

Group Dynamics In The Japanese University Efl Classroom

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Abstract

Ever since 1868, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Culture (MEXT) has implemented many reforms to enhance English education at tertiary level. However, much still remains to be done to improve the situation, and one of the biggest hurdles is the fact that there are many unmotivated students in the EFL classrooms of Japanese universities. This thesis explores the reasons for this problem by focusing on inter- and intra-relations between teachers and students in this context. My conclusions are that: 1) Visible and invisible inter-member relations exist between members of university classes and their teachers; 2) The teacher's behaviour affects the students' behaviour and impacts on their learning; and 3) Cooperative learning has a positive influence on language acquisition.

1.1 Introduction

Although the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Culture has borrowed various teaching methodologies and approaches from Western countries, its expectations of the English skills of Japanese students seem not to have been met. Despite these problems, very little research has been conducted in Japan into what happens in the classroom and how culture affects the learning of English. There is therefore an urgent need to investigate these, in order to improve matters. As Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) believe,

...the learning process often is considerably hindered by a lack of understanding of how dysfunctional classroom interaction between teachers and students, and interpersonal and group dynamics affect current approaches to teaching second languages in particular (p. 2).

I begin by looking at the general problems in Japanese universities today. I then go on to argue that issues to do with group formation lie at the heart of some of the problems faced in Japanese university EFL classrooms. Having made this case, I relate the theory of group dynamics to the Japanese context, focusing in particular on the impact on classroom dynamics of teachers and students. Finally, I propose cooperative learning as a possible solution to some of the problems and discuss ways in which it could be implemented in Japan.

1.2 Problems in Japanese universities

Given Japanese students' poor performance in university English classes and the difficulties often faced when teaching unresponsive groups, teachers sometimes tend to spoon-feed their students. The students, in turn, often take a passive rather than an active role in the learning process, and merely want to memorize as much as possible.

They [Japanese students] learn to listen well and to think quickly, but not to express their ideas. Neither speaking nor writing is encouraged. Speculation, controversy and interpretive relativism do not enter the classroom. Thought is weighted in favour of memory and objective problem solving with little official curricular interest in creativity of a humanistic or artistic kind (Rohlen 1983, p. 316).

In schools, violence, bullying, chronic truancy and high dropout rates will increase. According to "Education in Japan" (The Foreign Press Center, 2001), in FY (the financial year, starting in April), the number of regular truants from public and private elementary and middle schools was 130,208. The reasons for this chronic truancy were "anxiety or other emotional confusion," "multiple factors," and "apathy." These conditions appear to require teachers to learn new skills to manage their diverse

classrooms. Nevertheless, with the fall in the birth-rate, the age of ‘universal college admission’ will soon come, bringing a higher proportion of unmotivated or low-language-ability students to universities; both kinds are often hard to teach. All this raises the three following research questions.

The main theoretical research questions

- 1) What kind of visible and invisible inter-member relations exist between Japanese university students in the language classroom and how do they affect their learning?
- 2) How does the teacher’s behaviour affect the students’ behaviour, and what impact does it have on their learning?
- 3) How might co-operative methods benefit the learning of English in Japanese university language classrooms?

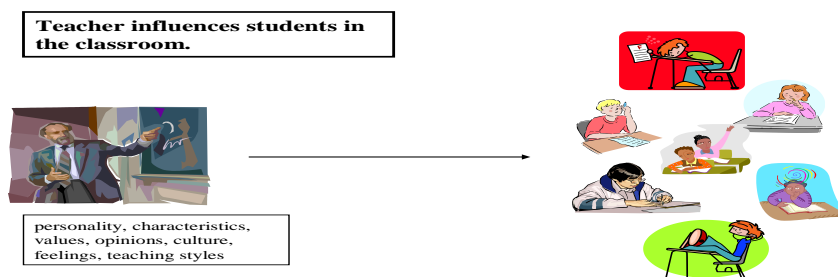
1.3 The teacher’s influence on group dynamics in the language classroom

The notion of the *group* is a very important one in language teaching contexts. In any group, there are leaders and members. The teacher is the leader of the class group, making most of the important decisions, while students are members of the smaller groups set up by the teacher to aid the process of learning English. Meanwhile, the class is composed of various informal groups, each of which has its own leaders and members, and these groups interact.

