

Learners' Perspective on Using Dynamic Assessment Procedures in Vocabulary Knowledge Development

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Abstract

Regarding the important role of vocabulary in the process of language learning and teaching, this study seeks to explore participants' perceptions with regard to learning vocabulary through Dynamic Assessment (DA) procedures. In order to meet the aim of this study, three male and three female EFL learners were chosen non-randomly based on their availability. All the participants were beginners with regard to their vocabulary knowledge. The participants voluntarily attended 15 DA sessions. During these sessions, the participants received corrective feedback within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). They have been providing with proper levels of help by moving gradually, using prompts, through the Regulatory Scale from the most implicit to the most explicit assistance which emerged from the individualized mediation between the mediator and the participants. A post-study semi-structured interview was conducted at the end of the last DA session. The aim of this interview was to elicit participants' perceptions of DA

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procedures on vocabulary development. The results of the study indicate that the participants have positive perception toward using DA procedures in teaching vocabulary.

Introduction

In recent years, vocabulary teaching has retrieved its position as a basic component of language development (Nunan, 1999). According to Zhihong (2000) without sufficient vocabulary, we cannot communicate and express the idea easily both in oral or written form. “Without grammar, little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed” (Wilkins, 1972, p. 111).

A number of studies have been conducted in the field (e.g., Cengizhan, 2011; Collins, 2010; Demircioglu, 2010; Lin & Morrison, 2010; Mahdavy, 2011) in order to find out the best method for teaching vocabulary. Like other language skills, it seems no agreed upon method of teaching vocabulary does exist among language experts.

Shortcomings of the traditional methods of vocabulary teaching in promoting learners’ vocabulary knowledge (Ciftci & Uster, 2009; McGraw, Yoshimoto, & Seneff, 2009; Nunan, 1999), has demanded implementing a new method to facilitate vocabulary learning. One of these new methods is Dynamic Assessment (DA). The positive results which have been reported to emerge out of using DA procedures in developing language skills (Ableeva, 2010; Birjandi & Ebadi, 2012; Cioffi & Carney 1983; Davin, 2011; Naeini & Duvall, 2012; Poehner, 2005; Shabani, 2012; Zoghi & Malmir, 2013a), led this study to find out about learners’ perspectives on using DA procedures in the process of vocabulary knowledge development.

Background

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896–1934) is one of the most famous and influential psychologists of the twentieth century. However, the value of his theories has been neglected due to the lack of understanding of the background to his thought.

There were three main stages through which, Vygotsky have tried to put his theories into practice. Langford (2004) enumerates these stages as follows:

- 1) 1921–27, when he was still feeling his way;
- 2) 1928–31, when he announced a preliminary version of his own theory;
- 3) 1932–34, when he refined his earlier ideas considerably.

Regarding the third stage of his activities, Vygotsky proposed that the teacher should provide the students with various kinds of individualized guidance. He maintained that this guidance must go beyond just raising students' interests. Vygotsky followed a philosophy of education in which it has been emphasized that:

the child is part of society and that its learning is social. The school should encourage what is social within the child to blossom on an individual basis. What is relevant to social needs and issues determines the curriculum, preferably in such a way that the child sees social needs as its needs. The teacher often turns to the child's interests for information about what the child needs to know, because the child is a social animal and exists as part of society. The child's needs are imbued with the social needs of the society around it and in turning to them we find the best way to make the child's education relevant to the society around it, as well as to the child (Langford, 2004, p. 124).

As Lantolf and Poehner (2011) clarify it, Vygotsky was interested to test his theory not only with regard to its explanatory power but also he was insisted to investigate the potential effect of his theory in the real world.

Vygotsky introduced the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to the field of cognitive psychology. ZPD has a common ground with the Sociocultural Theory of mind (SCT). SCT tries to describe the processes through which, learning and development occurs (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010). According to Poehner (2011) SCT formulated

more than 80 years ago. “Sociocultural theory offers a framework through which cognition can be investigated systematically without isolating it from social context or human agency” (Thorne, 2005, p. 393). SCT provides a scaffold for the investigation of cognition through a systematic method without separating it from social context or human factors (Thorne, 2005).

