

context in which this study was conducted. Situated in an area of significant disadvantage, the school was classified as having DEIS¹ Band 1 status. Therefore, I was cognisant of the impact of broader factors on children's literacy development (Eivers et al., 2004). The most recent international assessments indicate that, while the disparity in reading achievement for Irish pupils is less pronounced (in terms of the literacy achievement) than many other countries, there nonetheless exists a significant gap between reading achievement in DEIS and non-DEIS schools (McKeown et al., 2019). Determined to provide high quality learning experiences for my pupils, I decided to investigate the habits of good readers and examine how best to bridge the gap between the literacy attainment of my pupils and that of their peers who live in more advantageous areas. This investigation commenced with a careful examination of the previous research on reading comprehension, which would later become the basis for significant change in my classroom practice.

Helping children to construct meaning – what should teachers know?

The research on how children come to understand what they read, and how teachers can support this understanding, is extensive (Brown, 2008; Block and Pressley, 2003; Allington and Johnston, 2002; Block, 1999). Looking back on more than 50 years of research on theory and practice, explanations of reading comprehension depend, to varying degrees, on factors relating to the text, the reader, and the context (Pearson and Cervetti, 2015). While texts vary substantially, characterised by differing structures, linguistic features and measures of complexity, so too do readers, who bring varying background knowledge and levels of motivation to the act of reading. Contextual features acknowledge that readers do not engage with text in a vacuum; they are influenced and shaped by both local and societal influences that may be largely beyond the reader's control.

Comprehension is an active process that requires the deployment and integration of significant cognitive skills and resources (Kendeou et al., 2016). In order to understand what we are reading, we must decode the printed symbols (letters) on the page, take meaning from the decoded words, and integrate this meaning with relevant background knowledge, while continuously updating our overall understanding of the meaning represented by the text (Kintsch, 1988; Kintsch and Rawson, 2005). The complexity of these processes can prove challenging for young readers. For example, pupils who exert significant effort decoding may have limited capacity available to process the substance of what the text is about. Difficulties with decoding typically align with a dyslexic profile and can be contrasted with pupils who have accurate word-reading skills but poor comprehension (Hulme and Snowling, 2011).

Such poor comprehension can be caused by a plethora of different factors (Cain and Oakhill, 2006). Poor comprehenders have been found to score poorly on general measures of oral language proficiency, often from the early grades of elementary school (Catts et al., 2006). For example, a pupil may have a shallower store of vocabulary or

¹ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

difficulty understanding and using more complex syntactic structures in sentences. In order to understand more complex ideas in text, we need to read between the lines and fill in information that is implicitly stated. Studies have shown that the ability to infer can sometimes be lacking, leading to difficulties with comprehension (Cain and Oakhill, 1999). Importantly, readers also need to monitor their comprehension. A lack of metacognitive awareness can lead to a continuation with 'reading' despite the fact that understanding of the text has broken down (Hulme and Snowling, 2009). In addition, a number of other factors can impair comprehension, including poor understanding of text structure, gaps in background knowledge, and working memory difficulties (Kilpatrick, 2015).

A significant portion of the research on reading comprehension has focused on the strategies used by competent readers to make sense of text (Pressley and Allington, 2014). These readers question themselves and the text while reading; they consider the most important points encountered; they skim and scan to find relevant information quickly and they visualise characters, settings, and other details from the texts. The importance of these strategies has been underscored in reviews of teaching in this area (Shanahan et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2012). Having an understanding of the knowledge and skills that my pupils needed was a start, but I also needed an instructional framework that could support the diverse learners in my class. The research on good comprehension teaching proved to be instructive.

Teaching comprehension – what should teachers do?

Drawing on studies of the strategies used by good readers, a number of approaches have been shown to be effective in promoting strategic reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Shanahan et al., 2010). Significantly, studies on the effectiveness of comprehension teaching have repeatedly underscored the value of the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983) when scaffolding students' strategic reading. The model generally involves a transfer of responsibility from teacher to students, starting with explicit direction on the strategy (and when it should be used), clear modelling of the strategy (often involving thinking aloud), collaborative practice on how the strategy can be put into action, guided student practice of the strategy, and, finally, independent student use of the strategy (Duke et al., 2011; Shanahan et al., 2010).