As a central leader in the dynamics of the class group, the teacher influences the learning climate because s/he has authority, and students expect her/him to behave as a leader, a parent, and even a healer for disadvantaged and “special” learners (Ehrman and

Dörnyei, 1998, p. 212). Each teacher has her/his approach to teaching; though they must adopt a teaching style and methodology to suit the students, it is sometimes difficult to do this because teachers, equally, are people. They have personalities and characteristics, as students do, and these may have a positive or negative influence on students' learning in the classroom (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 The teacher's influence on students in the classroom



Through students' attitudes, facial expressions, class participation, complaints or absences, teachers can work out what students think about their teaching style, methodology, personality and characteristics. Test results or simple questions about teaching, feedback from students about teaching, or students' comprehension of the language will tell teachers whether their teaching styles suit the students or not. If teachers want to teach better, they need to be prepared and willing to adapt their teaching style to their teaching situation. Research has shown that flexibility is a key to good group management (Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997). Some teachers are authoritarian, others democratic, or with perhaps a very low quality of leadership. Authoritarian teachers can become obstacles to group development, because they want to control the groups. This attitude may raise some conflict, or even hostility, among

students, hindering the course of learning.

Seen from the perspective of group dynamics, the traditional authoritarian teacher role is undesirable because it does not allow for the group to structure itself organically, nor for the members to share increasing responsibility, and thus it is an obstacle to group development (Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997, pp. 75-76).

In Japanese university classrooms, the teacher's platform is usually higher than the rest of the floor. This symbolizes that the teacher is an authority, to whom the students should listen obediently. This power relationship can easily lead teachers to be authoritative and narcissistic, not interacting with students during lectures. I remember as a university student that some professors used to read aloud from their notebooks for the whole class hour, seldom paying attention to the students or inviting their questions. All that the students could do was to take notes silently or sleep through the lecture.

Democratic teachers, in contrast, encourage students to share their thoughts and opinions. They make students feel that it is safe to express their views. As a result, the teacher and students can establish good rapport. To be good facilitators, teachers need empathy, acceptance and congruence, because students look upon teachers as parents, listeners and leaders. However, the democratic approach is not without risk. If teachers are too democratic or give too much freedom to students, the students will take control of the session. If this happens, the students may choose not to work hard. A teacher who does not know when to exert control or authority as a group leader will equally not help students to learn.

Dörnyei (1994, p. 282) makes a number of suggestions related to teacher-specific

motivational components. These suggestions may also help teachers to become more democratic. They include the following: 1) try to be empathic, congruent, and accepting; 2) promote learner autonomy; 3) model student interest in L2 learning; 4) introduce tasks in such a way as to stimulate intrinsic motivation and help internalize extrinsic motivation; and 5) use motivating feedback.

Ideally, 'democratic' teachers will create classrooms in which their students are able to work academically, whilst solving the social problems inherent in group work. These democratic teachers will be flexible in their teaching methods, and know when to intervene in student conflict. They will also know how to set up classroom structures so that students can take responsibility for carrying out tasks. If teachers are aware of the visible and invisible happenings in the classroom, they can enhance their learning, and better implement some of the approaches and methodologies which have been borrowed and adapted from those used in the West. Ideally, the teacher will also act as a bridge between students so that they can build a sense of trust in other members of the class. This makes learning easier and gives the tasks and goals a better chance of being accomplished. However, it is not always easy to act in this way, for groups are composed of people with different demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, abilities, attitudes, belief and personalities; inevitably, these elements affect the group dynamics.

The learning experience of every student and the effectiveness of every teacher is influenced by what goes on among and between the people who populate the classroom (Ehrman and Dörnyei, 1998, p. 5).

