

Improvement strategy based on language immersion through accelerated English learning

Estrategia de superación sustentada en la inmersión lingüística a
través del aprendizaje acelerado del inglés

Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales^{1*} <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6081-9697>

Pedro Santiago Bernal Díaz¹ <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6994-3515>

Norma Melitina Nodarse González² <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0710-4609>

Liván Méndez Ferreiro¹ <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7506-8251>

¹ University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara. Department of Languages. Villa Clara. Cuba.

² Marta Abreu Central University of Las Villas. Language Center. Villa Clara. Cuba.

*Corresponding author. Email: dinorahsm@infomed.sld.cu

ABSTRACT

Background: The English language improvement policy in Cuban higher education, aimed at graduating competent professionals in this language, requires the design of a curricular strategy based on linguistic immersion through accelerated learning.

Objective: To design an improvement strategy based on linguistic immersion through accelerated English language learning in order to raise communicative competence among students and faculty at the University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara.

Methods: A qualitative research study was conducted during the 2023–2024 academic year. Theoretical methods were used: analytical-synthetic, induction-deduction, systematization, and conceptual triangulation; and an empirical method: documentary analysis for the design of the strategy. It was assessed using expert criteria.

Results: The new English language policy is structured at a basic level, transitioning towards intermediate and advanced levels, as established. The strategy is grounded in dialectical-materialist philosophy, sociology, psychophysiology, and the teaching-learning process with an emphasis on social formation. It considers the implementation of necessary actions so that agents of change successfully facilitate the training process for teachers of the discipline, other professionals, and undergraduate students.

Conclusions: The strategy based on linguistic immersion through accelerated learning is re-dimensioned through the integration of English into the professional training process at the intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary levels of undergraduate and postgraduate education, in a natural and systematic manner, across teaching, work, scientific-research, and extension activities.

MeSH: strategies; culture; cultural competency; students, faculty; education, medical

RESUMEN

Fundamento: la política de perfeccionamiento del inglés en la educación superior cubana encaminada a graduar profesionales competentes en este idioma requiere el diseño de una estrategia curricular sustentada en la inmersión lingüística a través del aprendizaje acelerado.

Objetivo: diseñar una estrategia de superación sustentada en la inmersión lingüística a través del aprendizaje acelerado del idioma inglés para elevar la competencia comunicativa en estudiantes y docentes de la Universidad de Ciencias Médicas de Villa Clara.

Métodos: se realizó una investigación cualitativa en el curso 2023-2024; se utilizaron métodos teóricos: analítico-sintético, inducción-deducción, sistematización y triangulación conceptual; y empírico: análisis documental para el diseño de la estrategia; fue valorada por criterios de especialistas.

Resultados: la nueva política de idioma Inglés se estructura en un nivel básico, transitando hacia un nivel intermedio y avanzado, según lo establecido. La estrategia se fundamenta en

la filosofía dialéctico-materialista, sociología, psicofisiología, y el proceso enseñanza aprendizaje con énfasis en la formación social. Considera la aplicación de acciones necesarias para que los actores del cambio faciliten el proceso de formación de los docentes de la disciplina, el resto de los profesionales y los estudiantes de pregrado, de manera exitosa.

Conclusiones: la estrategia sustentada en la inmersión lingüística a través del aprendizaje acelerado se redimensiona a partir de la integración del inglés al proceso de formación de los profesionales en los niveles intradisciplinar, interdisciplinar y transdisciplinar del pregrado y el posgrado, de forma natural y sistemática, tanto en las actividades docentes como laborales, científico-investigativas y extensionistas.

DeCS: estrategias, competencia cultural; cultura; estudiantes; docentes; educación médica

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century, characterized by the rapid advance and impact of science on development, the multiplication of scientific-technical information and knowledge, as well as scientific, commercial, and cultural exchange among different countries, demands new challenges from the Cuban university in the training and performance of future professionals so that they can actively, independently, and creatively participate in the socio-economic progress of Cuba, in the face of the challenges of sustainable development.⁽¹⁾

Higher education worldwide flows toward a trend of universalization of knowledge and internationalization, which require academic and professional communication between specialists of different nationalities, and therefore, raise the need to enhance communicative competence in English in the training of professionals along two fundamental directions: as

an instrument that contributes to communication, as well as to knowledge management and continuous training, self-improvement, and updating.