Studies that have focused on improvements in comprehension have regularly included a focus on the strategic use of comprehension strategies (Clarke et al., 2010; Palincsar and Brown, 1984). Promisingly for the current study, the teaching of comprehension strategy instruction through the gradual release of responsibility has been shown to be effective with diverse populations, such as students with a language impairment (Wright et al., 2015), students with autism (El Zein et al., 2014) and students in high-poverty settings (Kennedy, 2014). While a number of instructional frameworks were available, a selection of core features of transactional strategies instruction (TSI) (Brown et al., 1996) showed promise. TSI is the term given to peer-led collaborative groups who construct personal knowledge of a text while simultaneously modelling strategy-use for one another

(Pressley et al., 1992). The term 'transactional' is derived from the fact that the meaning is constructed simultaneously between readers and the text, rather than in the text or by the reader alone (Pressley and Allington, 2014). Many studies report that pupils who engage with TSI and become strategic readers can enhance their comprehension. Seminal work in this area found that just 30 hours of TSI instruction can significantly improve students' reading abilities (Pressley et al., 1992), while a year-long quasi-experimental study of 30 low-achieving second grade readers in five US classrooms found that those who had experience of TSI in their classrooms showed significant reading improvements compared to their peers who had not been taught using TSI (Brown et al., 1996).

Planning for the teaching of comprehension – what does the curriculum say?

Recent years have seen significant curricular changes in Irish schools, first seen in the publication of the *Primary Language Curriculum* for junior infants to second class in 2015, followed by an updated version of the curriculum to incorporate third to sixth class (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2019). These curriculum documents have been accompanied by reviews of the relevant national and international research (Kennedy et al., 2012; Shanahan, 2019). The reading strand of the English (language 1) curriculum features comprehension as a learning outcome. For example, at the end of fourth class, pupils should be able to:

Compare and select comprehension strategies flexibly and interchangeably and use background knowledge to engage with text in a variety of genres independently or collaboratively (DES, 2019, p.27).

It is noteworthy that this learning outcome attends to the role of background knowledge in comprehension, in line with the influences on comprehension seen in the previous review. The outcome also places significant emphasis on the use of comprehension strategies to facilitate pupils' understanding of text.

While these strategies were the main focus of the current study, it is important to note that all of the learning outcomes detailed in the reading strand (and indeed many of the outcomes in oral language and writing) contribute to comprehension. For example, the ability to use phonics/word recognition knowledge (learning outcome 5) (DES, 2019, p.26) and to understand relevant vocabulary (learning outcome 6) (DES, 2019, p.26) are crucial in understanding text. Pupils' engagement and motivation (learning outcomes 1 and 2) (DES, 2019, p.26) also impact on their success in reading comprehension. Therefore, while particular comprehension strategies are worthy of explicit teaching, all of the learning outcomes in the curriculum contribute to pupils' understanding of what they read.

Methodology

Making a change: The intervention

In choosing to implement transactional strategies instruction (TSI), attention was directed to the explicit teaching and teacher modelling of prediction, connection, visualisation, questioning, clarifying, determining importance, inferring and summarising. These are skills advocated by Pressley et al. (1992), Courtney and Gleeson (2007), Block (1999), Brown (2008) and Brown et al. (1996), in studies relating to the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies.

Equipped with the necessary theory and empirical findings, I then began to investigate the type of texts I had been using in my classroom. The use of picture books was suggested in the literature (Guthrie, 2013; Roche, 2011) as one method that could motivate pupils to become actively engaged with reading. Although picture books are widely used in early years education, their potential for use with older pupils at the more senior levels of primary school is often ignored (Pearson, 2005). Picture books can enable teachers to engage in fruitful and effective dialogue with pupils. Not only are they rich in illustrations, they also explore themes that pique the curiosity of pupils. In order to understand text, pupils need to make connections to its meaning. Reading picture books not only provides the opportunity to connect to the words in the book, but pupils can also make connections to pictures. Using the picture books suggested by Courtney and Gleeson (2007) as a guide, texts were sourced which were of high interest to the students in the class and suitable for use during TSI. It was important to strike a balance between enhancing comprehension while also not selecting texts that were so complex that they reduced motivation to read or prevented students from deriving pleasure from the process. A list of the texts and authors selected is shown below in table 1.

