

Mentoring Practices of Novice English Teachers

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Abstract

Mentoring is a professional rapport in which an experienced professional supports novice teachers in the premature phases of their profession to develop and progress their teaching career by sharing their teaching skills, experiences and knowledge. This article examines the English language teachers' understanding and practices of mentoring along with my experiences. I employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of teachers about mentoring. Four English teachers teaching at the secondary level were purposively selected as the participants for the study from two community schools of Rupandehi, Nepal. I used interviews as a technique for collecting information from the participants. The finding of the study shows teachers' positive mentoring experiences as they are satisfied with mentoring practices. The study also shows that the common mentoring practices the English teachers employed were peer support, profession-related workshops, training, conferences and seminars. The study may contribute to boost professional competency in their teaching career having effective mentoring experiences and practices with some insightful ideas.

Keywords: Collaboration, mentor, novice teacher, reflective practice, professional development

Introduction

Mentoring is a system of semi-structured guidance whereby the mentor shares his/her knowledge, skills and experience to assist novice teachers to progress in their own lives and careers. Mentoring is the practice of assisting others in achieving their goals for personal, academic and professional growth and development

by guiding, leading, supporting and challenging them via trust and respect for one another (Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008). It is crucial to professional enhancement which supports novice teachers in the early days

of their teaching career. The process of mentoring involves imparting knowledge, offering guidance, emotional support, cultivating and upholding a long-term connection (Mijares et al., 2013). In this process, a skilled teacher helps a less skilled teacher acquire the teaching abilities necessary to fit in a school and advance their career. Mentoring is considered to be a kind of professional support that is transmitted in different ways among professionals, colleagues and from an experienced person to a less experienced person. Mentoring is one of the best reforms in the education system and a very cost-effective programme which makes novice teachers capable in the teaching profession. In this line, Hobson et al. (2009) asserted that mentoring assists novice teachers in their professional development and facilitates their induction into the culture of teaching in a particular local context (as cited in Rodie, 2011). Mentoring has a positive impact on increasing professional and vocational performance among teachers of all experience levels as well as new teachers (Washburn-Moses, 2010) in the real issues of classroom teaching.

My educational journey of schooling is full of both sweet and bitter experiences and memories that still echo in my memory. In the early days of my teaching, I was thinking of quitting the job and decided not to pursue the teaching career anymore. However, my mentor gave me support in motivating students, planning lessons, managing the classroom, preparing teaching materials, dealing with personal classroom issues and in evaluating processes such as asking effective questioning (Wright, 2014). He also inspired and encouraged me to use proper learner-centred strategies for teaching language aspects, language skills, vocabulary, grammar, language functions, test construction and continuing my educational journey ahead. He assisted me by giving me both theoretical and practical ideas of teaching.

Due to an encouraging, friendly and motivating mentor, I transformed my teaching philosophy and began enjoying teaching. I incorporated effective teaching strategies and adopted them while developing myself as a professional teacher by upgrading my academic qualifications, participating in workshop seminars, involving in professional organizations such as Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) and getting feedback from him and senior colleagues. After receiving mentoring, I could feel comfortable, make the class more interactive with communication strategies and deliver various teaching texts confidently and effectively. Thus, my mentor has influenced the direction of my teaching career. It was the mentor who guided, inspired, encouraged and supported me for a better professional career, transforming me from an average learner to an independent teacher.

Despite its significance; all the teachers are not getting equal opportunities for mentoring and exploring themselves in teaching. In the early days of my teaching, I loathed teaching profession due to the lack of proper mentoring. In the Nepalese context, the efforts made by the government are not enough to support teachers' professional development. Regular workshops, trainings, and conferences for teacher professional development (TPD) programmes don't seem to go well or efficiently (Pandey, 2011). The pre-service programmes run by different universities in Nepal do not seem adequate as they provide more theoretical knowledge than practical skills. The infrequent teacher training could not help the teachers overcome the problems they face in teaching in everyday classrooms. Therefore, teachers need platforms and professional networks to promote reflective practices such as video recordings of peers and self for evaluative purposes on their regular classroom impressions and problems.

