Foreign Language Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate: High Level vs. Low Level Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Communication with others is said to be the ultimate goal of language learning. Language learners, however, may sometimes feel so anxious that they are not willing to communicate. The present study thus aimed at probing the relationship between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in the EFL classroom. Besides, FLA and WTC of high level vs. low level language learners were compared. The participants, 30 high- and 30 low-intermediate EFL learners from the Iran language institute (ILI) in Gorgan, Iran, were given two questionnaires: Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001), and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope,1986) The results showed no significant relationship between FLA and WTC in the classroom. They also indicated that high level and low level language learners did not differ significantly in terms of FLA and WTC. Finally, it was concluded that two important factors affecting such results could be the age and the number of the participants.

KEYWORDS: Foreign Language Anxiety; Willingness to Communicate; Foreign Language Learning.

INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the purpose of ELT shifted away from the mastery of linguistic structure to the ability to use language communicatively. One of the major aims of CLT is to create a context resembling authentic communication (Gałajda, 2017), in which language students need to learn how to communicate effectively and appropriately. On the other hand, language learners themselves sometimes may not be eager enough to initiate interactions with their teacher or peers. In fact, some learners tend to be highly motivated for learning but anxious about communicating at the same time. When provided with an opportunity to use the foreign language, some students remain silent while others will speak and communicate. Thus, the teachers' role is vital in that they are to pinpoint the origins of such reluctance and try to help their students to participate more and more in class activities and, in turn, in out of class communication opportunities.

Why people vary in their talking behavior may be explained by the personality variable called willingness to communicate (WTC) (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). One possible source of learners' unwillingness to communicate can be foreign language anxiety (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Gałajda, 2017; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001). Further, Ellis (2008) asserted that the affective aspect that has received the most attention in SLA is anxiety. Thus, lowering students' language anxiety and increasing their willingness to use the L2 inside and outside the classroom can help direct language learners to start and maintain authentic communication. The WTC model integrates the substantial variables to predict L2 communication. Although some research has been conducted on the interplay between FLA and WTC in the Iranian EFL context (see, for example, Alemi, Daftarifard, & Pashmforoosh, 2011; Ehsani & Jan-nesar Moghaddam, 2021; Fathi, Mohammaddokht, & Nourzadeh, in press; Marashi & Sahafnia, 2020; Rastegar & Karami, 2015; Shahraki & Seyedrezaei, 2015; Zare & Riasati, 2012), few have been done on the high vs. low level language learners' perception of these two concepts. The current study, then, was an attempt to shed light on the role of foreign language anxiety among Iranian EFL language learners and its interaction with their WTC in terms of their level of language proficiency.

WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE (WTC)

A number of factors, which are called antecedents, influence a student's willingness or unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classroom. McCroskey and Baer (1985) were among the first who introduced the concept of WTC with reference to the native language. They stated that many situational variables can have an impact on WTC: "How the person feels that day, what communication the person has had with others recently, who the other person is, what that person looks like, [and] what might be gained or lost through communicating" (p. 1). Accordingly, willingness to communicate can be seen to a great extent as situationally dependent. They also added that there exist other factors which apparently measure dominance in communication, initiating and maintaining interpersonal communication, frequency and duration of communication, and *anxiety* about communication. Such anxiety or fear, then, is likely to be one of the antecedents of global tendencies to be willing or unwilling to communicate. According to McCroskey and Baer, WTC may depend upon such attributes as communication apprehension, perceived communication competence, introversion or extraversion, and self-esteem.

MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998) adapted WTC to the L2 situation in a model that is intended to explain individual and contextual impacts in the choice to initiate L2 communication. MacIntyre et al. (1998) asserted that many variables have the potential to change an individual's WTC: "The degree of acquaintance between communicators, the number of people present, the formality of the situation, the degree of evaluation of the speaker, the topic of discussion, and other factors can influence a person's WTC" (p. 546). They, however, were of the view that the most dramatic variable is the language of discourse which effects change in the communication setting. This might explain why they regarded WTC in L1 as totally distinct from WTC in L2. Accordingly, they presented a pyramid consisting of several categories or *layers* of the WTC model:

Layer 1: Communication behavior. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), this layer is viewed as an outcome of the complex system of interrelated variables in the lower layers. Communication behavior is considered in a broad sense, including such activities as speaking up in class, reading L2 newspapers, watching L2 television, or employing an L2 at the workplace. MacIntyre et al. argued that the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to increase willingness to communicate, and any program that fails to produce learners who are willing to use the language is simply a failure.

