

Assessing Speaking Skills through Picture Description: Evidence from Senior High Students

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i6.1338>*Johari Afrizal, Mumlikka Ayoddukki, Yulianto^{abc}¹²³Universitas Islam Riau, IndonesiaCorresponding Author: johariafrizal@edu.uir.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the speaking skills of senior high school students in Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia, through a picture description task. Speaking is a crucial skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables effective communication in both academic and social contexts. However, despite its significance, limited research has examined Indonesian students' speaking performance through picture description tasks, particularly in relation to pronunciation and fluency. To address this gap, the present study assessed 46 students using a standardized rubric covering comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Their performances were evaluated by three independent raters to ensure reliability and objectivity. The findings showed an overall mean score of 3.7, categorized as very good. Vocabulary obtained the highest average (4.2), followed by comprehension (3.8), grammar (3.6), and fluency (3.5). Pronunciation recorded the lowest mean (3.3). These results highlight the need for targeted pedagogical strategies to improve pronunciation and fluency while consolidating vocabulary and comprehension skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Mastering speaking skills is a critical component in acquiring a second or foreign language, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Among the four core language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing speaking is often considered the most complex and dynamic. Speaking is an interactive and expressive process that enables learners to communicate ideas, emotions, and information effectively in both academic and social contexts. It requires accurate pronunciation, appropriate vocabulary selection, grammatical competence, coherence, and fluency, all executed in real-time during interaction (Brown, 2004; Harmer, 2007). Consequently, speaking is one of the most challenging yet essential skills for EFL students, especially in environments where English is infrequently used outside the classroom (Ma et al., 2024; Abrar et al., 2024).

In the context of Indonesian Senior High Schools, students encounter multiple obstacles that impede effective speaking performance. One major challenge is limited exposure to authentic English input. Learners seldom interact with native speakers or English-rich environments, which restricts their ability to internalize natural language patterns and pragmatic use (Alharbi, 2019; Ali et al., 2025). Additionally, low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes are significant barriers. Many students hesitate to speak in front of peers or teachers due to anxiety over mispronunciation or grammatical errors, reducing their participation in classroom activities (Al-Khreshah & Orak, 2021; Yusnitasari & Suwartono, 2020). Limited vocabulary knowledge and insufficient command of grammatical structures further restrict learners' ability to express themselves accurately and meaningfully.

Speaking is not solely a verbal activity; it also involves crucial non-verbal elements such as intonation, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact, which enhance clarity and convey emotion (Salam & Nurnisa, 2021). Effective oral communication requires a combination of

linguistic and paralinguistic skills. Hidayah et al., (2024) highlight five key components of speaking performance: comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Each element contributes uniquely to communicative competence, yet all must function synergistically to achieve effective communication. Msimeer (2021) similarly emphasizes that speaking instruction should integrate linguistic accuracy with paralinguistic expressiveness to produce holistic competence.

Evaluating speaking ability often involves assessing these integrated components. Brown (2004) and Harmer (2007) argue that comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency are essential measures of oral performance. Among various assessment methods, picture description tasks are particularly effective. Such tasks stimulate spontaneous speech while providing visual scaffolds that facilitate idea generation and language production. By observing students' ability to describe images, teachers can evaluate their performance across all five speaking components within a communicative context. Picture description tasks also simulate real-life communication, where interlocutors rely on contextual cues to interpret and convey meaning.

To improve EFL learners' speaking skills, educators have explored strategies that reduce cognitive load and enhance oral proficiency. One effective approach is the describing picture strategy, which uses visual prompts such as photographs, illustrations, or image sequences to stimulate verbal expression (Naviantara et al., 2024). Visual stimuli activate prior knowledge, encourage vocabulary recall, and guide sentence formation. By providing concrete content, this strategy allows learners to focus on language production rather than generating ideas from scratch. It also supports the use of cohesive devices, temporal markers, and appropriate tenses, particularly when describing sequences of events (Pratiwi & Ayu, 2020; Muhammad Asikin, 2023).