In my understanding, most English teachers are unwilling to share their issues with their colleagues due to the fear of losing their dignity. Due to a sense of humiliation or horror of losing prestige, novice teachers scarcely confess their teaching issues to others (Ur, 2005). They do not seem to expose their weaknesses to others due to the fear of losing their job as well. Many novice teachers are afraid of seeking support from experienced teachers rather they leave the profession before the start of their second year of teaching (Daresh, 2003). In this context, several initiatives including the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) and National Centre for Educational Development (NCED) have been developed to support the Nepalese teachers' professional development (Gnawali, 2013). The novice teachers have not been able to feel the changes to receive support for their day-to-day problems in the classrooms. However, in the Nepalese context, there are very few research works on mentoring practices of novice English teachers and they are not very much expressive on this issue. Therefore, I intend to explore how novice English language teachers understand and practice mentoring. How they grow professionally overcoming the problems that they encounter and build their confidence in teaching. Exploring teachers' perceptions on mentoring may give insights to novice English teachers to improve professional competency in related to classroom management, planning for teaching, teaching strategies, and assessment of learning to improve mentorship programmes.

Regarding the models of mentoring, there are three major models of it such as the craft model, the competency-based model, and the reflective model (Maggioli, 2004). The craft model is for new teachers who serve as their mentors' apprentices and learn by watching their mentors' work. Similar to the first model, the second aims to help the mentee acquire certain skills, while the third facilitates teachers to analyze their own behaviours and find the reason behind them. Mentors cannot be taught successful mentoring and coaching skills; they need to do their duties effectively (Vikaraman et al., 2017). The same is the case for mentoring programmes in the Nepalese context as well.

The present study aims at exploring English language teachers' understanding and their practices of mentoring. For accomplishing this objective, I seek to answer the following research questions:

How do novice English language teachers understand and practice mentoring?

How does mentoring support novice English teachers to grow professionally?

Review of Literature

Mentoring is a process of teacher development which supports and encourages novice teachers to develop and improve their teaching performance with proper skills strategies and knowledge. Mentoring is a means of supporting and guiding the work of others (Darish, 2003) for a strong foundation and better teaching career. In this regard, Malderez asserted, "Mentoring is one-to-one workplace-based contingent and personally appropriate support for the person during their professional integration, learning growth and development" (as cited in Burns & Richards, p. 260). Mentoring helps both novice teachers and mentors to adjust themselves properly in any kind of classroom situation with caring, sharing and encouragement. Mentorship has been recognized as a mechanism for career achievement and mentoring correlation has been cited as indispensable in career selection, improvement and efficiency (Straus et al., 2009). The

organizations that have been working for the professional growth and development of in-service teachers in Nepal are educational training centres and the NELTA.

Regarding mentoring, Malderez argued that mentors evaluate the mentees' instruction to detect needs and decide how best to continue (as cited in Burns & Richards, 2009). Thus, a mentor can facilitate the mentees to find the right direction and develop solutions to carrier issues. Therefore, the study of mentoring practices of novice English teachers in teaching English is considerably worth to be studied. Previous studies on mentoring have been examined as follows.

In this context, Orland-Barak and Hasin (2010) examined the perspectives of mentors in various circumstances concerning mentoring. The results showed that interpersonal interactions, organizational skills, and offering both challenge and support were crucial for the mentees to develop their skills. In addition, Wright (2014) has explored various strategies such as classroom management, personal classroom issues, encouragement through unexpected difficulties, work load management, and effective reflective thinking practices for developing comprehensive mentoring programmes. During their first year of teaching, they are crucial for orienting trainee teachers. Similarly, Arora (2016) conducted a study on an exploration of mentoring among Indian school teachers at Bangor University. The study showed that informal mentoring exists among Indian school teachers in the form of giving professional assistance, advice, sharing feedback, reflection, long-term support, agreed-upon and frequent observations, reciprocity in roles, accepting positive criticism, allowing for free expression, and encouraging and caring for oneself. The practice has not been addressed as 'mentoring' in the context; therefore, teachers were found to be less familiar with the term 'mentoring'. Informal mentoring exists among Indian school teachers but unfamiliarity with its concept has been kept delitescent.