Layer 2: Willingness to communicate (WTC). MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) concept of WTC differs from trait-like WTC presented by McCroskey and Baer (1985) because it additionally involves situation-specific factors. MacIntyre et al. defined WTC as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). Such willingness to communicate in the classroom entails sufficient self-confidence, motivation, and a combination of affiliation and control motives.

Layer 3: Situated Antecedents of Communication. Two immediate antecedents of WTC were proposed: (a) the desire to communicate with a specific person and (b) state communicative self-confidence. The desire to communicate with a specific person is defined as one's desire to communicate with persons who are physically nearby, frequently encountered, physically attractive, and those similar to us in a variety of ways (Lippa, 1994, as cited in MacIntyre et al., 1998). State communicative self-confidence is the transient feeling of confidence at the particular moment in a specific situation. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998) this momentary feeling of self-confidence includes two factors: state perceived competence and state anxiety.

The above-mentioned layers indicated the comparatively temporary effects on WTC, working as dependent variables. The next three layers, however, represent relatively enduring influences on WTC, and work as independent variables in analyzing WTC in an L2.

Layer 4: Motivational propensities. Motivational propensities to communicate are stable individual differences that apply in several situations, and consist of three clusters of variables: (a) interpersonal motivation, (b) intergroup motivation, and (c) L2 confidence. Interpersonal motivation stems from playing a social role within a group. As opposed to interpersonal motivation which is related to individual characteristics of the communicators, intergroup motivation is derived from the membership of a particular group. Finally, L2 confidence concerns the relationship between the individual and the L2, and is created by two components – self-evaluation of L2 skills and language anxiety.

Layer 5. Affective and cognitive context. This layer consists of intergroup attitudes, social situation, and communicative competence. The variables in this layer are individually based, and represent accumulated prior history and broad-based attitudes and motives of an individual. The factors influencing intergroup attitudes are *integrativeness,* which is related to increased frequency and quality of contact with L2 community, *fear of*

assimilation, which predicts less contact with the L2 community, and *attitudes toward the L2*, which determines motivation to learn the L2. Social situation is a multifaceted category which describes a social encounter in a particular setting. Factors influencing situational variation include participants, setting, purpose, topic, and channel of communication. Communicative competence is composed of five constituent competences: linguistic competence, discourse competence, actional competence, sociocultural competence, and strategic competence (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1995).

Layer 6: Social and individual context. The last layer demonstrates interactions between the society and the individual. The society context refers to the intergroup climate in which interlocutors evolve, whereas the individual context refers to stable personality characteristics found to be particularly relevant to communication.

According to Gałajda (2017), willingness to communicate can be viewed as a personality trait as people exhibit regularity in WTC in different contexts. She also added that WTC could be a decision-making process which is influenced by risk-taking orientations; that is, every turn during an interaction people make up their minds and decide whether or not to communicate. Moreover, WTC can be a situational variable since people vary in their WTC across various situations (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990).

ANXIETY: ITS TYPES AND SOURCES

Dörnyei (2005) pointed out that there are two dimensions in the literature that are relevant to understanding anxiety: beneficial/facilitating vs. inhibitory/debilitating anxiety and trait vs. state anxiety. The first dichotomy refers to whether or not anxiety can be a positive or a negative force in learning and the second refers to whether anxiety is part of an individual's makeup across many situations or whether it is a reaction in a particular situation. Horwitz (2001) in a review of the literature noted that there is something unique about L2 learning anxiety separate from other types of anxiety. According to Spielberger (as cited in Horwitz, 2001, p. 113), anxiety is "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system". Phillips (1992) has dealt with two kinds of anxiety: *trait* anxiety and *state* anxiety. He defined trait anxiety as "a relatively stable tendency to exhibit anxiety in a large variety of circumstances" (p. 14). In contrast, state anxiety is seen as "a situation-specific trait anxiety; that is, an individual suffering from state anxiety will manifest a stable tendency to exhibit anxiety, but only in certain situations" (Phillips, 1992, p. 14).

According to Phillips (1992), test anxiety and math anxiety are two well-known types of state anxiety. Likewise, Spielberger (as cited in Horwitz, 2001) pointed out that trait anxiety is conceptualized as a relatively stable personality characteristic whereas state anxiety is defined as a response to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus such as an important test. In addition to these two perspectives to anxiety, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) also added a third term, *situation-specific* anxiety, supposedly to emphasize the persistent and multi-faceted nature of some anxieties. Unlike Phillips, Horwitz (2001) was of the view that foreign language anxiety is to be addressed from the perspective of situation-specific anxiety.