According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006) since SCT is concentrated on communication, cognition, and meaning, it is in line with those theories of language which are incorporating with a theory of mediated intellectual acts that lead development. These acts occur when 'more knowledgeable other' provide help to the level needed by the learner by moving gradually to solve the problems (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Naeini and Duvall (2012), the more knowledgeable other regulates his or her engagement with the learner while considering his/her ZPD.

Dynamic Assessment (DA) is originated from Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development in general and the concept of ZPD and mediation in particular (Oskoz, 2005). DA refers to the “interaction between a mediator and a learner, which seeks to estimate the degree of modifiability of the learner and the means by which positive changes in cognitive functioning can be induced and maintained” (Lidz, 1987, p. 13).

As Poehner (2008) maintains, one of the main outcomes of SCT is that it emphasizes the role of social interaction in the development of children’s thinking. He believes that a sociocultural viewpoint assumes a mediated relationship between humans and the world. Based on these ideas, he concluded that if the concept of ZPD be taken seriously, it implies that assistance should be given to the learners during assessment in order to see what they are really able to do. SCT emphasizes that a child’s development and learning is shaped by sociocultural forces. In the other words, this theory indicated that parents, teachers, peers and the community play an important role in defining the types of learning interaction

occurring between children and their environments (Chang, 2004). Oskoz (2009) believes, learners should be paired in a way that brings to mind the adult/child pattern in an expert/novice dyad.

Thorne (2005, p. 394) describes the process of development of SCT as it “has matured over its approximately 80-year history as a theory of human development that unites the ontogeny of an individual with the cultural-historical milieu and the variable processes of participation in culturally organized activity”. With regard to the field of second language learning, it seems, applications of SCT to teaching were neglected until recently (Poehner & Lantolf, 2010).

Poehner (2008) explains that while Vygotsky was trying to relate the results of his SCT to education, he figured out that although the learners who are engaged in independent problem solving show those functions that had already been internalized they show no sign of the abilities that were still in the process of developing. This observation maintains that after offering different forms of support the domain of individuals’ abilities can be revealed while confronting with difficult situations. According to Poehner (2008), providing such support simultaneously leads to development; as a result assessment itself becomes an instructional intervention. Vygotsky’s SCT pursues to be of interest for L2 researchers (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011).

ZPD was another concept which Vygotsky introduced to the field of cognitive psychology. According to Naeini and Duvall (2012) there is an interspace between what the learners are able to perform, without assistance, and the expected goal. This interspace is ZPD. This concept is illustrated in Figure 1.