Table 1

Picture Book	Author	Picture Book	Author
When Jessie Came Across the Sea	Amy Hest	My Lucky Day	Keiko Kasza
Henry's Freedom Box	Ellen Levine	Music for the End of Time	Jen Bryant
Lost and Found	Oliver Jeffers	Jumanji	Chris Van Allsburg
The Butterfly	Patricia Polacco	One Boy's War	Lynn Higgins Cooper
Zoo	Anthony Browne	Grandfather's Journey	Allen Say
Silly Billy	Anthony Browne	Ape	Martin Jenkins
The Silver Swan	Michael Morpurgo	Voices in the Park	Anthony Browne
The Man Who Walked Between the Towers	Mordicai Gerstein	The Cats in Krasinski Square	Karen Hesse
Amazing Grace	Mary Hoffman	The Stranger	Chris Van Allsburg
The Emperor's Egg	Martin Jenkins	The Wall	Eve Bunting
The Blue Whale	Nicola Davies	See the Ocean	Estelle Condra
Ice Bear	Nicola Davies	La La La	Kate DiCamillo
Baseball Saved Us	Ken Mochizuki	Probuditi!	Chris Van Allsburg
Teammates	Peter Golenbock	Tea With Milk	Allen Say
Barack Obama	Nikki Grimes	Two Bad Ants	Chris Van Allsburg

The success of TSI sessions in my classroom would largely become dependent on two factors; (a) the ability of the pupils to understand, discuss and use the strategies, and

(b) the ability to work in a co-operative and supportive group. When implementing TSI, each pupil is allocated a role within their group which related to a particular strategy, for example; leader, prediction expert, questioning expert, declunking expert, clarifying expert, inference expert or summariser, similar to the *Building Bridges of Understanding* programme by Courtney and Gleeson (2007). The purpose of each role is to internalise each strategy as determining when and how to use the strategy is an integral part of carrying out the role. The assigning of roles can be viewed as a method of differentiation, therefore, pupils with diverse needs can assume a full and valued role within the TSI process.

Three sessions of TSI were implemented per week for the duration of ten weeks. During lesson one of each week (Monday), I explicitly modelled the reading strategies for the pupils while reading a high-quality picture book. In the subsequent two sessions (Tuesday and Thursday), pupils worked in small collaborative groups with each group member being allocated a role relating to a particular strategy. Table 2 depicts an example of the teaching and learning schedule across the week.

Table 2

Group	Book	Day	Methodology
Whole Class	<i>Baseball Saved Us</i> by Ken Mochizuki	Monday	Explicit teaching of comprehension strategies. Teacher modelling of strategies. Gradual release of responsibility to pupils.
Group A	<i>Teammates</i> by Peter Golenbock	Tuesday and Thursday	TSI in small mixed ability groups with role cards. Collaborative learning. Teacher circulates to scaffold and support. Pupils revisit the text on Thursday to conclude reading and continue discussion.
Group B	<i>Barack Obama</i> by Nikki Grimes	Tuesday and Thursday	TSI in small mixed ability groups with role cards. Collaborative learning. Teacher circulates to scaffold and support. Pupils revisit the text on Thursday to conclude reading and continue discussion.

Teaching comprehension strategies: The central role of explicit teacher modelling and 'think alouds'

Before pupils commenced work in their small groups, explicit teacher modelling of each strategy was undertaken with ample time provided for pupils to observe the strategy in action and then try it for themselves. This explicit modelling usually took the form of 'think alouds' which involved me, the teacher, explicitly modelling both how and when to use each strategy. The cover illustration was a perfect place to start using comprehension strategies with students. A 'think aloud' sequence undertaken while focusing on the strategy of

prediction using the cover of the book *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* by Amy Hest, is described below:

Me: I predict that Jessie is on a boat sailing to America and she will have a new and happy life there. Does anybody else have a prediction, or guess, as to what might happen in this story? Remember your prediction does not have to be right, it is just a guess.