Another factor which affects group dynamics and consequently language learning is

sensitivity. Teachers should be sensitive to their students' personal emotional needs, because in the classroom, as elsewhere, they may feel anxiety, loneliness, shame, frustration, hostility and so on. At times, students expect teachers or their peers to provide emotional support. If teachers force students to participate or learn in an English class in ways which they would not normally choose, they will notice that the teaching plans do not work or the students do not learn. In class, both teachers and learners need a sense of security and the protection of their self-image. Hence, psychoanalytical theory can play a vital role in solving teaching problems and improving degrees of tolerance:

Psychoanalytic theory holds that behaviours that originated in the individual's efforts to cope with external events and internal interpretations of those events develop into patterns of action and reaction that characterize an individual, often without regard to the realities of the current situation (Ehrman, 1998, p. 96).

Learning a language not only involves mastering new information and knowledge to do with the target language but it also involves emotions and personality. Therefore, it may be useful for teachers to know a little about psychotherapy. The psychotherapist and the educator alike seek to develop change and growth in both cognitive and emotional processes. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) claim that language learning is a deep psychological process:

Effective second language learning, for example, can involve relatively deep changes, not only in cross-cultural knowledge and receptivity but also in a more generalized acceptance of ambiguity, multiple ways of experiencing the world, and increased cognitive flexibility (p. 16).

Unfortunately, the learning process can sometimes be hindered when teachers fail to

understand how dysfunctional classroom interactions between teachers and students and among the students can divert energy and attention away from the learning task (Ehrman and Dörnyei, 1998, p. 2). Ehrman and Dörnyei also agree with Stevick's (1980) claim that "...success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (p. 4).

A group is an assemblage of more than two people between whom cohesiveness is exerted in order to attain common goals. Students are put into groups, and the individuals within the groups influence each other when they learn a language. If problems prevent the cohesiveness of the group, the students will not learn the language as well as they were expected to. It is useful to be able to arrange groups so that the members develop good social and emotional relationships in carrying out their tasks.

1.3.1 The impact of student behaviour on classroom dynamics

In every classroom, the students have different characters and different past experiences. Students can be kind, taciturn, talkative, showy, shy, adventurous, dominant, competitive, submissive, withdrawn, rebellious and so on. They may experience difficulties in coping with others in class. Teachers also have different personalities. They too can be forcible, talkative, taciturn, dominant, showy, kind, patient, enthusiastic, etc. Both teachers and students inevitably bring their different personalities into the classroom, and the ways in which these personalities interact can have a profound effect on the types of learning which ensue. As Edge says:

All learners are different. No two individuals have the same knowledge, or skills,

or expectations...Learners are also influenced by their age and by their educational, social and cultural backgrounds, which they may or may not share with their fellow students and teacher (Edge 1993, p. 9).

It is therefore important to focus on individuals, as well as groups. As students go through interdependence, interaction, competition and common goal-striving with their peers, they may look to the teacher to provide the same level of conflict-resolution skills as parents or counsellors.

Edge emphasizes the importance of a positive emotional environment in the language classroom, because the foreign language will be learned best when it performs the normal functions of language (1993, p. 19). If learners learn languages in a positive emotional environment, they will be motivated, have a good attitude, be confident to talk and make a personal investment in learning. The language will become meaningful and students will learn it well. But since such positive emotional environments can easily be damaged, Edge warns teachers that activities should not risk exposing students' feelings and advises that they should not be too personal in character.

1.4 Visible and invisible Groups

The notion of visible and invisible groups was first introduced by Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998). The difference between the visible and the invisible groups in the language classroom are that the visible group is formed of the individuals who are its members, their one-to-one relationships and the structure of their observable behaviours, whereas the invisible group is formed by the covert network of relationships which operate at the level of the group-as-a-whole through unconscious processes and communications (Ehrman and Dörnyei, 1998, p. 77). Ehrman and Dörnyei apply these phenomena to

the functioning of the group itself, but not to the individuals, considered as individuals, or the subgroups of individuals in the group.

For any given group, the same set of individuals constitutes both the visible and invisible groups; the distinction is a matter of level of abstraction and the framework for understanding a given behavior. Individuals act both as themselves and as representatives of the group (Ehrman and Dörnyei, 1998, p. 78).

As we saw above, understanding individuals (Figure 1.2) in the classroom is a vital factor in improving the learning of the target language. We might therefore expect the diversity of students in their invisible groups to affect the way in which they learn English. Figure 1.2 (below) shows how students interact in groups. Each student can be affected by interpersonal processes.