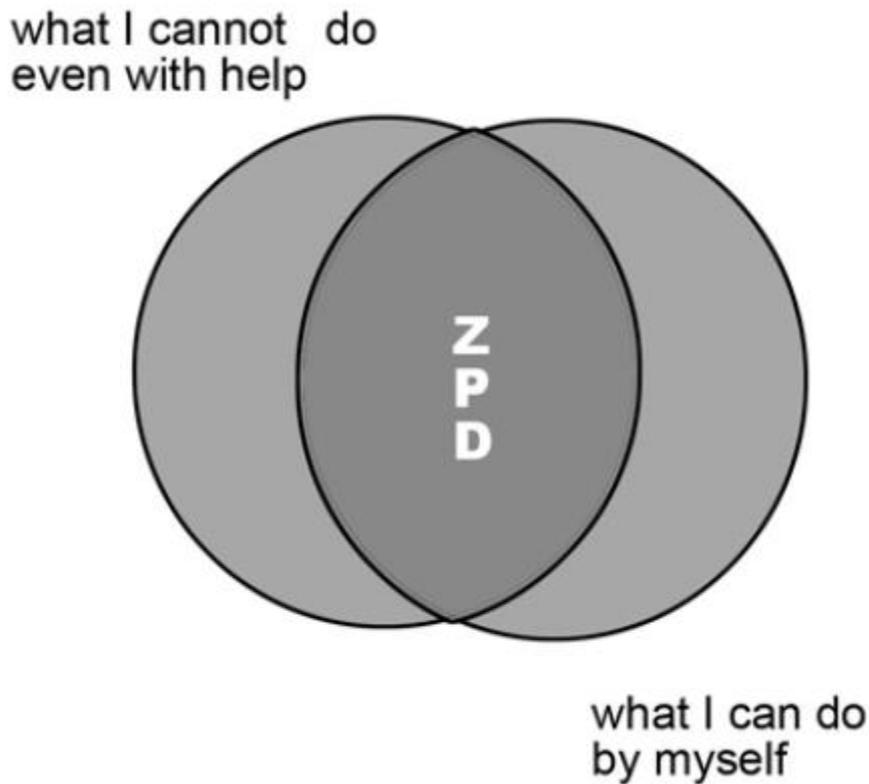


Figure 1. The Zone of Proximal Development (Shabani, Khatib & Ebadi, 2010, p. 248)

ZPD is the distance between the learner's current development level and the level of potential development. According to DA literature (Poehner, 2005; Ableeva, 2010) the distance between the learner's current level of development and his/her potential level of development can be reduced through collaboration with a mediator.

As Shabani, Khatib, and Ebadi (2010) put it, those tasks which the learners can accomplish via getting help from the other person can be located inside the ZPD. So, teaching should be occurring throughout this area. "As the learner accomplishes the task, his or her ZPD, or the gap between what he or she can do on their own and what he or she can only accomplish with assistance shrinks" (p. 238). The aforementioned view of the ZPD is abbreviated in figure 2.

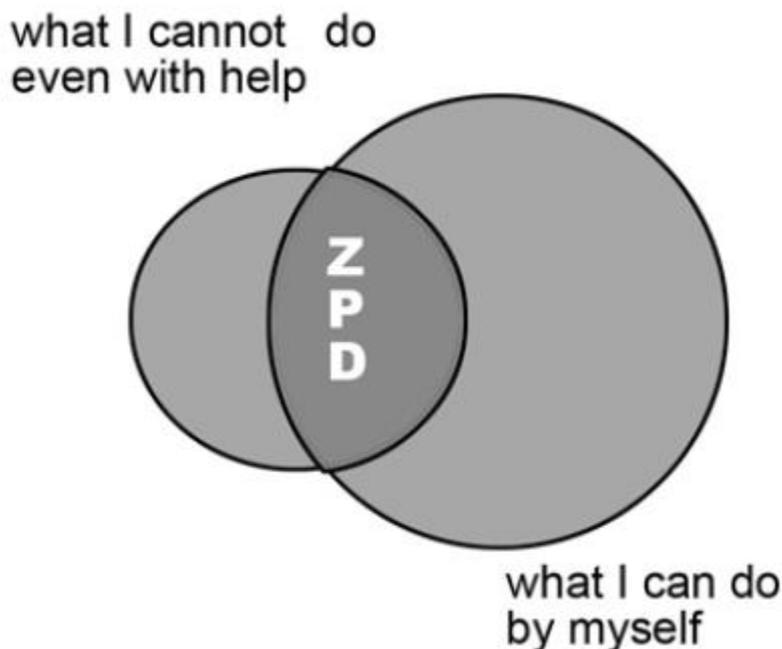


Figure 2. The ZPD after Teaching has Occurred (Shabani, Khatib & Ebadi, 2010, p. 248)

Vygotsky stated that in order to raise the effectiveness of teaching, it needs to be delivered in the ZPD for every child. In the other words, learning within one's ZPD may cause to a better performance. This aim will be met through new forms of psychological assessment. This new psychological assessment tests what the child can do with assistance, rather than without (Langford, 2004). With regard to the relationship between the examiner and the examinee, Vygotsky (1998) gave more importance to cooperation in comparison with intervention. This view encompasses implying a dialogic interaction between the teacher and the learner in order to share the responsibility for development.