Likewise, the study of Septiani et al. (2019) on the novice English teachers' experience: Practices and challenges' supported the novice English teachers to be good at communication skills, and personality and have extensive knowledge in ICT. It also supported them to overcome the problems such as motivating the students, implementing the lesson plan, interacting with colleagues and parents, managing their time, controlling their emotions and improving their knowledge and ability. In the same way, the study of Albakri et al. (2021) in Malaysia indicated that the trainee teachers were contented with their mentoring programme during practicum. The study showed that pre-service teachers' perception of mentoring was satisfactory. It also exposed that mentor teachers' knowledge and skills of mentoring were more fundamental than modelling and pedagogical knowledge in providing quality mentoring.

The aforementioned reviewed literature shows the significance of mentoring for professional growth in teaching. However, there are many practices of guidance and support to each other in teaching among colleagues and also from seniors to junior teachers. Most of the above-mentioned studies are carried out in foreign contexts and are based on quantitative research methodology. The literature review has shown that mentoring supports minimizing the problems encountered by the novice teachers during teaching. Therefore, exploring mentoring practices in Nepalese contexts will be a new research issue. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, such qualitative research has not been conducted and documented so far to explore novice English teachers' understanding and practices of professional growth using the descriptive

phenomenology method. Therefore, I intend to fulfill the existing research gap in this study.

Methodology

I adopted a descriptive phenomenological qualitative research design as it describes things as one experiences them. It is associated with lived experiences of teacher participants on practices of mentoring. According to Willis (2007), phenomenology enables the researcher to concentrate on subjective and diverse realities (as cited in Campbell, 2015). I used interviews two times as a research tool for collecting the required information from the participants to examine their understanding and practices in mentoring. I selected four English language teachers purposively from two community secondary schools of Rupandehi, Nepal. I recorded and collected their lived experiences taking consent from one-to-one interviews (Creswell, 2013). To maintain the trustworthiness and authenticity of the raw data, member checks were also used (Cohen et al., 2018). I then used their pseudonyms for maintaining privacy and secrecy. I converted the recorded data from Nepali to English and organized and categorized it into three themes before analyzing and interpreting it.

Results and Discussion

The data obtained from the interviews of the participant teachers have been analyzed and interpreted in three themes such as English teachers' understanding of mentoring, the importance of effective mentoring and English teachers' practices of mentoring.

English Teachers' Understanding of Mentoring

Mentoring is a platform for trainee and experienced teachers to share new ideas related to teaching and to understand the new strategies of teaching. It plays a crucial role as a powerful tool to enhance the profession and career in every institution. It helps empower the constant professional growth of teachers to uplift their careers improving and transforming their teaching skills. Dipak maintained, "When I consult with senior teachers, they help me maximize the learning process and solve my problems and enhance my professional development". His experience of mentoring revealed that consulting senior teachers helped him overcome his pedagogical problems. Manju believed, "Effective mentoring relationship is beneficial not only to novice teachers but also to experience as they generate a new technique to make the classroom more effective". This indicated that experienced teachers got chances to develop themselves in their teaching profession while dealing with the problems of novice teachers.

Some novice teachers with frustration in teaching cannot transform into better professionals. Ramu stated, "I remember the early days of my teaching that I have passed through; I have had both pleasant and unpleasant moments. However, my mentor supported and guided me when I faced obstacles on the way of my teaching journey". The real experience of his teaching career revealed that for the challenging professional growth of EFL teachers in Nepal, mentoring may be a useful strategy. In this context, Reetu asserted, "I know mentoring assists novice teachers to adjust and maintain teaching for better professionals". She reported that mentoring could provide guidelines to novice teachers to adjust and sustain in the teaching field as better professionals in their careers. Pre-service teachers get psychological and emotional assistance, academic support for developing goals and choosing a profession, and role

model through individual mentoring in a secure environment. These supports and role models are crucial for them to grow personally and professionally and achieve success with their future students (Duta, 2020). Thus, mentoring supports pre-service teachers to grow individually and professionally.

However, in the context of Nepal, very few teachers have been provided with such facilities to develop their profession with a positive attitude. Such teachers can easily adjust to new teaching situations; cope with all kinds of problems related to teaching and boost their knowledge and skills to enhance the teaching-learning process.