The theoretical foundation of this strategy is rooted in dual coding theory, which suggests that learners process and retain information more effectively when presented through both visual and verbal channels (Fatima, 2023). When learners associate images with language use, they are more likely to internalize vocabulary and grammatical structures, which facilitates recall and active language production. Empirical studies demonstrate that visual prompts enhance memory retention, improve fluency, and increase lexical diversity in EFL speaking tasks (Seroja Br Ginting & Fithriani, 2021; Marpaung, 2022). Ngan and Lan, (2024) further confirm that integrating visual stimuli helps learners retrieve language more efficiently and produce coherent oral narratives.

In addition to cognitive benefits, picture description tasks help reduce affective barriers, such as anxiety and fear of error. Language anxiety is a common impediment in EFL classrooms, often causing learners to avoid speaking activities (Zhong, 2024). Visual scaffolds provide learners with concrete reference points, which increase confidence and allow students to focus on fluency, accuracy, and expressiveness. Research indicates that picture-based speaking tasks not only improve linguistic performance but also enhance students' motivation, engagement, and confidence in speaking (Alamri, 2018; Ekaningsih & Faiz Haq, 2022).

Pedagogically, picture description is flexible and practical. Teachers can implement the strategy using a variety of materials, including textbook illustrations, digital media, personal photographs, or magazine cut-outs. It can be conducted individually, in pairs, or in small groups, allowing adaptation to different classroom sizes and proficiency levels. The approach aligns with student-centered learning principles, emphasizing active participation, collaborative meaning-making, and learner autonomy (Wahyuni & Maming, 2019). By engaging learners in constructing language around visual prompts, this method fosters meaningful interaction and encourages self-expression.

Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of picture description in enhancing EFL speaking skills. Syamsu, (2023) found that students engaging in picture-based tasks demonstrated notable improvements in vocabulary acquisition, sentence complexity, and fluency. Similarly, Ekaningsih and Faiz Haq, (2022) reported that picture description enhanced grammatical accuracy while boosting student confidence and enthusiasm. These

findings align with broader research advocating for communicative, visual-based approaches to increase participation and reduce language anxiety (Alamri, 2018).

Despite the advantages, the effectiveness of picture-based speaking tasks may vary according to learners' proficiency levels and teacher scaffolding. High-proficiency students tend to produce more elaborate and accurate speech, whereas lower-proficiency learners may require additional support, such as vocabulary pre-teaching or modeled sentence structures (Naviantara et al., 2024). Teachers play a vital role in providing feedback, monitoring task execution, and encouraging interaction to maximize the communicative potential of these activities.

Given these considerations, the present study investigates the speaking performance of Senior High School students in Pekanbaru, Riau, focusing on their ability to describe pictures. This research aims to analyze how visual prompts influence key components of speaking comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency and to provide practical insights for EFL teaching. By integrating theoretical perspectives from dual coding theory and communicative language teaching, the study contributes to understanding the role of visual-based strategies in developing oral proficiency. The findings are expected to inform educators about effective, engaging, and student-centered methods for fostering communicative competence in both classroom and real-world contexts.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to investigate the speaking skills of second-grade senior high school students through a picture description task. Quantitative descriptive research is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for systematic measurement, numerical scoring, and statistical analysis of students' speaking performance, providing an objective overview of their abilities (Creswell, 2014). The research focused on capturing students' performance in a controlled yet authentic communicative task, aligned with the curriculum objectives for English as a foreign language.

The primary instrument for data collection was a speaking test, administered to 46 students from a public senior high school in Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia. Each participant was required to describe a picture that corresponded with the theme of advertisements, reflecting content familiar to the students through their current English curriculum. To ensure the appropriateness and relevance of the visual prompts, image selection was conducted collaboratively with the English teacher. This collaboration aimed to strengthen the content validity of the assessment, as carefully chosen materials that align with students' prior knowledge and curriculum objectives are known to enhance the accuracy of evaluating communicative competence (Brown, 2004; Harmer, 2007). The selected images were contextually rich, visually clear, and contained elements likely to elicit extended descriptive language, enabling a comprehensive assessment of various speaking components.