The importance of the English language in the training of professionals can be summarized in several spheres:^(2,3)

- Academic and scientific: through the management and access to greater academic resources and information, exchange, internationalization, academic mobility, joint programs, and the harmonization of programs and degrees.
- Economic: expressed in the impact on trade, with emphasis on the software industry, economic-financial relations in the world, increased competitiveness in trained human resources, and revenue generation through the export of international academic services.
- Cultural: given the growing globalization of the world, the decisive role of English as a vehicle for habitual international and intercultural communication in countries and between countries that do not speak English as a native language.
- Political-ideological: manifested in the possibility of broadening political-ideological training and general culture, enhancing and developing thought and worldview in the face of the challenges of today's world.

Since the early years of the Cuban Revolution, it has been an aspiration to achieve a university graduate capable of demonstrating communicative competence in English. To this end, strategies have been implemented over these years that have transitioned from a dynamic sustained by methods favoring the development of reading skills towards a training process that needs to move beyond towards productive and conscious communication in the professional context.^(2,4)

In this direction, the Ministry of Higher Education (MES), as part of the policies for the improvement of the continuing education process of Cuban professionals, has set forth the policy for the improvement of the English language training process of students in Cuban higher education, aimed at graduating professionals competent in the language, which

becomes a strategic objective, as it provides a superior quality to the comprehensive training of professionals.⁽²⁾

This research is oriented towards the design of a curricular strategy which solves a specific problem in educational practice, recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2015: the need to rethink and transform the development of the English teaching-learning process in all contexts and in line with new international trends and standards. From that point on, the first steps began in the design and application of the new English language policy. Marta Abreu Central University of Las Villas was one of the first to take on this challenge, which has since extended to the University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara.

In response to this need, the English teaching, learning, and assessment process has gone through several methods and approaches designed in accordance with the different curricula that have taken place at the Cuban university level.

In 2003, following the design of Study Plan E, a group of experts from across the country worked on the development of a methodology for teaching English and the creation of textbooks, with the aim of promoting independent study of the language, so that class time could be devoted to developing oral communication skills, which at that time was established as a priority.⁽²⁾

The objective of the present study is to design an improvement strategy based on linguistic immersion through accelerated English language learning to raise communicative competence among students and faculty at the University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara.

METHODS

A qualitative research study was conducted at the University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara during January–March 2024, the object of study being the design of an English language curricular strategy at the University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara.

The following methods were employed:

- Analytical-synthetic: analysis was used in the evaluation of the problem situation, and synthesis in relating the elements to each other and linking them to the problem as a whole. They were used throughout the process of reviewing and studying documents and bibliographies related to the object of study, as well as in the processing of all information resulting from the research.
- Induction-deduction: these complement each other in the process of developing scientific knowledge, and were therefore used during data processing.
- Systematization: previous experiences and theoretical knowledge related to the design of English language curricular strategies, based on linguistic immersion through accelerated learning, were organized and reflected upon.
- Conceptual triangulation: various theoretical and conceptual perspectives were integrated to enrich the understanding of the object of study, thus favoring interpretive validity.

Empirical methods:

Documentary analysis for the theoretical foundation and methodological bases of the strategy, based on:

- Resolution 165/19. Regulations for the English Language. Havana: Ministry of Higher Education; 2019.⁽²⁾
- Structuring by Levels of Communicative Competence in English for Cuban Higher Education. Casar Espino LA, González González CC, Rubio Mederos L. Havana: Ediciones Futuro; 2021.⁽⁵⁾
- Council of Europe. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. UK: Council of Europe; 2018.⁽⁶⁾
- Linguistic Immersion Course in the Cuban Context. Sánchez Morales D, Nodares-González N. Villa Clara. 2022.⁽⁷⁾