According to Poehner (2005) the term DA was coined by the researchers in the field in order to differentiate between this new notion of assessment and traditional methods of testing (static assessment). These terms refer "to the administration procedures; any assessment can be conducted in a dynamic or static fashion. Of course, the terms 'static' and 'dynamic' posit a clear dichotomy between assessments that include intervention and those that do not" (p. 14). Lantolf and Poehner (2004, p. 50) propose the following definition for DA:

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Dynamic assessment integrates assessment and instruction into a seamless, unified activity aimed at promoting learner development through appropriate forms of mediation that are sensitive to the individual's (or in some cases a group's) current abilities. In essence, DA is a procedure for simultaneously assessing and promoting development that takes account of the individual's (or group's) zone of proximal development

While discussing about DA procedures, it should be taken into consideration that DA focuses on process rather than product (Antón, 2003). DA has both instructional and evaluative implications which are inseparable (Saeidi & Hosseinpour, 2013). DA can help both learners and teachers in the process of language learning and teaching through Mediated Learning Experiences (MLE). Providing a brief literature about MLE seems to be necessary here. According to Feuerstein (1990), MLE is the most important procedure through which culture is conveyed from one generation to another. The most dominant property of MLE is that, it investigates belief systems and behavior from an interactional point of view (Lebeer, 1995). Hessamy and Ghaderi (2014) briefly describe MLE through following words:

In fact, in Feuerstein's Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) model, the stimulus-response model has been revised so that the child is interacting with a more competent peer who helps the child in any way by selecting, changing, amplifying, elaborating, and interpreting the objects with the child through mediations (p. 648).

Through MLE, the teacher may guide learners in highlighting important content, making connections, setting goals, planning, regulating and controlling behavior (Panahi, Birjandi, & Azabdaftari, 2013). Teachers can benefit from mediation and reciprocity patterns which are going to emerged out of this study, in vocabulary teaching activities. Through

interacting with the learners, teachers can give feedback to help the learners identify their errors and correct them.

Drawing on Poehner's (2007) study, it can be concluded that one of the most important characteristics of DA is that, it is not an independent activity which can be fulfilled separately from other pedagogical activities. DA is a collaborative process that determines the potential causes of learners' performance problems and helps learners overcome those problems (Panahi, Birjandi, & Azabdaftari, 2013). As a result, DA combines assessment and instructional activities. That is, instructional activities can be changed as a result of the feedback that the mediator receives on learners' performance through assessment activities. According to Lidz (1987) DA considers the learning processes and is implied as a means for gauging the learners' ZPD.

According to Anton (2003), DA procedures are appropriate and can be implemented in the EFL context. DA researchers have generally referred to mediation as intervention (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002). Intervention or mediation is comprised of a wide system of help, ranging from predetermined hints to dialogic interaction (Poehner, 2005).

According to Lantolf and Poehner (2004) there are two kinds of mediation with regard to DA; interactionist and interventionist. In interactionist DA, "the mediation emerged out of the cooperative dialoguing between the mediator and the learners; there were no a priori categories of mediation or hierarchies of prompts" (Poehner, 2005, p. 149). According to Poehner (2005), the interactionist approach to DA which follows Vygotsky's discussions of working in the ZPD to promote development, parallels many of the arguments made by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994).

The aim of this study will be realized through the following research question:

What are the learners' perceptions of DA procedures on vocabulary development?

Method

The samples of this study were chosen non-randomly based on their availability. Three male and three female EFL learners voluntarily participated in this study. All the participants were beginners with regard to their vocabulary knowledge. All the participants shared the same native language. They were studying at primary schools and none of them took part in language classes at the time of the study. In order to preserve their anonymity, female participants were given the following pseudonyms; F1, F2, and F3 and male participants M1, M2, and M3. All the participants participated in the instruction sessions for a period of five weeks. They attended the instruction sessions 3 days a week for about 60 - 75 minutes. These instruction sessions were held in order to develop participants' vocabulary knowledge through using DA procedures.

A post-study semi-structured interview was conducted at the end of the DA sessions. The aim of this interview was to elicit participants' perceptions of DA procedures on vocabulary development. For doing so a number of questions have been prepared and participants' responses to these questions were tape recorded. These post-study semi-structured interviews were conducted in Persian. Each participant was interviewed individually. The transcriptions of the interviews were translated into English. Through thematic analysis, care has been exercised to find general themes out of data analysis. Thematic analysis was done through making use of a 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006).