To maintain fairness and minimize potential bias, students randomly selected one of three pictures through a lottery system. Each participant then performed a 2–3 minute oral description, which was audio-recorded to allow detailed evaluation of their performance. Audio recording is a widely recommended practice in speaking assessments, as it enables raters to review performances multiple times, reducing scoring errors and increasing reliability (I Gede. et al., 2018).

The students' oral responses were evaluated by three raters: the researcher and two English teachers with substantial teaching experience. Each rater assessed the responses independently using an analytic rubric, designed to measure five key components of speaking: comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Each component was scored on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent). This multi-component analytic approach provides detailed diagnostic feedback on specific aspects of speaking and aligns with contemporary perspectives on speaking assessment, emphasizing both linguistic accuracy and communicative effectiveness (Mohd Noh & Mohd Matore, 2022).

The scoring rubric was adapted from Harris (1974), a foundational framework that defines core speaking components and offers clear descriptors for each performance level. Inter-rater reliability was calculated to ensure consistency among the three evaluators, reducing subjective bias and enhancing the validity of the assessment process. For each student, the final component scores were computed by averaging the scores given by the three raters, ensuring a balanced evaluation.

The overall Speaking Ability (SA) score for each student was calculated using the following formula:

$$SA = \frac{C + G + V + P + F}{5} \quad SA = 5C + G + V + P + F$$

Where:

C = Comprehension score

G = Grammar score

V = Vocabulary score

P = Pronunciation score

F = Fluency score

To interpret the results meaningfully, the overall SA scores were classified into five performance levels, consistent with contemporary speaking assessment frameworks (Han, 2016).

Table 1. The Categories of Speaking Skill

Score Classification	Category
4.5-5.0	Excellent
3.5-4.4	Very Good
2.5-3.4	Good
1.5-2.4	Poor
1.0-1.4	Very Poor

This classification system provides a clear, interpretable framework for evaluating students' oral proficiency and facilitates comparison across individuals and groups. By integrating curriculum-based visual prompts, a rigorous scoring rubric, and multiple raters, the method ensures that the assessment is both valid and reliable, capturing an accurate representation of students' speaking skills in authentic communicative contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research aimed to evaluate the speaking proficiency of Senior High School students in Pekanbaru by employing a picture description task as the primary assessment method. The analysis focused on five key components of speaking: comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. These aspects were assessed using a scoring rubric adapted from Harris (1974), which allowed for a structured and objective evaluation of students' spoken language abilities. A total of 46 students participated in the speaking assessment, and their performances were rated by three trained evaluators to ensure scoring reliability. During the test, each student was required to describe a picture related to an advertisement theme, which was selected to align with the students' current curriculum and to provide relevant and familiar content. The students' oral descriptions were then evaluated based on the five speaking components, and the average scores from the three raters were calculated to represent each student's overall speaking performance. This approach not only minimized scoring bias but also ensured a more accurate reflection of the students' speaking abilities.

Table 2. Students' Speaking Skill Scores in Picture Description Tasks

No	Score	Category	Number of students
1	4.5-5.0	Excellent	5
2	3.5-4.4	Very Good	28
3	2.5-3.4	Good	12
4	1.5-2.4	Poor	1
5	1.0-1.4	Very Poor	0
Total			46

Based on table 2, the data were obtained by calculating the average score of each student from all raters and then classifying the results into different categories. The analysis shows that 5 students achieved scores within the range of 4.5–5.0 and were categorized as excellent.

Meanwhile, 28 students obtained scores between 3.5–4.4 and were classified as very good. Furthermore, 12 students scored in the range of 2.5–3.4 and were categorized as good, while only 1 student scored 1.5–2.4 and was placed in the poor category. These findings indicate that the majority of students were in the very good category, with most receiving scores above 3.5 but below 4.5. However, only a small number of students, specifically 5, managed to reach the excellent category. This finding is further illustrated in figure 1.