Moreover, Ellis (2008) maintained that situation-specific anxiety consists of the anxiety which is provoked by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation. Ellis claimed that language anxiety is a type of situation anxiety, which is largely independent of other types of anxiety. He pointed out that the various sources of anxiety in the foreign language classroom are reflected in the questionnaires devised to measure learner anxiety. In 1986, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope proposed a situation-specific anxiety construct which they called Foreign Language Anxiety which was responsible for students' negative emotional reactions to language learning. They went on to offer an instrument, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), to measure this anxiety. According to Horwitz (2001), studies using this instrument and other specific measures of second language anxiety have found a consistent moderate negative correlation between the FLCAS and measures of second language achievement. Having reviewed the literature on anxiety in language learning, Young (1991) identified six potential sources of language anxiety. Some of the sources were associated with the learner, some with the teacher, and some with the instructional practice. Young argued that language anxiety arises from:

1. personal and interpersonal anxieties,
2. learner beliefs about language learning,
3. instructor beliefs about language teaching,
4. instructor-learner interactions,
5. classroom procedures, and

6. language testing

Young (1991) also posited that some of these sources may be interrelated. In the same vein, Horwitz et al. (1986) outlined a theoretical framework to describe three components of foreign language anxiety:

- communication apprehension
- fear of negative social evaluation
- test anxiety

Ellis (2008) was of the view that while it has been possible to identify a number of general sources of anxiety, it is important to bear in mind that learners differ in what they find anxiety-provoking. As Horwitz (2001) noted in her review of studies that have investigated the effects of instruction on anxiety in almost all cases, any task that was judged comfortable by some learners was also judged stressful by others. Furthermore, VanPatten and Benati (2010) contended that forcing learners to speak before they are ready would raise the learner's levels of anxiety and other negative emotions, perhaps inhibiting acquisition more generally. They also believed that anxiety is one of those psychological distance factors that learners cope psychologically with learning an L2. In terms of the sources of language learning anxiety, Von Worde (2003) found that speaking activities, inability to comprehend, negative classroom experiences, fear of negative evaluation, native speakers, methodology, pedagogical practices, and the teachers themselves were the main sources of learning anxiety. Moreover, other research studies found that students felt the most anxious when they responded to teachers or were singled out to speak English in class (Liu, as cited in Zare & Riasati, 2012). The participants in Williams and Andrade's (2008) study also saw the teachers as the main source of anxiety.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON FLA AND WTC

Alghali (2016) studied learners' willingness to communicate in language classrooms and the tentative effect of foreign language anxiety on the extent of their communication. She found that FLA had no influence on students' desire to communicate in the language classroom. Kalsoom, Soomro, and Pathan (2020) studied the impact of social support and FLA on learners' (WTC) inside the classroom in Pakistan. Their results showed that social support had impacts on learners' WTC. Moreover, FLA had a negative and significant correlation with WTC. Zhou, Xi, and Lochtman (2020) explored FLA as a moderator on the relationship between second language competence and WTC among 129 Chinese English learners in Belgium. Their analyses displayed that there was a significant relationship between FLA and WTC of the participants. Additionally, they proved strong associations between overall competence and WTC outside the classroom. Fuji (2021) probed the correlations between FLA and WTC, the differences of WTC between high-anxious and low-anxious learners, and learner willingness to use the four skills in English. The results revealed that there was a significant, negative relationship between FLA and WTC, and the differences between high-anxious and low-anxious learners in terms of WTC were significant.

In the Iranian context, a number of studies have been conducted on the topics in question. For example, Alemi et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between WTC and its interaction with their language anxiety and language proficiency among 49 Iranian university students. Their results showed that students' WTC was directly related to their language proficiency, but had not significant relationship with FLA. In another study, Rastegar and Karami (2015) studied the relationship/s among FLA, WTC, and academic achievement in the Iranian EFL learners'. The findings indicated that there was a negative, significant relationship between FLA and WTC. Also, the relationship between FLA and academic achievement was significant and negative, but the link between WTC and academic achievement was significant and positive. Marashi and Sahafnia (2020) explored the association among EFL learners' language aptitude, FLA, and WTC. The results confirmed that there was a negative, significant correlation between the students' FLA and their WTC, while there was a positive, significant relationship between language aptitude and WTC. Ehsani and Jan-nesar Moghaddam (2021) investigated the relationship between FLA, WTC and locus of control (LOC) among Iranian EFL learners. Their findings showed that there was a significant but negative association between WTC and FLA. However, no correlations were found between LOC with WTC and FLA. Finally, Fathi et al. (in press) studied the impacts of grit and FLA as predictors of WTC among Iranian EFL learners. They found that FLA had some effect on WTC and this effect was greater than that of grit.