As I read aloud and different pupils applied the pre-taught strategies, other pupils could follow their lead and began to agree or disagree with what their classmates had said. This provided a catalyst for rich classroom discussion and critical thinking.

After explicit modelling across a wide range of texts and making provision for the pupils to use each strategy, it was then time to release the responsibility to the pupils gradually, and facilitate them working in small groups with a text. At first, each pupil was given a particular strategy to focus on in their group. However, with more practice pupils requested that this practice be halted – they wanted to employ the necessary strategies when they felt the need in the text, rather than just when their particular strategy was relevant. From this pupil input, I then removed the practice of individually allocating strategies to pupils, which demonstrated that pupils were not only interested in using the pre-taught strategies, but also realising their role in assisting meaning construction.

Through gradually enabling pupils to work without my constant support, I found it difficult to withdraw from being at the centre of students' learning. Despite circulating and scaffolding for each group when necessary, there was a shift in the locus of control within the classroom. This initially proved to be difficult, however, providing pupils with opportunities to practise their comprehension strategies was essential. After reading work by Brown (2008), I stumbled upon one of the most simple and effective methods of encouraging children to participate in TSI and whole class reading. This was to ask the short and basic question, 'What are you thinking?'

Data collection and analysis

Quantitative measures

The *Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) and the *Neale Analysis of Reading Ability* (Neale, 1989) were distributed to pupils before and after the intervention. The *Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) is a 25-item, four-option, multiple choice questionnaire that asks pupils about the strategies they could employ before, during and after reading. It assesses pupils' awareness of a variety of metacognitive behaviours that fit within six broad categories:

- a. predicting and verifying,
- b. previewing,
- c. purpose setting,
- d. self-questioning,

- e. drawing from background knowledge, and
- f. summarising and applying fix-up strategies.

Responses are given one mark and every participant receives a score out of 25.

The *Neale Analysis of Reading Ability* (NARA) (Neale, 1989) was used to compare reading comprehension abilities at pre- and post-intervention. This test consists of two standardised parallel forms of six graded passages of text to form in a continuous reading scale for pupils aged from six to 12 years. After pupils complete a practice passage, they progress to passage one, reading aloud and answering comprehension questions without looking back at the text. The reading of each text is timed in seconds. Accuracy in reading is recorded by calculating the child's reading errors. If a pupil obtains more than 16 errors on any of the first five passages of text, or an error total of 20 on passage number six, the test is stopped. Standardised scores are calculated including percentile ranks, stanines and reading ages for accuracy, comprehension, and rate of reading. The benefits of undertaking this test were numerous as the results provided tailored information on a pupil's comprehension achievement. However, caution must be exercised with the interpretation of a pupil's results on the NARA test (Neale, 1989), as pupils with additional educational needs who have difficulty with fluency and decoding text, but who may contribute meaningfully to classroom discussion, may not show an improvement on their score on the NARA test as when they make 16 reading errors on passages one to five, the test is stopped. Pupils with dyslexic tendencies are one such example. The results of both the *Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) and the *Neale Analysis of Reading Ability* (Neale, 1989) were analysed using *Statistics Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS).

Qualitative measures

Semi-structured interviews took place at pre-, mid- and post-intervention to delve into pupils' thoughts about the TSI process. I kept an observational diary for the duration of the intervention, to further document and analyse the changes, if any, that would occur in pupils' comprehension. This proved to be an essential learning tool for me as a mainstream teacher. Excerpts from this diary and the semi-structured interviews are presented in the Results section with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants in this study.

Data gathered using qualitative methods were analysed using the inductive approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Observations were coded and grouped to generate patterns of re-occurring themes and issues.

Results

Reading comprehension

The NARA test (Neale, 1989) indicated that there was a significant increase in comprehension scores from pre-intervention ($M = 31.77$, $SD = 23.16$) to post-intervention ($M = 52.08$, $SD = 33.44$); $t(12) = -4.77$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed). The eta squared statistic was .69, indicating a large effect size. On average, each pupil increased their comprehension by 19 points. This finding suggests that TSI was successful in improving pupils' reading comprehension.