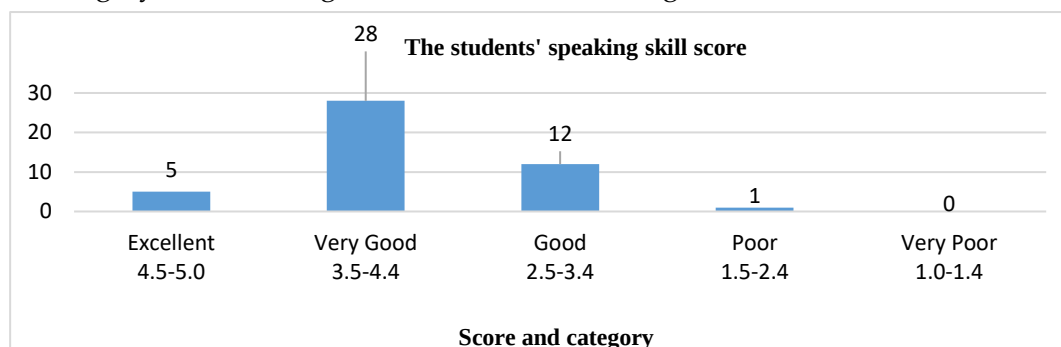


Figure 1. Students' Speaking Skill Scores in Picture Description Tasks

The relatively limited number of students in the excellent category can be attributed to several challenges observed during the picture description task. Many students frequently produced grammatical errors, which often resulted in misunderstandings. In addition, vocabulary limitations led to hesitation and frequent pauses, as students struggled to recall or select appropriate words. Pronunciation difficulties were also evident, and these occasionally caused miscommunication. Fluency problems, such as slowness and noticeable pauses, were common and can be linked to the fact that English is a foreign language for the students.

Despite these challenges, the majority of students displayed strong comprehension of the pictures they described. This suggests that while their delivery was sometimes hindered by linguistic limitations, their understanding of the content remained relatively strong. Overall, based on the evaluation of all raters, the speaking skills of senior high school students in Pekanbaru were classified as very good. The following table presents the recapitulation of all raters' assessments.

Table 3. Recapitulation of Students' Speaking Skill

No	Components	Mean of Rater 1	Mean of Rater 2	Mean of Rater 3	Total	Mean	Category
1	Comprehension	3,8	3,9	3,9	11,5	3,8	Very good
2	Grammar	3,4	3,5	3,8	10,7	3,6	Very good
3	Vocabulary	4,2	4,1	4,2	12,5	4,2	Very good
4	Pronunciation	3,3	3,3	3,3	9,9	3,3	Good
5	Fluency	3,5	3,5	3,7	10,7	3,5	Very good

Based on the results presented in table 3, students' overall speaking performance was categorized as very good, with a mean score of 3.7 across the five assessed components: vocabulary, comprehension, grammar, fluency, and pronunciation. These findings highlight the effectiveness of visual-based tasks in stimulating various aspects of speaking skills. Figure 2 presents a summary of the students' speaking skills.

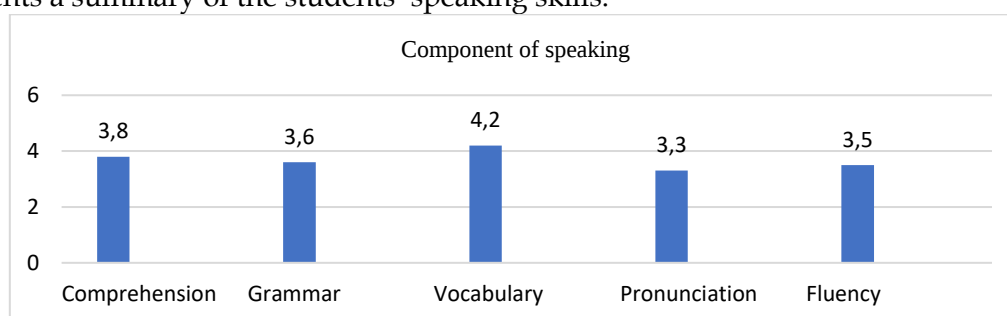


Figure 2. Students' Speaking Skill in Describing Picture for Each Component

The findings of this study provide further evidence that integrated multimodal materials are effective in EFL contexts, particularly in promoting interactive and meaningful student communication (Nurdini, 2018). In fact, the integration of pictures as prompts provides concrete references that can scaffold learners' responses, making speaking tasks less intimidating and more meaningful. This is in line with Shuib et al., (2020) who note that visual scaffolding significantly reduces the cognitive burden students face in generating speech, allowing them to focus more on meaning and less on form. Similarly, Maharani et al., (2023) emphasize that visuals provide contextual anchors that promote recall and activate learners' stored lexical knowledge, which contributes positively to oral production.