Similarly, Dipak explained, “Mentor provides new ideas so that we can easily solve the problems and contributes to creating a healthier and harmonious environment of teaching and learning in our class. NELTA also helped me with collaborative teaching”. His understanding of mentoring indicated that with the new ideas provided by mentors, they could easily solve the problems and contribute to creating a healthier and harmonious environment of teaching and learning. To some extent, NELTA has worked as a bridge to share their knowledge and skills from time to time. Villegas-Reimers (2003) asserted that mentors assist trainee teachers by sharing knowledge, giving them access to resources, providing leadership, counselling, coaching, encouraging, reflecting and offering advice on career choices. I believe if the teachers are cooperative with each other, they can create a good academic environment in every school throughout the country. Then all the teachers transformed them professionally and gave positive results and effective outcomes to every educational institution.

If novice teachers get support from mentors and collaborate with other teachers; they are less likely to leave the teaching. Instead, they can create a better academic environment everywhere. When novice develop their professional competency, mentors could begin to work with novice teachers to enable them to think in informed ways about practice, its development and its wider implications for the lives of the children.

Importance of Effective Mentoring

Mentoring offers an extensive variety of learning chances for the professionals such as on-the-job training opportunities, maximum performance with competence in teaching for excellence, and creating interest in teaching and handling teaching-related matters. It is a cooperative and collaborative process between the mentor and mentees. It can support teachers develop tools for continuous improvement.

There are a number of benefits of mentoring such as group problem-solving, emotional support, role modeling and demonstration, encouragement and motivation, sharing knowledge and suggestions, learning about the subject and content and using the right teaching techniques (Kafle, 2008). Mentoring provides teachers the knowledge of both content and teaching skills.

The most remarkable value of the mentor is to offer assistance, direction, support, and supervision to mentees (Ambrosetti et al., 2017). Mentoring is effective in newly qualified teacher induction time, so it is a part of the induction process; moreover, it is a tool for staff development as well as an interactive system where learners get the opportunity to learn better in an interactive way. Mentoring is beneficial for new teachers because it facilitates them to generate new techniques, make the classroom more effective, solve teaching -related problems and develop professionally. English teachers in Nepal are aware with the

idea of mentorship, which enables them to adapt to changing circumstances, deal with challenges, and come up with new solutions. As a result, it provides a forum for both new and experienced teachers to exchange information and learn about changing circumstances (Pandey, 2009). Effective mentoring helps teachers grow professionally.

In this regard, Manju stated, “Mentoring helped me understand the school environment and organizational culture, successfully accomplish my teaching and grow professionally with methodical knowledge and skills. When I got practical ideas from mentors, I updated myself with new techniques of teaching and now can overcome the challenges that are likely to occur in the field of teaching”. Her experience of mentoring clarified that mentoring supports to understand the school environment and organizational culture, get practical ideas and minimises the stressful pain of teaching and teaching could be made less challenging making novice teachers capable of performing responsibilities and strengthening their skills in their profession with methodical knowledge and skills to enhance their survival rate .

Her experience is in harmony with Arora (2016) whose study showed mentoring offered professional assistance, guidance, shared feedback, reflection, long-term support, agreed and persistent observations, reciprocity in roles, acceptance of positive criticism, free expression, and individual care and support to novice teachers. Likewise, it has been found that mentoring is beneficial, especially for new teachers (Mann & Tang, 2012). Mentoring is found to be crucial and useful for novice teachers. Therefore, more work is required to boost potential application of mentoring in the Nepalese milieu. The possibility of mentoring will be explored and strengthened as one of the key approaches to professional development (Ministry of Education, 2016). Teachers can improve and their professional skills involving in mentoring.

Recalling similar experiences, Reetu shared, “When I get the opportunity to interact with the experienced teachers on teaching problems. I get very useful ideas to deal with the problems then I can make my teaching very effective and interesting”. Reetu claimed that mentoring provides useful ideas and establishes and achieves a vision of good teaching which is possible only when mentors support the mentees in every problem throughout their professional career. Hobson et al. (2009) asserted that mentoring is specifically meant to help the professional growth of trainee teachers and to make it easier for their induction into the teaching profession and a particular local context (as cited in Rodie, 2011). All the participants claimed that mentoring provides a chance to be adjusted to a new system, get exposed to the experience and develop them personally and professionally. It helped novice teachers take control of their learning and manage the complexities. In these circumstances, mentoring proves to be a powerful instrument to prevent teachers from professional isolation. So, it is required to offer assistance and support for novice teachers in easing the transition from student to teacher.