Expert criteria assessment of the strategy

Eleven specialists were selected based on their connection to the specialty, their experience of more than 15 years in medical education teaching, and their teaching categories as assistant professor and full professor. The indicators requested were: design of actions, methodological rigor, logical dependence or consistency, credibility, and whether it is transferable or applicable in other academic contexts. The assessment scale considered the categories: Very adequate, Moderately adequate, and Inadequate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Resolution 165/19 of the Ministry of Higher Education,⁽²⁾ in the new English language policy in Cuban higher education, establishes proficiency in the language as a graduation requirement for students, initially at a basic level equivalent to A2, transitioning towards an intermediate level equivalent to B1, according to the levels instituted by the MES for all contexts.

To this end, the policy states that universities must create and guarantee the necessary conditions so that agents of change can successfully facilitate the English language training process for students.⁽²⁾

In the Structuring by Levels of Communicative Competence in English for Cuban Higher Education,⁽⁵⁾ the objectives of its training in the national context are well defined based on the aims and training objectives of students in the different university degree programs in the national context. Both the rich Cuban pedagogical tradition and international trends and standards are taken as references: the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the Pearson Global Scale of English (GSE), among others.⁽⁶⁾

This system of objectives by levels guides the work in the national context and constitutes a common base reference platform for the development of course programs, tutorials, self-learning, and both standardized and non-standardized assessment.⁽⁵⁾

The strategy is based on linguistic immersion and accelerated learning as the fundamental axis for the rapid preparation of professionals. Its foundations were analyzed as part of a

dynamic professional system, in which functions, structure, and relationships are identified within linguistic immersion based on accelerated English language learning.⁽⁷⁾

According to the conceptual triangulation based on theoretical elements and documentary analysis, the training process of the new English language policy is characterized by:

- Name of the policy: it is called the policy for the improvement of the English language training process in Cuban higher education.
- Scope of the policy: it encompasses the undergraduate training of students in non-foreign language degree programs, postgraduate training, and the faculty training of English teachers from the different schools.
- Conception of training: it is conceived outside the teaching process plan as an educational, socio-political, and cultural project of the institution and the degree programs, based on the professional model of the degree programs.
- Training conditions: it has a differentiated school organization, made up of teaching groups by equivalent levels, and high levels of in-person attendance in training.
- Level transition: it progresses from the basic level – equivalent to a basic user A1 and A2, to the intermediate level – equivalent to an independent user B1 and B2, and may even reach the advanced level – equivalent to a proficient user C1 and C2.
- Minimum level established as a graduation requirement: the basic level equivalent to A2 and the intermediate level equivalent to B1 are established according to the level structuring established for Cuban higher education based on the CEFR.
- Progression by levels of communication: it emphasizes general-social communication with elements of academic communication through general-purpose courses at levels A1, A2, and B1. It transitions towards academic and professional communication through courses with specific purposes, as well as through the English improvement strategy within the degree programs.
- Logic of the training process: it includes diagnostic-placement, course delivery and provision of other academic services, assessment, and certification.
- Base structure for learning management and self-management: it is managed from the language department for the development of the process and from self-access centers for self-learning.

- Services provided in the language departments: diagnostic-placement and certification of levels of communicative competence in English, delivery of training programs and tutoring for self-learning, and the provision of educational resources and materials, among others.⁽²⁾

English language training for higher education students is developed simultaneously in three directions:^(2,5)

- Intensive training through a system of general-purpose and specific-purpose courses, as well as other academic services offered at universities outside the teaching process plan.
- Extensive training through the English improvement strategy within the degree programs as part of the students' academic, work-research, and extension training.
- Management of autonomous and independent training by students based on academic services provided at universities and other available means.

The aforementioned theoretical references served as the basis for the formation of an English language improvement strategy instituted at the University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara, aimed at undergraduate English language teachers, postgraduate faculty, and health sciences students.