Among the five components, vocabulary achieved the highest average score of 4.2. This indicates that students were able to use a broad range of appropriate and context-specific words when describing the images. The use of visual prompts appears to activate their lexical knowledge by providing tangible and familiar contexts, allowing them to recall and apply relevant vocabulary more effectively. Moreover, visual stimuli can lower cognitive load by anchoring abstract concepts in concrete representations, which enhances lexical access and usage (Dewi et al., 2025). Research by Mamun, (2024) further supports this view, suggesting that incorporating visuals into speaking tasks leads to more diverse and accurate vocabulary use among EFL learners. Additionally, exposure to authentic and visually supported language tasks builds semantic networks and encourages lexical expansion through contextual inference. Similar to Ekaningsih and Faiz Haq, (2022) vocabulary scored highest due to students' frequent exposure to English media, which supports lexical development. This suggests that authentic and visual-based input plays a major role in expanding learners' vocabulary. In the Indonesian EFL context, students are often exposed to English through advertisements, entertainment, and social media, which introduces them to commonly used lexical items and makes these words easier to recall during speaking tasks. The picture description test leveraged this prior exposure by providing stimuli that connected with students' existing lexical knowledge.

Nevertheless, while vocabulary emerged as the strongest component, it is important to note that students' vocabulary use may still be limited to high-frequency words and familiar contexts. As Al-khresheh, (2024) points out, EFL learners often experience lexical fossilization, where they repeatedly use a restricted set of vocabulary without progressing to more complex or nuanced expressions. Therefore, while the results suggest strong vocabulary skills relative to other speaking components, further pedagogical attention is necessary to enrich learners' lexical repertoire with less frequent but contextually valuable expressions. Oktaviani et al., (2021) also demonstrate that multimodal instruction combining images, texts, and auditory input can enhance retention and lexical variation, and such approaches could be further emphasized in classrooms.

Comprehension followed with an average score of 3.8, reflecting students' ability to accurately interpret and describe essential visual elements, such as the type of product, promotional message, price, and contact information. Their success in this area suggests that students were not only able to observe but also synthesize visual data into coherent verbal expressions. This is consistent with Ferginan et al., (2025), which found that visual input supports conceptual understanding and enhances verbal articulation in speaking activities. Rizal and Pancor (2024) also affirm that picture-based prompts foster deeper information processing and semantic mapping, enabling students to translate visual cues into structured spoken responses. Furthermore, Rahman and Jamila (2024) emphasize that using visuals in tasks such as advertisement description helps bridge the gap between passive understanding and active language use. Visual support, when combined with task-based instruction, promotes learners' interpretative and summarizing skills, especially in conveying key content clearly (Baskara, 2023). In addition, the results show that comprehension was not limited to simple recognition of objects, but extended to an understanding of communicative purposes behind the advertisements. Many students were able to explain how the product was intended to attract buyers, suggesting the development of higher-order comprehension skills such as

inference and interpretation. Hidayah et al., (2024) highlight that such skills reflect critical literacy practices, which are increasingly valued in modern EFL pedagogy.

The grammar component received a mean score of 3.6, indicating that most students could form basic grammatical structures but still faced issues related to accuracy and complexity. Common errors included article misuse (e.g., “an burger”), incorrect subject-verb agreement (e.g., “she go to buy”), and improper prepositions (e.g., “on the price” instead of “at the price”). These recurring mistakes suggest that students need ongoing and structured grammar instruction embedded within meaningful communicative contexts. Agustin et al., (2021) argue that while fluency should be prioritized, grammatical competence remains essential in spoken interaction, as it affects both clarity and credibility. Recent findings by Tiana et al., (2023) suggest that learners benefit significantly from grammar-integrated speaking activities, especially when instruction is supported with immediate corrective feedback. Moreover, Shuib et al., (2020) emphasize the importance of scaffolded grammar instruction using real-life scenarios, which helps learners internalize grammatical rules more naturally and apply them accurately in oral communication. The results of this study confirm earlier findings that Indonesian EFL learners frequently transfer grammatical structures from Bahasa Indonesia into English, which leads to persistent errors. Yet, despite these errors, most students were able to construct comprehensible sentences, demonstrating a balance between meaning-focused communication and form-focused accuracy.