Figure 1.2 How students interact in groups

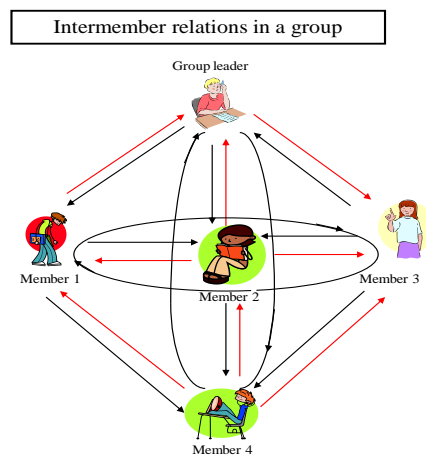
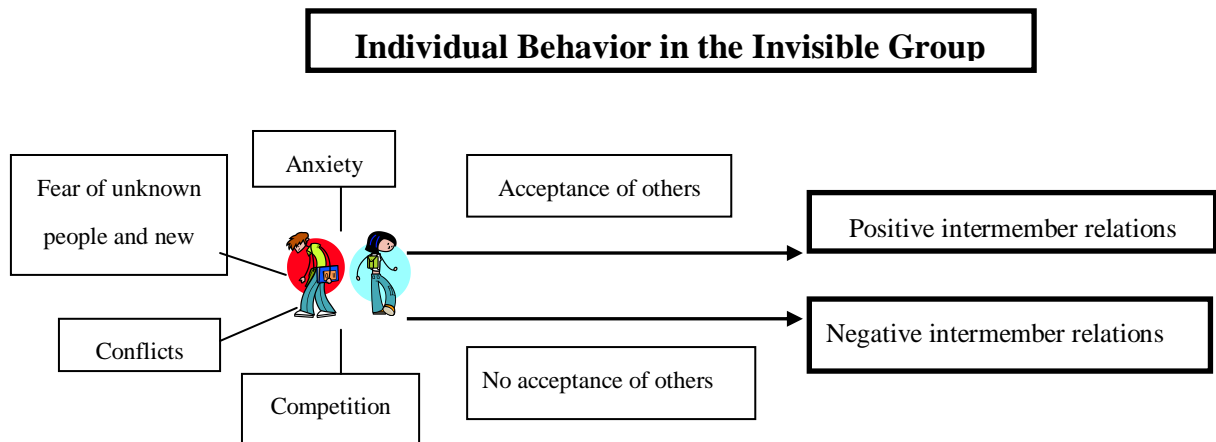


Figure 1.3 shows how individual students behave positively and negatively in a group.

Figure 1.3 Individual behaviour in the invisible group



Examples of individualist behaviour in the invisible group include: lack of tolerance, rigidity towards new things and different things, lack of flexibility, the interference of personal background, and a lack of attention to others. Strong feelings of envy and gratitude can influence interpersonal relations and these feelings are associated with experiencing a thing, person, or event as either all good or all bad. Ehrman calls this “splitting” (1998, p. 64). Envy is observed frequently in interpersonal processes and gratitude is seen when students express appreciation for the teacher or other members in a group. After students have gone through feelings of anxiety, fear of the unknown, hostility and competitiveness, they gradually learn to accept other members, and positive intermember relations will then be built up as they meet each other more often and over a longer time period. Positive intermember relations can be built by efficient facilitators: such people have empathic ability, acceptance of the group’s members, and

congruency (Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997, p. 76).

According to Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998), group dynamics are the products of true groups, not merely collections of individual learners. Within groups, the group dynamic can exert both positive and negative influence.

At the level of learning groups, a cohesive, well-functioning group can be a source of enhanced self-efficacy on the part of its members and of effective cooperation, in which member diversity is harnessed for the benefit of all. On the other hand, a poorly functioning group can result in apathy, inefficient learning, and, at worst, destructive psychological effects on the members accompanied by intense aversion to further learning (pp. 4-5)

1.4 Co-operative learning within classroom groups

According to Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), communicative teaching activities are based on small group work and active interaction between the students, while cooperative language learning is based on a small-group-based instructional approach built on the principles of group dynamics (pp. 6-7). Therefore, it is important to discuss cooperative learning and consider what part it can play in the language classroom.