Awareness of strategic reading processes

The pupils were also tested on their awareness of strategic reading processes using the *Awareness of Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) at pre- and post-intervention. Results revealed that pupils' awareness of strategic reading processes significantly changed from pre-intervention ($M = 9.00$, $SD = 3.65$) to post-intervention ($M = 17.77$, $SD = 3.75$); $t(12) = -9.31$, $p < .001$. The eta squared statistic was .88, indicating a large effect size. Therefore, the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies and the implementation of TSI were effective in improving pupils' awareness of strategic reading processes.

Qualitative findings

What about the pupil voice?

It was noted in the following excerpt from the observational diary that pupils really enjoyed listening to the picture books being read aloud to them during the Monday session each week:

Anna: I love the times when you are the reader in the reading in the circle and we all just do the skills and listen.

Barbara: The picture books are good because like sometimes like big novels can get boring and then we have to keep reading them for weeks and weeks... If I wasn't interested in the title of one picture book then at least it's over in like one or two days and not going on for weeks.

Peter: Picture books are the best... You get to read the whole story... Not like half of the story or a piece of the story so you get the ending all the time and I like that.

Peter's comment is interesting because it can be interpreted in terms of most picture books having a beginning, middle and a logical ending, while Barbara's comment may be something for teachers to bear in mind when selecting novels. Themes and issues should appeal to all pupils in the class as they will probably be reading and working on them for a considerable period of time. Not only were pupils becoming more motivated to read, I was also experiencing success with reading comprehension in the classroom. This was a source of great satisfaction for me and also contributed to my own motivation as a teacher in terms of providing effective literacy instruction. Reading aloud in a circle to pupils and sharing thoughts with them generated an atmosphere of mutual respect and interest, which contributed to the development of an encouraging and pleasant pupil-teacher relationship.

Interestingly, wordless picture books provided significant opportunities for modelling higher-order skills associated with comprehension, including inference, in particular. I found that *La La La* by Kate DiCamillo was one of the most thought-provoking and insightful reading sessions I had with my class. This book, which consists only of the words 'La La La' throughout, directed students' attention to the detail in illustrations and the colours used by the illustrator. The focus for students shifted to the comprehension strategy of inference, a strategy which struggling readers have difficulty developing. However, Kispal

(2008) argues that struggling readers need inference more than accomplished readers, as they use cues and prompts from the information they can see and are then able to read to make meaning. John, a student who presented with literacy difficulties and who had been largely unmotivated to read, subsequently told me about his favourite picturebooks:

John: *Silly Billy* and *La La La* were my favourite books... remember I read them both out loud with no mistakes ... That was good now wasn't it?

Finally, I knew that my efforts in striving to develop a literacy-rich classroom were not in vain when John arrived late for school one day. Upon entering the classroom his one and only concern was about reading:

John: Did you do them teacher?

Me: Do what?

John: The reading groups?

John's motivation and interest in reading was remarkable and it would previously have been unthinkable that he would have feared missing out on reading.

The influence of text structure and format

In this study, pupils were exposed to various elements of presentation and typography which can have a lasting effect (Gambrell, 2011). Pupils became excited by the fold-out page in *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* by Mordicai Gerstein as, typically, schoolbooks follow traditional formats and structure. As the TSI groups were working on different texts, one group did not get the opportunity to work with this book. However, after such enthusiastic reviews by their peers, the other pupils became curious. When questioned about the appeal of this book above all the others, it was the fold-out page in the middle of the book which really captured the attention of the pupils. Perhaps it could be the lack of reading materials children in disadvantaged areas have at home, but the pupils thought it was exceptionally clever of the author to do such a thing, and many had never seen it done before. There was always a scramble to retrieve this book from the class library and it was held in very high regard amongst the pupils, not just because of its story line, but because it was a novelty in terms of structure and format. This book became so popular that I had to source another copy of it and organise for both copies to be taken home by different pupils each day. This was one of the most insightful, yet simple, learning experiences for me in terms of developing a literacy-rich classroom.