In terms of fluency, the average score was 3.5, revealing moderate proficiency in maintaining speech continuity. Although students could generally express their ideas, noticeable pauses, repetitions, and hesitations were observed, often due to limited vocabulary recall or uncertainty in sentence formulation. These indicators reflect a lack of automaticity and confidence in spontaneous speaking situations. Basir et al. (2024) found that such disfluencies are common among EFL learners, particularly when they lack frequent opportunities to practice real-time conversation. Marlia et al. (2023) similarly noted that speaking anxiety and unfamiliarity with impromptu expression often hinder fluency. To address this, language programs should provide regular opportunities for impromptu speech, debates, role-plays, and collaborative discussions. In addition, peer interaction and teacher-guided reflection after speaking activities help build learners' confidence and improve their ability to organize thoughts quickly during oral tasks (Wati et al., 2025). Wang et al., (2024) also emphasizes that fluency improves with both frequency and quality of exposure, especially when learners engage in authentic communicative exchanges with peers or native speakers. The results of this study confirm that while students were able to produce speech relatively smoothly, their hesitation markers and pauses indicate the need for more opportunities to develop automaticity in oral communication.

Pronunciation was the weakest component, with a mean score of 3.3. Frequent pronunciation errors such as misarticulating words like burger, opportunity, and certified sometimes hindered intelligibility. These issues likely result from insufficient exposure to native-like pronunciation models and interference from the phonological patterns of students' first language. Sayogie and Adbaka, (2022) emphasize that effective pronunciation instruction must include explicit training in phonemic awareness, stress patterns, and intonation. Moreover, Nazhifah and Lubis, (2024) also recommend integrating pronunciation-focused mobile applications and online feedback tools, such as ELSA Speak or YouGlish, to support autonomous learning. Additionally, interactive techniques such as minimal pair drills, recording-and-reflection tasks, and corrective feedback loops help students become more aware of their pronunciation challenges and gradually improve. The lower performance in pronunciation is consistent with findings by Gilakjani and Sabouri (2017) who argue that pronunciation is often the most challenging skill for EFL learners due to limited classroom time devoted to it and the influence of first language phonology. In Indonesian contexts, English pronunciation instruction is sometimes overshadowed by grammar-focused learning, leading to persistent difficulties in producing accurate sounds and stress patterns. Nevertheless, with technology-based resources and communicative practice, learners can

gradually improve their intelligibility, which should be prioritized over native-like accuracy in the classroom setting.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides valuable insights into the speaking proficiency of senior high school students in Pekanbaru, assessed through a picture description task that revealed both strengths and areas requiring improvement. The findings indicate that while students exhibited a basic ability to communicate in English, their performance across comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency varied considerably, reflecting the multifaceted nature of speaking skills influenced by linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors. Comprehension emerged as the strongest aspect, as most students were able to interpret the communicative intent of picture prompts and respond meaningfully despite limited spoken output. However, weaknesses in grammar and vocabulary constrained accuracy and expression, while issues in pronunciation and fluency – such as incorrect stress, rhythm, and frequent pauses – diminished the naturalness of speech. These results underscore the necessity of a balanced instructional approach that maintains comprehension-based activities while strengthening grammar and vocabulary instruction, alongside focused pronunciation and fluency training through role-plays, storytelling, and timed speaking tasks. Furthermore, the picture description task proved to be an effective diagnostic tool for identifying learner weaknesses, suggesting that with consistent practice, meaningful input, and supportive classroom environments, students can progressively develop more accurate, fluent, and confident English-speaking competence.

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