Three key components of cooperative learning are: 1) group cohesiveness; 2) structured learning; and 3) evaluation and rewards for achievement (Dörnyei, 1997, p. 483). It is said that cooperative learning is highly effective in the language classroom (Ehrman, p. 245). The next section examines how cooperative learning can work for Japanese students in classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language.

1.4.1 To what extent does cooperative learning currently take place in Japanese university EFL classrooms?

Cooperative learning does not appear to be a key characteristic of Japanese university EFL classrooms. Table 1.1 (from Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 1995, p. 7) contrasts old ‘information transfer’ paradigms of learning with new, more cooperative paradigms. It is very instructive to see how closely some aspects are related to the current conditions of teaching in Japan; this seems to belong to the old paradigm and may be one of the reasons that English education in Japan has not achieved much, despite the various implementations of language policies and methodologies from the West.

Table 1.1 Comparison of Old and New Paradigms of Teaching

	Old Paradigm	New Paradigm
Knowledge	Transferred from Faculty to Students	Jointly Constructed by Students and Faculty
Student	Passive Vessel to be filled with Faculty's Knowledge	Active Constructor, Discoverer, Transformer of Knowledge
Faculty Purpose	Classify and Sort Students	Develop Students' Competencies and Talents
Relationships	Impersonal Relationship among Students and Between Faculty and Students	Personal Transaction among Students and between Faculty and Students
Context	Competitive/Individualistic	Cooperative Learning in Classroom and Cooperative Teams among Faculty
Assumption	Any Expert Can Teach	Teaching is Complex and Requires Considerable Training
Ways of Knowing	Logico-Scientific	Narrative
Epistemology [sic]	Reductionist Memorization [sic]	Constructivist [sic] Relating
Mode of Learning		
Climate	Conformity/Cultural Uniformity	Diversity and Personal Esteem/ Cultural Diversity and Commonality

Table 1.1 tells us that in the old paradigm the teacher's job was to give knowledge to her/his students, who waited to receive this knowledge and then memorized it. That is, students were seen as passive recipients of knowledge. The teacher then sorted students into various categories and gave the students grades according to ability. Students and teachers competed, either with other classmates and/or with colleagues. The old teaching paradigm closely represents the way in which many Japanese students and teachers still interact in the classroom. Japanese students passively wait for the teacher to cover their blank paper with the required knowledge and to be guides and leaders who can give them everything as mere recipients they need.

1.4.2 Group membership and individual assessments

One thing to consider here is a point made by Johnson, Johnson and Smith: that "in cooperative situations, students are bound together by their mutual fate, shared identity, and mutual causation and, therefore, celebrate (and feel benefited by) each other's

successes” (p. 14). When a teacher evaluates students individually on the basis of group achievements or tasks, some students may think that the evaluation does not justly recognise their efforts; and if they feel that the evaluation is unfair, then it will be difficult for them to celebrate other people’s success. The teacher’s evaluation during each class must be planned carefully, because students are keen to get good marks. Ongoing assessment requires teachers to proceed very carefully and this will probably add to their workload. So it is better to have only small numbers of students in each class, to enable teachers to evaluate them fairly and observe them carefully. In Japan, unfortunately, the administrative staff expects teachers to teach big classes because it saves money. But this, historically speaking, would be a good moment to reduce the size of classes, because the population of applicants has gone down sharply and universities are not attracting as many students as they used to. This means that the size of classes could become smaller than ever before, unless the numbers of teaching staff are proportionately reduced.

1.5 The benefits of cooperative learning in Japanese university EFL classrooms for cognitive and metacognitive activity

Japanese university students are currently learning in competitive and individualistic classrooms where reasoning strategies and critical thinking are not trained. However, according to Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1995), cooperative learning promotes a greater use of higher level reasoning strategies and critical thinking than competitive or individualistic learning strategies do (p. 25). This trio of writers lists seven ways in which cooperative learning enhances cognitive and meta-cognitive activity. Hence, cooperative learning may provide a useful way forward. In this section, I look at each of their arguments in turn, and relate it to the current situation in Japan.