Maximizing Learning Potential

Mentoring helps novice teachers adopt new strategies and guidance to solve teaching-related problems. Then novice teachers learn to take control of their learning and manage the class effectively. It enhances teachers' professional development as it provides valuable opportunities for teachers' professional growth (Dikilitas & Atay, 2018). Mentoring plays a crucial role in the effective teaching

and learning process. Novice teachers get formal and informal support in many ways through mentoring. Peers, someone from their community or even a work supervisor or faculty member can be mentors of the mentees (Conner, 2015). When there is high cooperation between mentors and novice teachers, learning will be more effective.

In this context, Dipak asserted, “When I feel difficulty, I consult with the experienced capable and intimate colleagues of my schools. I get new practical ideas related to teaching from them. They help me overcome the problems and make my teaching effective”. After sharing the experience of the participants, I knew that the novice teachers got new ideas to solve pedagogy-related problems and develop their professional skills. Manju asserted, “Mentoring is necessary for the trainee teachers to implement theoretical knowledge to the real-life situation. The current mentoring system for novice teachers seems ineffective so it requires improvement”. This justified that mentoring supports novice teachers to apply theoretical knowledge to practice in real classroom teaching, however, it should be improved. Pre-service teachers can examine how they perceive the classroom, the teaching methods they employ, the responsibility they play as teachers, and the potential impact they could have on their students’ lives by learning from their mentors and partners. Then, mentors are in charge of motivating novice teachers to overpower not only their actual classroom challenges but also the intellectual challenges they face when they realize they are not adequately ready to teach languages (Castañeda-Trujillo & Aguirre-Hernández, 2018). Thus, mentors facilitate overcoming the actual classroom and intellectual challenges.

Professional Development Support

Almost all the novice teacher participants in my study revealed that formal or informal mentoring has contributed to bringing about a drastic change in their teaching. Experienced teachers and teacher educators assist them in improving their professional competency. The quality of their teaching improves when they apply cognitive skills to their students. They provided new ideas about teaching and they developed their professional competency. In this line, Manju mentioned, “Through mentoring, I developed motivation, encouragement and collaborative problem-solving skills. I also got emotional support; knowledge of the subject matter and the use of appropriate instructional methods. These skills supported me to identify improve and make my teaching better”. Her mentoring practices explore that when novice teachers got opportunities to participate in workshop seminars, conferences and training, they got the practical ideas of teaching various teaching items and language skills. Such activities supported them to make their teaching better on one hand and on the other hand, to recognize, assess and improve their students’ performance.

In this line, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) asserted that mentoring permits teachers to achieve the capacity to identify, understand, and assess their behaviours and strategies to improve students’ proficiency. In this regard, Manju further stated, “I got practical ideas from training, workshop seminars and conferences for teaching different language aspects, grammatical points and literary genre effectively. They help me teach in real classrooms effectively”. Her experience revealed that training, workshop seminars and conferences are crucial in the mentoring process as they support novice teachers for their

better professional careers.

Almost all the novice teacher participants in my study narrated that formal or informal mentoring contributed to bringing about a drastic change in their teaching. Mentored teachers assisted them in improving their professional competency. The quality of teaching is improved when they apply cognitive skills with the novice teachers such as listening, asking inquisitive questions, providing feedback, and managing their classroom. Thus, mentors provide new ideas about curriculum and teaching developing their professional competency. Mentor encourages novice teachers to solve difficult problems related to teaching. They also help maximize learning potential and adjust new teachers to the new situation and support them as a reflective practitioner providing content and skills-focused advice and support. They can be supporters to listen and encourage novice teachers in the articulation of ideas to help them achieve professional learning objectives.