The research on ZPD best fitted to frameworks of qualitative inquiry (Ableeva, 2010; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Oskoz, 2005; Poehner, 2005; Poehner, Zhang, & Lu, 2014). Qualitative data can be interpreted through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis has been used as the general methodological framework for data analysis. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally

organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

Boyatzis (1998) indicates that thematic analysis is a method in qualitative research which can be used for revealing patterns and themes in a particular phenomenon. Thematic analysis is used in qualitative research and focuses on examining themes within data (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). This method emphasizes organization and rich description of the data set. Thematic analysis goes beyond simply counting phrases or words in a text and moves on to identifying implicit and explicit ideas within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2011, p. 10) “thematic analysis require more involvement and interpretation from the researcher”.

In order to provide participants with the questions which can engage them to state their perceptions toward DA, the current researcher adapted four questions from Ebadi (2015), Barkhuizen (1998), and Yan and Horwitz (2008). These questions which have been translated into Persian are as follows:

1. Do you think learning vocabulary through this course in comparison with the other courses was easier or not? How?
2. How effective was the mediation to promote vocabulary knowledge? Explain!
3. What types of assistance provided through assessment sessions were the most interesting?
4. Did you feel anxious in this course especially when answering those questions which you found hard to answer? How?

It is worth mentioning that, due to the beginner level of the participants with regard to their English knowledge, the instruction sessions, for the most part, were held in Persian. However, while transcribing the audio tapes, whenever Persian was used in these sessions, an English translation is provided. The qualitative data analysis which has been used in this

study was consisting of in-depth analysis of the transcription of the recorded conversations between the participants and the researcher as it unfolds during the dialogic interactions.

Results and Discussion

The participants were interviewed individually in Persian. Their responses have been audiotaped. After transcribing their responses, they were translated into English. The following general patterns (table 1) emerged out of participants' responses.

Table 1. Post-study Interview Results

Questions	M1	M2	M3	F1	F2	F3
Q1: Ease of learning vocabulary through this course	Relatively easier friendly atmosphere	Easier more repetition of vocabulary items	Much easier presenting tips by the mediator	Easier too much help by the mediator	Easier focus on vocabulary	Easier absence of scoring
Q2: Effectiveness of the mediation to promote vocabulary knowledge	Effective	Effective	Effective	Effective	Effective	Effective
Q3: The most interesting types of assistance	Request for reading the stem or looking at the picture carefully	Specify the word family which the unknown word is belong to or introducing another known	Introducing synonym(s) or antonym(s)	Reading aloud the stem or offering the Persian translation of the stem	Request for verification	Request for reading the stem or looking at the picture carefully

		word(s) from that word family				
Q4: Feeling anxious when answering difficult questions	Very comfortable	comfortable	comfortable	Very comfortable	comfortable	comfortable

Before demonstration of the post-study semi-structured results, it is worth mentioning that care has been exercised to help the participants in responding interview questions through reminding them about different levels of help and the other activities they have done during DA sessions. Through engaging participants in dialogic interaction, they have been given prompts to elicit their responses with regard to four aforementioned questions. The prompts were not prespecified and they were changing in accordance with the situation.

With regard to the first question (Do you think learning vocabulary through this course in comparison with the other courses was easier or not? How?), all the participants declared that learning vocabulary through this course was easier comparing with the other courses. F1, F2, F3, and M2 believed learning vocabulary through this course was easier while M1 stated that it was relatively easier and M3 affirmed that this process was much easier in this course. The following excerpts were chosen from interviews regarding the first question.

M1: Committing words to the memory was relatively easier in this course in comparison with Language Institute. Less effort was needed to remember the words, that is, there was no need to write the words and their Persian meaning on a piece of paper and then try to memorize them. There was a friendly atmosphere during the course.

F1: Learning vocabulary in this course was a good experience. You were of too much help during this course and this led to learning the words with less effort. My teacher in Language Institute didn't help as much as you did. Learning words was easier than Language Institute. Completing the tasks with regard to spelling was easier with your help.