Based on these empirical studies, it can be inferred that although research on the notions of FLA and WTC has already been conducted alone or in relation with other variables of individual differences, little research seems to

have been conducted on the differences between high and low level students in terms of FLA and WTC. Therefore, the present research study was an attempt to bridge this gap by investigating the relationship between FLA and WTC of high- vs. low-intermediate level language learners in the Iranian EFL context. The following research questions were thus formulated:

1. Is there any significant relationship between FLA and WTC among Iranian EFL learners?
2. Do high level and low level EFL learners differ significantly in terms of FLA and WTC?

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the present study were language learners, who were selected through the convenience sampling method and their availability was regarded as the criterion for their selection. They were learning English as a foreign language at the Iran Language Institute (ILI) in adults' branch, Gorgan, Iran, in the summer term of 2021. The 60 male language learners, 30 of them high-intermediate and the other 30 low-intermediate level students, were given two questionnaires. The students' native language was Persian, and their age ranged from 13 to 22. Their proficiency level was supposed to be high enough to make out the items of the questionnaires, although the researcher had told the students that they could ask for clarification of the items.

INSTRUMENTS

In this study, two instruments were employed to collect data on the variables of the study. It is to be noted that the validity of the scales was confirmed by three PhD holders in the field. The reliability coefficients of the instruments were also calculated.

WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE QUESTIONNAIRE

A modified version of the likert-type questionnaire developed by MacIntyre et al. (2001) was used for measuring students' willingness to communicate inside the classroom. The scale comprises of 27 items which range from 1 to 5 (1 = almost never willing, 2 = sometimes willing, 3 = willing half of the time, 4 = usually willing, and 5 = almost always willing). The greater the scores, the more willing the learners were to communicate.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ANXIETY SCALE (FLCAS)

The likert-type questionnaire developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was employed for measuring students' foreign language classroom anxiety. The scale comprises of 33 items which range from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly agree; 2= agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree). The higher the scores, the higher levels of anxiety the learners experienced.

The reliability of these two questionnaires was estimated in the pilot study in the spring term of 2021. The values of the Cronbach's alpha for FLA questionnaire and WTC questionnaire were .75 and .68, respectively, which can be regarded as acceptable.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

As the study was conducted at the time when COVID-19 Pandemic was still around and the classes were held online, the researcher had to collect data through email and social media such as WhatsApp. The researcher explained the purpose of the study in his online classes, which were held through Adobe Connect and/or Skype. The classes met twice a week in the evening. The teacher of the classes was the researcher himself. He informed the students that their participation was not compulsory and that their responses would not be revealed publically. In essence, the language learners participated in the study of their own volition. The questionnaires, then, were sent to 72 students of high and

low intermediate level students. Having screened the questionnaires with regard to their completeness, the researcher chose 60 ones for data analysis purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using the statistical software SPSS, version 24, the data were analyzed. First, normal distribution of the data was checked by using statistical tests, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. The results of these tests are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1.
Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
FLA	.088	30	.200[*]	.983	30	.925
WTC	.087	30	.200[*]	.966	30	.447

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Since evaluating the normality of data is seen as a prerequisite for many statistical tests, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and Shapiro-Wilk test were employed to decide if the population under investigation is normal. According to Table 1, the Sig. values of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for FLA and WTC were both .20. Further, the Sig. values of the Shapiro-Wilk test for FLA and WTC were .92 and .44, respectively. Since these values were greater than .05, it can be concluded that the data are distributed normally, and parametric tests can thus be used for the current study. Accordingly, the Pearson's product-moment correlation test and independent samples t-tests were employed to seek answers to the research questions. In order to answer the first research question, a Pearson's product-moment correlation test was run. The results of the test are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2.
Pearson's Correlation Test Between FLA and WTC

		FLA	WTC
FLA	Pearson Correlation	1	-.071
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.730
	N	30	30
WTC	Pearson Correlation	-.071	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.730	
	N	30	30

As it can be seen in Table 2, the Sig. value of Pearson's product-moment correlation is .73, which is much higher than .05, indicating that the relationship is not significant. Therefore, there is no significant relationship between FLA and WTC among Iranian EFL learners. In order to answer the second research question, two independent samples t-tests were run. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Independent Samples T-Tests Between High and Low Intermediate Students' FLA and Their WTC

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
FLA	Equal variances assumed	.400	.533	1.400	58	.174	6.846	4.889	-3.24	16.936	

	Equal variances not assumed			1.400	54.831	.174	6.846	4.889	-3.244	16.936
WTC	Equal variances assumed	.424	.520	1.157	58	.257	4.344	3.755	-3.349	12036
	Equal variances not assumed			1.131	57.616	.269	4.344	3.839	-3.587	12.275

As it can be seen in Table 3, the Sig. (2-tailed) values for FLA and WTC are .17 and .25, respectively, indicating that the differences are not statistically significant. Thus, high level and low level language learners do not differ significantly in terms of FLA and WTC.