The authors assume the definition of improvement strategy as a set of actions and habits designed to improve a person's personal, emotional, and professional development, strengthening their self-esteem, resilience, and ability to achieve goals.⁽⁸⁾

The flexible, innovative, diversified, contextualized character of this strategy stands out, adjusted to the educational and communication needs of students in this language, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, to manage their proficiency for use in fulfilling missions in English-speaking countries, as well as to broaden their general and linguistic culture:

- Flexible: depending on what students need to learn, when, and how.

- Innovative: in the English teaching-learning process, objectives, content, methods, assessment forms, and time allocations can be adjusted; moreover, the process must be creative and based on research results and action-research in the specific context of the university.
- Contextualized: it responds to the needs and interests of the professional model according to the degree program.

The conceptual bases for the improvement of English training were projected in three dimensions, in correspondence with what is expressed in 169/19 Resolution:⁽²⁾

1. The methodological dimension
2. The administrative dimension
3. The technological dimension

The unity of these three dimensions allowed for a comprehensive and integrated approach to the strategy, conditioning its effective implementation in the medical university through a plan of strategic actions.

Another element assumed in the conception of this strategy focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of linguistic immersion and accelerated learning as the fundamental axis for the rapid preparation of professionals.^(7,9) Its improvement is re-dimensioned through the integration of English into the professional training process at the intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary levels in a natural and systematic manner, across teaching, work, scientific-research, and extension activities.

In this sense, to the extent that the various disciplines, subjects, and other academic activities are taught, it is proposed that the teaching staff include the use of information sources in English; completion of homework, coursework, and assessment activities in English; organization of committees at events; and presentation of student scientific activity papers in that language, among other initiatives, so that students feel the need to self-prepare in this language, provided that specialized bibliography is available and accessible, and that the teacher acts as a guide and evaluator of the entire process.

The foundations of this improvement strategy have been extrapolated from the linguistic immersion course in the Cuban context, taught by Dr. C. Sánchez Morales.⁽⁷⁾

Philosophical foundation

The philosophical underpinning of Cuban education is dialectical-materialist philosophy, understood as the highest expression of the evolution of the legitimate development of national thought, mainly the ideas of José Martí, with which it is creatively combined. Philosophically, this strategy contributes to the treatment of the education of man, education as the most general category, and the "why" and "what for" of education. It is based on the premise that one cannot arrive at a position regarding the philosophy of education without taking into account the main ideological currents that dominate the contemporary world, from which educational policies are nourished.

Marxist philosophy has always been defined as an eminently critical and revolutionary knowledge, and therefore, it starts not from an abstract philosophy, but from a philosophy with the capacity to dialectically assimilate the best of current conceptions and analyze the conceptual limitations and sociopolitical interests to which they respond.

An expression that achieved the most original and creative development and application of dialectical materialist philosophy to pedagogy was that of the Russian scientist Vygotsky, who, with his socio-cultural theory of human development, has offered a vision of social constructivism to current educational theories. This fact shows the proximity of the best of current educational traditions to the best of the Marxist tradition, and places Cuban pedagogy at a theoretical advantage.

Starting from the premise that man is a living, biopsychosocial, individual-community, and historical reality, this strategy adheres to an integrative conception, which proposes a conception of education that synthesizes the scientific and humanist dimensions.

This strategy is the result of pedagogical practice and the systematic reflections made upon it to achieve its transformation, contribute to theory, and improve said practice. It becomes essential to view practice not only as a verification of theory, but also as a starting point.

On the other hand, the social character of language occupies an important place in this strategy, since it promotes the use of English by creating socially motivated situations.

Sociological foundation

The sociology of education must be the derivation, at the sociological level, of guiding philosophical conceptions. Within the sociological underpinnings of this strategy is the repercussion that the achievement of objectives will have for society, and which is built upon the communicative needs of training both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Education is a determined and at the same time determining social phenomenon, since it is intimately related to politics, economics, law, the environment, social communication, and culture, in a dialectical interrelationship, because education is conditioned by these social spheres but, in turn, conditions their future projection.