The second question targeted the effectiveness of the mediation in developing vocabulary knowledge. Through contemplation of the participants' responses to this question it has been revealed that all the participants found these different levels of help to be effective in promoting vocabulary knowledge. In the following excerpts M3 and F2 express their opinions with regard to the second question.

M3: Completing the tasks with your help was much easier comparing with the time when I have to complete them individually. Sometimes with a little help from you I was able to answer the questions.

F2: I think you made use of a proper approach in helping me, that is, whenever I need your help you offered it. In Language Institute the teacher did not help as much as you. It was interesting that I could answer most of the questions with your help.

The third question was concerned with the degree of popularity of different types of assistance which the mediator provided for the participants through assessment sessions. With regard to the participants' answers to the third question the variety was great. Except M1 and F3, which share a favorite level of help (Request for reading the stem or looking at the picture carefully), the other participants preferred different levels of help; M2 preferred to be helped through specifying the word family which the unknown word is belong to or through introducing another known word(s) from that word family. M3 believed Introducing synonym(s) or antonym(s) was the most interesting level of help that he received during sessions. F1 claimed that when the mediator read aloud the stem or offered the Persian translation of the stem she was able to correct her mistakes or provide the

required words. She liked this level as the best. F2 indicated that when the mediator asked her to verify her responses she was sure that a mistake occurred and she tried to modify her response. She found this level of mediation as the most interesting one. In the following excerpt explained about their favorite levels of help.

M2: All the hints that you offered were helpful. If I want to be more specific, I preferred those times when you introduce another word that was similar to those words which I didn't know their meaning. For example, in one of the tasks I was not able to provide the answer and when you told me it is an object like slide, I guess it was seesaw, and my answer was correct.

F3: Sometimes I misunderstood the questions and when you asked me to look at the picture carefully, I could provide the answer, that is, I knew the answer but I did not understand what the question was.

The last question of the interview targeted participants' anxiety while confronting with those tasks which they experienced difficulty in completing them. Analyzing of the participants responses showed that while M1 and F1 declared that they were very comfortable in such situations, other participants believed that they were comfortable when confronting with those questions which they found hard to answer. In the following excerpts M1 and F3 explained about their experiences with regard to the forth interview question.

M1: I was not afraid of the difficult questions because, if I was not able to answer at the first time I would be able in the next time. I was very comfortable because there was no punishment for incorrect answers while in Language Institute you may get a negative score and other students may make fun of you if your answer is wrong.

F3: I was not anxious because the class was relaxing and friendly. You said that mistakes are natural and we can correct them. When I hesitate to answer a question in Language

Institute, other students provide the correct answer. They don't let me to think, and it is annoying. When I had difficulty in answering, you didn't provide the correct answer immediately, but you helped me to find the answer myself.

Conclusion

Although efforts have been made to minimize the flaws of this study, the limitation with regard to the qualitative nature of this study still remains (Richards, 2003). The generalizability of the findings may be limited because the mediation is dependent upon the context and quality of the interaction between mediator and the learner (Kozulin & Garb, 2001, cited in Anton, 2003; Lavelli, Pantoja, Hsu, Messinger, & Fogel, 2005), so, there exists a possibility that the research yield different results in different circumstances. The small size of the sample may be considered as a potential limit of this study.

Generally, it seems the participants found DA procedures to be effective in developing vocabulary skills and they were satisfied with the process as all of them agreed that learning vocabulary in this course was easier comparing with the other courses (especially those course which have been conducted in the language institutes). The participants were not suffering from high anxiety while confronting difficult tasks and questions as they were confident they can rely on the mediator and through collaborating with him overcoming the problems. The participants found different levels of mediational moves as effective tools in completing the tasks and activities. It seems due to different styles of learning they preferred different mediational moves. The findings can be summarized in the following lines:

1. The participants found DA procedures to be effective in developing vocabulary skills.
2. The participants declared that learning vocabulary in this course was easier comparing with the other courses.

3. The participants were not suffering from high anxiety while confronting difficult tasks and questions during DA procedures.

4. The participants found different levels of mediational moves as effective tools in developing vocabulary knowledge.

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