Based on the results of the Pearson correlation test, the relationship between FLA and WTC of the language learners was not statistically significant. These findings were in line with those of Alemi et al. (2011) and Alghali (2016). The results, however, were in contrast with those of Rastegar and Karami (2015), Kalsoom et al. (2020) Zhou et al. (2020), Fuji (2021), Marashi and Sahafnia (2020), Ehsani and Jan-nesar Moghaddam (2021), and Fathi et al. (in press) . Such outcomes may suggest that although language learners suffer from some anxiety in class, it has no role in the students' willingness to communicate. As a result, language learners' (un-)willingness to communicate might be affected by factors other than anxiety. MacIntyre (2007) contended that motivation is also a vital factor in willingness to communicate in the foreign language. He stated that "an experienced learner who is unwilling to communicate might show both high motivation for learning and high anxiety about communicating" (p. 564). Therefore, we may need to reorient our focus toward a concern for other affective and linguistic processes that play a part in WTC as it "might not be as familiar as other individual difference factors" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 564).

Another important reason for such results may be the small number of the participants, i.e., 60 participants, in the present study. Most research studies conducted on the relationship between WTC and FLA (see, for example, Liu & Jackson, 2008; Shahraki & Seyedrezaei, 2015; Zare & Riasati, 2012) were done on larger numbers of language learners. In the Liu and Jackson (2008) study, for instance, 547 first-year undergraduate non-English major students took part.

The results of the independent samples t-tests showed that the difference between high level and low level students in FLA and WTC was not statistically significant. These results can be due to a number of reasons. The first important reason can be the small number of the participants. This issue was explicated in the preceding paragraph in detail. The second possible factor could be the slight difference between the learners' language proficiency levels, high vs. low intermediate levels. This can be accompanied by the students' age differences. The value of Kurtosis for the participants' age was estimated as 4.27, which is higher than 2, indicating that age distribution might not have been normal. Consequently, the abnormal distribution of age in the two groups may have affected the results of the t-tests. Thus, students of high and low levels both experience anxiety almost equally, and their willingness to communicate were not substantially different.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results indicated no link between FLA and WTC among Iranian EFL learners. This can thus have pedagogical implications for EFL teachers and materials developers. Teachers, for instance, are advised to look for other ways to motivate students' willingness to participate more in class discussions and activities as "motivation" has a crucial role in such situations (MacIntyre, 2007). One way to increase motivational levels of language learners is to engage them in classroom activities by meeting their needs and providing communication opportunities for them (see Ghelichli, Seyyedrezaei, Barani, & Mazandarani, 2020). Alternatively, language teachers can organize syllabuses around the most occurring learners' communicative needs (Gałajda, 2017) in order to encourage their students for communication in class, although teachers may not be able to predict all communicative contexts for learners to communicate in. Since the role of native speakers in the process of language learning cannot be denied as they may activate learners' willingness to communicate in a foreign language, especially outside the classroom (Gałajda (2017), and since the Iranian context lacks such a crucial factor, it seems to be the teachers' responsibility to provide various communication opportunities for language learners to engage in. In fact, some learners who are willing to communicate in one context may be less eager to speak in other situations, or those who enjoy communicating with certain interlocutors may not be so willing to share their thoughts with others. Moreover, materials developers may need to focus on incorporating communicative tasks in the textbooks for inside and outside the classroom use.

The findings also showed no differences between high and low intermediate EFL learners in terms of WTC and FLA. In other words, although the students were in two different levels of language proficiency, their perceptions of WTC and FLA were no different. It seems that the age factor plays a more significant role than language proficiency. These results can be beneficial to language teachers who may teach students of different levels of language proficiency. Such teachers may need to be aware that, based on the present results, age appears to play a more important role than the level of language proficiency. Simply put, when addressing the students or expecting them to be responsive in class, the teacher should give more priority to the learner's age than their levels.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study investigated the relationship between FLA and WTC in two groups of language learners, high and low intermediate levels, with a limited number of participants. Further studies can be conducted on the comparison of other levels of language learners with a larger number of students. Moreover, apart from anxiety, other factors, such as motivation or any other variables of individual differences, which are supposed to possibly play a part in the students' WTC, may be a good topic for further research. Besides, the participants in this study were all male language learners; future studies can be done on the female ones, or alternatively on the comparison between genders.

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