The development of the individual under the influence of education and the environment takes place, by its social content, as a dialectical unity between objectification (materialization) and subjectification (assimilation) of social contents. Therefore, an individual will be more original the more complete their assimilation of social contents is. A society is more complete when it produces more originality in each individual.

Cuban society has achieved a high level of professionalism that has earned it great international prestige in the most demanding scenarios, with emphasis on the performance of Cuban health professionals. Proficiency in English as a foreign language becomes for training not only a basic skill of their education but, very especially, the decisive instrument for the fulfillment of their social mandate in carrying out the different tasks and international missions where English is used as a lingua franca.

Psychophysiological foundation

Expressed in the relationships between the zone of actual development and the zone of proximal development of individuals, and the relevance of the search for the meaning of words and things that occurs through the establishment of patterns. The pattern is the meaning of categorization and organization of information.

The search for meaning occurs through patterns. The brain attempts to discern and understand events and stimuli from the environment. Individual patterns are different from each other. When the brain's natural tendency to construct meaning from patterns is exploited in teaching, learning, and classroom assessment become more similar to real-life learning. The brain creates patterns, and the teacher's task is to organize and present the material in a way that allows the brain to make meaningful and relevant connections to extract patterns.

This type of learning is more easily recognized in the whole language approach and in the content-based learning approach to language learning.^(10,11) Both seek to connect meaning through the development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills. There are at least three ways in which the teacher can provide more patterns to students:

- a) Before working with new content, try to find out what students know about the topic.
- b) Provide an overview of the topic through slides, posters, banners, etc.
- c) Help students form patterns by stimulating discussion of materials, creating models, and using graphic organizers.

Pedagogical foundation

The teaching-learning process systematizes the social formation of new generations.⁽¹²⁾ Historical-social practice has shown that said formation, according to the aspirations of society, occurs fundamentally in the object: the teaching-learning process, which due to its systemic nature becomes a fundamental instrument for fulfilling the social mandate.

The social mandate is the problem, because it embodies the need that society has to prepare professionals with specific training in certain knowledge, English language skills, and values to act in a social context in a given era.

The part of reality that carries the problem is the object. That is, the object is an aspect of the productive or service process, in which the need to prepare or train professionals to participate in solving the problem is manifested, which is resolved immersed in the citizen training process; in this sense, it is highly focused on the comprehensive training of health professionals in the Cuban context.

Strategic actions

I. Postgraduate

(Target audience: English teachers)

- a) Diagnose the actual state of preparation regarding linguistic immersion and accelerated learning of the teacher members of the research project at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara.
- b) Design an improvement course to update the English teacher members of the research project for future replication with the rest of the faculty.
- c) Prepare the teacher members of the research project who have deficiencies in topics related to linguistic immersion and accelerated learning.
- d) Replicate, through the project members, the training in the area of linguistic immersion and accelerated English learning among the faculty of the Language Department at the schools where they work.
- e) Develop activities in English applying the improvement strategy in accompaniment or mentoring of English teachers (seminars, education in the workplace, preparation of summaries) to encourage student participation in scientific events and high-impact publications.
- f) Design elective courses aligned with the CEFR and based on linguistic immersion through accelerated learning to raise the level of already certified students.
- g) Design English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses aligned with the CEFR and based on linguistic immersion and accelerated learning for 5th and 6th-year students.
- h) Create artificial partial immersion environments in the classroom context.

(Target audience: Health professionals)

- a) Apply a diagnostic assessment to health professionals who need to pursue postgraduate courses to determine their language proficiency levels using the CEFR descriptors as a reference.
- b) Design postgraduate courses aligned with the CEFR, based on linguistic immersion and accelerated learning for health professionals who need to prepare to fulfill their social mandate.
- c) Design postgraduate courses aligned with the CEFR, based on linguistic immersion and accelerated learning, by ESP specialties to promote the linguistic quality of medical collaboration.
- d) Design intensive preparatory courses for executives, both for the intra-university community and the extra-university community.
- e) Enhance comprehensive and accelerated language preparation for teachers for the development of teaching category exercises, the English minimum requirement, second language, and researcher requirements.
- f) Establish agreements with the MES and Marta Abreu Central University of Las Villas for the management of international projects through the Department of International Relations of the University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara, for English teachers.
- g) Design preparatory courses for teachers, based on linguistic immersion and accelerated learning, for those pursuing master's and doctoral degrees, with corresponding certification upon request.
- h) Maintain refresher courses for language teachers with both national and international specialists for the purpose of continuous improvement.
- i) Create a linguistic immersion classroom through accelerated learning for postgraduate courses.
- j) Systematically update the different designed postgraduate courses in the virtual classroom.