First, according to Johnson and Smith, the expectation set up by cooperative learning, that all will have to summarize, explain, and teach the rest of the group what they are learning, impacts on the learning strategies used. Japanese university students have not yet developed these strategies, because in class they tend only to listen and write down what teachers say. Teachers seldom invite or ask students to summarize or explain what the class should learn. If teachers want students to be able to summarize or explain material, they must first change their own teaching methods and styles. Small classes give more opportunities to students to summarize or explain than big classes. Group work or pair work in a small class may help students to talk about or discuss what they have learned.

Second, discussion within cooperative learning situations is thought to promote more frequent oral summarizing, explaining, and elaborating of what one knows. Orally summarizing, explaining and elaborating one's information, ideas and conclusions are necessary for the storage of information in the memory and the long-term retention of the information. As teaching and learning methods in Japan still seem to belong to the "Old Paradigm" (see Table 1.1), this stunts the ability in the students to summarize or explain and elaborate on what is known. But if Japanese students are to learn by comprehending, as opposed to memorizing, they should have more practice in summarizing, explaining and elaborating. They need to experience collaboration in groups to carry out tasks successfully in the classroom, while their teachers need to learn how to use collaboration in class and how to evaluate both each student and the collective work of groups.

Third, heterogeneity in cooperative learning groups is thought to nourish group members. Learning experiences are enriched by the exchange of ideas and perspectives among students from high-, medium-, and low-achievement levels, handicapped and non-handicapped students, male and female students, and students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Japanese students often try to avoid conflict, so it might be very difficult for them to express their own opinions, ideas and arguments. However, if they experience acceptance by the members of a group, they will become more confident in speaking out, explaining what they think and feel and what they understand by the contributions of other students. They will mitigate their mutual diversity, peer pressure or fear of losing face in the group. This may be the key issue in the appeal of cooperative learning in Japan. Cohen, Lotan and Catanzaire (1990) suggest some solutions: that teachers need to have a fundamental understanding of status problems and possible ways of affecting them by pedagogic action (p. 227). There are some advantages to using norms and roles: making curricula for cooperative learning; learning to treat the issues of multiple ability and what expectations of competence to form. Students depend on the teacher's judgment of students' competence; thus, the expectations of weaker students' competence will rise. Viewing videotaped sessions, teachers can see examples of students' logical and spatial awareness, check how exact this is and assess their progress better.

The teacher is a high-status source of evaluations for students. If teachers make evaluations of students, students are likely to believe those evaluations. Theoretically, this treatment ensures that competence expectation for low-status children are raised because they will accept the teacher's evaluation of themselves as competent on relevant skills...The advantage of continuing to try to change expectations for competence lies in the tremendous potential that cooperative learning in combination with successfully treated expectations for competence has

in academically heterogeneous classrooms (Cohen et al., p. 228).

Fourth, in most cooperative learning situations, students with incomplete information interact with others who are in the same situation but have different perspectives and facts. Teachers as leaders of the groups can easily give more information to those who need it, thus allowing the students to interact with each other.

Fifth, within cooperative learning groups, members externalize their ideas and reasoning so as to meet critical examination. Considerable peer monitoring and regulation of one's thinking and reasoning are needed. As a leader, the teacher can solve this problem and it is one of the teacher's roles in the classroom to do so.

Sixth, members are likely to give each other feedback concerning the quality and relevance of contributions and ways to improve reasoning or performance. Typically, personalized process feedback is given continuously as part of the interaction among group members. In cooperative learning groups, feedback is ideally received from fellow group members and discussed face-to-face in ways which make the personal implications clear. But it is very difficult for students, Japanese ones in particular, to give feedback. It requires more academic knowledge and a good deal of information to evaluate other members' comments. However, teachers can gradually move from asking students to give easy feedback to asking them to give it in more difficult areas, so as to accustom them to the process.

Seventh, involved participation in cooperative learning groups produces conflicts between the ideas, opinions, conclusions, theories, and information of members (Cohen

et al., pp. 27-29). Students can negotiate with each other and, if they do not agree, teachers will be there to mediate or persuade other members of the group to solve these conflicts. Thus it seems that, on balance, Japanese university EFL students stand to gain a great deal from the introduction of cooperative learning into their classroom settings.

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