Limitations

Scores on the NARA test (Neale, 1989) and the *Awareness of Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) at pre- and post-intervention allowed for ease of comparison at both stages. However, the results of this research reflect one class group in one school and thus suffer from a lack of generalisability. Using score comparisons at pre- and post-

intervention to draw definite conclusions about a pupil's reading ability may not be accurate, as one test score on one particular day may not accurately reflect ability. The duration of the intervention is short, and thus the long-term impact of implementing TSI in the classroom remains unexplored. Ten weeks of TSI could only skim the surface of the benefits the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies could potentially hold for pupils in a DEIS Band 1 school. Performance on the NARA test (Neale, 1989) and on the *Awareness of Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) at pre- and post-intervention may have been influenced by other factors, such as the teaching of reading that took place in the classroom each day (buddy reading, novel study, library visit), outside of this intervention.

Discussion, recommendations and conclusions

The findings demonstrated that TSI was a successful method of improving pupils' reading comprehension. Struggling readers are more likely to learn essential reading skills and strategies if the explicit model of instruction is part of the teacher's repertoire of teaching methods (Rupley et al., 2009). In a meta-analysis of over 40 studies of reading comprehension in special education settings, Berkeley et al. (2010) concluded that teaching pupils to attend more carefully or to think more systematically about text as it is being read improves pupils' comprehension. Scope exists for further studies in the Irish context pertaining to the use of comprehension strategies and TSI with pupils who have special educational needs. Similarly, the shift towards in-class support under the new special educational needs model and *Circular 0013/2017* (DES, 2017) could provide some scope for TSI to be used as an in-class intervention. As this intervention took place in a senior class and all of the strategies were in use when implementing TSI, further studies could investigate which strategies are developmentally appropriate at each class level and when exactly pupils can work in small collaborative groups during TSI. Perhaps early implementation of TSI with fewer strategies in the early years can result in a spiral and developmental nature of implementation across the school.

One significant learning point for the first author, as the teacher, was how much the pupils struggled with the skill of determining importance. This skill, otherwise termed summarising, was not one which I had thought the pupils would struggle with. They could not decipher the main points of the text in a concise manner and tended to include irrelevant detail. This may have been because the students' perception of what summarising meant was incorrect:

James: Yeah like when we were doing it [summarising] first, I thought you [teacher] were checking if we were listening, so I wrote down absolutely everything I could think of and remember about the book and it was a full page long... [giggles].

James's comment was insightful in terms of deciphering my next teaching points. In order to really peel back the level of complexity, I resorted to reading simple nursery rhymes with the class and asked them to tell me in one, short, sentence what the rhyme

was about. It helped to tell the students to pretend they were explaining the rhyme to a pupil in a younger class. It is also interesting how the preoccupation with assessing pupils' knowledge was intertwined with James's beliefs about the task. Similarly, it has been suggested that motivation to read wanes in the later years of primary school and in to post-primary school as reading tasks become focused on outputs, where reading is then perceived as a task, rather than a pleasurable activity (Rosenblatt, 2005; Tyre and Springen, 2007). Providing pupils with a forum for discussing books can help them to think critically and this discussion is also crucial for the promotion of comprehension (Shanahan et al., 2010).

This study demonstrated that explicit instruction is a powerful means of developing proficient comprehenders. While this article presents findings from a relatively small and particular context, it does provide a striking example of the impact that research-informed instruction can have on students in Irish schools. While I was hopeful that adopting a more strategic approach to comprehension would prove fruitful for my pupils, I could not have envisaged the impact that the intervention would have on the quality of engagement and discussion in my classroom. The essential ingredients of high-quality comprehension instruction, plentiful opportunities for co-operation in groups, and carefully chosen picture books, had a remarkable impact on my classroom and pupils. The interaction and dialogue promoted by TSI groups can facilitate all students, no matter their reading difficulty, to take part in high quality discussion about text.

However, effective strategy instruction, no matter how comprehensively validated it may be in research, can never reach its true potential if it is not implemented in real world classroom settings. It is hoped that the content of this article will aid teachers to help their pupils to become purposeful, strategic readers. Exploring picture books with children and discussing their contents is one of the most rewarding and interesting experiences a classroom teacher can have. This, combined with attention to research-informed teaching strategies, can have a truly meaningful impact in our classrooms.

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