II. Undergraduate

- a) Guarantee, through the improvement strategy, the preparation of students so that they obtain their graduation requirement.
- b) Set up language courses by levels aligned with the CEFR in the virtual classroom and update them systematically, in correspondence with undergraduate requirements.
- c) Intentionally promote exchange among the triad of specialty teacher, English teacher, and English-speaking students with the students, to encourage the application of the proposed improvement strategy from the classroom in the different subjects and specialties. The English teacher will play their role as moderator.
- d) Create the necessary conditions in a classroom with self-access functions, to promote the self-management of English learning based on linguistic immersion and accelerated learning for students of the different specialties.

Expert criteria assessment of the strategy

The structuring, design of each of the actions, and methodological rigor were evaluated as Very adequate. The specialists considered that the improvement strategy possesses logical dependence or consistency; it possesses credibility, thereby corroborating its auditability or confirmability. It is transferable or applicable since there is a possibility of extending the study results to other schools and higher education institutions. They expressed concern about the possible application of the improvement strategy in general education, since English language teaching should be strengthened at levels below higher education.

Aguilera *et al.*⁽¹⁾ designed a system of communicative tasks in an English oral expression strategy, due to the poor development of these skills among university students. They warn about the need to improve didactics to stimulate cognitive independence; García Rodríguez *et al.*⁽⁴⁾ created a system of activities to implement the English language curricular strategy in the fifth year of Medicine, which differs from this strategy because the latter is aimed at strategic actions for curricular application in both undergraduate and postgraduate education; while Isalgué-Álvarez⁽¹²⁾ includes in their English language curricular strategy within the General Chemistry discipline the different levels of assimilation in their teaching tasks with the objective of improving the didactics of teaching the aforementioned language.

The theoretical underpinnings proposed by the aforementioned authors differ from the improvement strategy proposed here, as it is based on linguistic immersion through accelerated learning. This methodology will allow for the rapid preparation of teachers to respond to the demands of the new English language improvement policy at the University of Medical Sciences of Villa Clara.

Scientific contribution

A curricular improvement strategy based on linguistic immersion and accelerated learning is provided for the rapid preparation of English language teachers, who will replicate their experiences in courses designed for postgraduate and undergraduate education, in response to the demands of the Ministry of Higher Education in Cuba, but with the guiding vision of the CEFR.

CONCLUSIONS

The improvement strategy is based on philosophical, sociological, psychophysiological, and pedagogical foundations, and considers the implementation of necessary actions so that agents of change can rapidly and successfully facilitate the English language training process for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

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Declaration of interests

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Author contributions

Conceptualization: Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales

Data curation: Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales, Pedro Santiago Bernal Díaz, Norma Melitina Nodarse González, Liván Méndez Ferreiro

Formal analysis: Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales, Pedro Santiago Bernal Díaz, Norma Melitina Nodarse González, Liván Méndez Ferreiro

Project administration: Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales

Investigation: Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales, Pedro Santiago Bernal Díaz, Norma Melitina Nodarse González, Liván Méndez Ferreiro

Methodology: Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales, Pedro Santiago Bernal Díaz, Norma Melitina Nodarse González, Liván Méndez Ferreiro

Supervision: Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales, Pedro Santiago Bernal Díaz, Norma Melitina Nodarse González, Liván Méndez Ferreiro

Writing – original draft: Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales, Norma Melitina Nodarse González

Writing – review & editing: Dinorah Sofía Sánchez Morales, Norma Melitina Nodarse González

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