proficiency is shown in Table 5. As can be seen, the students in the intermediate reading proficiency level reported that they used more strategies in both the global category and the problem-solving category during the pre-test taken at the beginning of the semester. At the end of the semester, they reported using the strategies in the categories less. It was found that the differences from pre- to post-test for both the problem-solving strategy category ( $t = 2.99, p = 0.00$ ) and the global strategy category ( $t = 1.89, p = 0.05$ ) were statistically significant at a  $p < 0.05$  level. It is also important to note that the strategies in the support strategy category were used more, but this difference was not statistically significant.

**TABLE 5. Difference in Reading Strategy Use Between Pre- and Post-test by Self-Rated Reading Proficiency Level**

Level	Variables	Test	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig.	Difference*
Beginning	Global Reading Strategy	Pre	3.15	0.18	-0.84	0.41	-
		Post	3.29	0.22			
	Problem-Solving Strategy	Pre	3.55	0.18	0.34	0.74	-
		Post	3.49	0.36			
	Support Reading Strategy	Pre	3.14	0.23	-0.15	0.89	-
		Post	3.17	0.32			
	Total	Pre	3.26	0.12	-0.22	0.83	-
		Post	3.32	0.26			
Intermediate	Global Reading Strategy	Pre	3.58	0.12	1.89	0.05	Pre > Post
		Post	3.33	0.26			
	Problem-Solving Strategy	Pre	4.06	0.29	2.99	0.00	Pre > Post
		Post	3.57	0.34			
	Support Reading Strategy	Pre	3.21	0.18	0.27	0.78	-
		Post	3.57	0.34			
	Total	Pre	3.61	0.11	1.90	0.06	-
		Post	3.38	0.23			

Note. \* $p < 0.05$ .

When considering the difference in strategy use among the three strategy categories between beginning and intermediate reading proficiency

levels, the study revealed that the differences were statistically significant in the global reading strategy category ( $t = -3.49, p = 0.00$ ) and problem-solving strategy category ( $t = -3.37, p = 0.00$ ) at a  $p < 0.05$  level in the pre-test. The difference in overall strategy use between the two groups on the pre-test was also statistically significant ( $t = -3.16, p = 0.00$ ), indicating more frequent use of strategy by the intermediate readers at the beginning of the semester (see Table 6). There was no statistical significance between the two levels on the post-test, although the mean score of the intermediate readers was higher than those at the beginning reading level.

**TABLE 6. Difference in Reading Strategy Use and Self-Rated Reading Proficiency Levels**

	Variables	Level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig.	Difference*	
Pre	Global Reading Strategy	B	3.16	0.42	-3.49	0.00	I > B	
		I	3.58	0.35				
	Problem-Solving Strategy	B	3.55	0.42	-3.37	0.00	I > B	
		I	4.06	0.54				
	Support Reading Strategy	B	3.14	0.48	-0.48	0.64	-	
		I	3.21	0.42				
	Total	B	3.28	0.35	-3.16	0.00	I > B	
		I	3.62	0.33				
Post	Global Reading Strategy	B	3.29	0.47	-0.25	0.8	-	
		I	3.33	0.52				
	Problem-Solving Strategy	B	3.49	0.60	-0.41	0.68	-	
		I	3.57	0.58				
		Support Reading Strategy	B	3.17	0.56	-0.45	0.66	-
			I	3.25	0.51			
		Total	B	3.32	0.51	-0.41	0.69	-
			I	3.39	0.48			

Note. B = Beginning, I = Intermediate; \* $p < 0.05$ .

## Limitations

There are several limitations of the study that should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. First, the SORS is a self-reported survey and only reports what strategies learners think they use rather than what they may actually use. The self-reported questionnaire may not report all types of reading strategies and responses can be exaggerated so that students do not feel embarrassed. Second, the study only had 41 participants, which is small, and the participants were EFL students enrolled in an IEP in a Korean context. Consequently, caution will be required when generalizing the findings to a larger group or to other populations in other learning contexts.

## DISCUSSION

The data in Table 2 were used to determine what strategies Korean university EFL students attending an intensive English language program in Korea used. It was found that they reported using various reading strategies while reading their English academic texts. When looking at the strategy preference among the three categories, according to the overall mean scores, strategies from the problem-solving strategy category were the most preferred strategies while strategies in the support strategy category were the least favored. However, the only category that had a statistical significance was the problem-solving category. This makes sense, as students were reading in a foreign language and needed to adjust their reading speed, read more slowly, and really focus on the text to guess at the meaning of unknown words, and even reread sections of the text for better comprehension.

The data found in Table 2 were used to determine if there were any changes in the Korean university EFL students' overall reading strategy use throughout the semester. Interestingly, it was found that the mean score of the overall total strategy use decreased after a semester, although the change was not statistically significant. In addition, it was found that the use of two strategy categories (i.e., the global reading strategy and problem-solving strategy categories) went down. Only the use of strategies in the support strategy category increased after a semester. This may be a good thing as this may indicate that reading in English over time became easier, and thus fewer strategies were needed

to help with comprehending the English text. This supports the idea that when one has the necessary schema, it is easier to read and learn from the material. The findings also may indicate that Korean EFL students' application of reading strategies may have become more internalized and used unconsciously. Thus, they did not report what they used, so their strategy use in the post-test appeared to be lower than in the pre-test. These findings support the findings of a previous research study by Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) in which they reported lower language learning strategy use of advanced ESL students in an IEP.

The data in Tables 3 and 4 were used to look at the differences in the Korean university EFL students reading strategy use by gender. It was found that the difference in strategy use between female and male students was not statistically significant, although the male students reported using more strategies in all the categories. Additionally, the male students' use of the problem-solving strategy dropped significantly after a semester. While the consensus of research studies has reported that findings of differences based on gender are inconsistent, they have shown that females tend to use more learning strategies than males (Green & Oxford, 1995). However, the current study found higher strategy use reported by male Korean university EFL students.

The data from Tables 5 and 6 were used to look at the differences in the Korean university EFL students' reading strategy use by their self-rated reading English proficiency. The participants who rated their English reading proficiency as being at the intermediate level reported using more strategies than those students who rated their English reading proficiency at the beginning level, and the difference was statistically significant. These findings are supported by previous research, as research has shown that the levels of language proficiency does impact the reading strategies used (Fazeli, 2011; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Hong-Nam & Szabo, 2018; Rao, 2016; Zarei & Baharestani, 2014).

## CONCLUSIONS

About three-fourths of these Korean university EFL students agreed that the intensive English language learning program was helpful and somewhat beneficial. These findings do tend to support the design to maximize the exposure to the English language and optimize the learning time (Mukundan et al., 2012).

Reader's strategy use can be diverse due to their reading proficiency. The current study found that Korean university EFL students at the intermediate level reported using more strategies in the pre-test than in the post-test, and the difference was statistically significant. The intermediate readers also reported more frequent strategy use in the categories of global strategies and problem-solving strategies. This makes sense, as the more you understand a language, the less you rely on decoding and figuring out what the words are and move to strategies that help you with understanding the texts being read. Thus, a better reader uses more metacognitive strategies for learning and understanding the content and can self-regulate the use of these strategies in a better manner (Flavell, 1976, 1979; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002; Pang, 2008).

Finally, this study found that the males used more strategies than the females. This goes against previous research that showed females use more strategies. It was also interesting to note that the use of the global reading strategy and problem-solving strategy use went down throughout the semester, but the use of support reading strategies increased for both the male and female participants.

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