They inspire as a counsellor, communicators, problem solvers, administrators, enablers, monitor academic processes, monitor social development, managers of behaviours, praise givers, motivators, and team builders. In this regard, Reetu claimed, “In my view, mentoring is crucial to make teaching effective. Usually, the mentor facilitates novice teachers to develop professionally. It removes confusion and develops confidence in teaching. When I get ideas on a new topic, I feel comfortable delivering the subject matter”. Her lived experiences made it clear that experienced teachers as mentors supported her to develop professionally removing confusion and developing confidence in teaching. Participant’s view is supported by Matsko et al. (2020), Orland-Barak and Wang (2020) who asserted that mentoring is an essential part of developing trainee teachers' ability to handle the academic and social challenges they may encounter during their first year of college as well as their capacity to teach.

Teachers’ Practices of Mentoring

In the context of Nepal, mentoring can be one of the best tools that English language teachers can get benefit from it to develop them professionally. Mentoring supports novice teachers by helping, guiding, and assessing the novice language teachers’ teaching. Regarding this, Reetu asserted, “After completion of M.Ed., I started teaching in school as an English teacher. In the beginning, I faced problems in finding materials, classroom management and using appropriate teaching strategies. I got help from the experienced and senior teachers”. In the early days of teaching, she faced challenges in finding materials, classroom management and using appropriate teaching strategies in the class but gradually she got support and guidance from experienced and senior teachers on using proper teaching strategies.

Ramu shared similar experiences in mentoring thus, “I faced problems in my teaching career in the early days which developed frustration in teaching. However, mentoring practices from NELTA and TPD training from the education office transformed me into a better experienced professional with the latest trends or practices”. His experience of teaching reflected that, in the beginning, he had frustration in teaching. However, mentoring practices transformed him into an experienced and competent teacher with the latest trends or practices. He further put his narrative thus, “Attending teaching practice, TPD training, NELTA conferences and consulting with my senior colleagues, I developed professional skills”.

He claimed that he developed his professional skills through internal supervisors, subject teachers and attending TPD training.

Similarly, Manju stated, “I do not ask all my problems and concerns to the senior teachers because I had the fear of losing the face if I asked them all the teaching-related problems, they would rate me as an unqualified teacher”. Her personal experiences indicated that due to prestige issues, she could not ask about and share her problems with her seniors. Her view is similar to Ur (2005) who stated that once this difficulty is overcome, the results are satisfying. However, some teachers may be reluctant to admit the existing teaching problems due to the fear of losing dignity. She further insisted, “Since in schools, there is no provision of mentors to share my problems, I share the problems with my close colleagues. So, I want a mentor to listen to my confusion in the schools regularly”. Manju’s experience showed that there is no regular mentoring during in-service programmes. So, she shared her problems with her close colleagues. She intended to have a mentor to listen to her problems in school for continuous professional development.

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of the study is to examine novice English language teachers’ understanding and practices of mentoring. This research study reveals teachers’ positive mentoring experiences as they are satisfied with mentoring practices. The study also shows that the common mentoring practices the English teachers employed are peer support, profession-related workshops, training, conferences and seminars to understand the school environment and organizational culture, manage class, and adjust to the new situation with content and skills-focused advice and support. It enhances their confidence removing confusion to grow academically with the latest practices. Furthermore, the study also shows that mentoring practices offer support to novice teachers to reduce teaching-related problems and make the teaching and learning process more effective with the use of appropriate instructional methods. Moreover, the study explores that mentoring enhances the abilities of teachers in the teaching and learning process during the early years of their teaching career with proper modellings for effective teaching strategies. In addition, mentoring practices support them to boost their career with methodical knowledge and skills, proper teaching strategies of language skills, vocabulary, grammar, language functions, test construction and adjust to new situations and sustain their teaching career successfully.

This study may contribute to both mentors and mentees for better understanding and actual practices of mentoring with insightful ideas to improve professional competency and expertise in their current mentoring experiences and practices. The study may also contribute to the discourse of mentoring practices in English language classrooms to solve teaching-related problems and boost their career.

Therefore, there should be a mechanism of mentoring from which novice teachers get opportunities to overcome the issues related to teaching and the current mentoring system for novice teachers should be improved. The government authorities should conduct training and workshop seminars frequently so that novice English teachers can handle the classroom effectively for the betterment of mentoring experiences. Since it is a small-scale qualitative study conducted in Rupandehi only with four teacher participants using interviews, its findings cannot be generalized to the entire English language teachers throughout the

country. Therefore, to address the limitations, a further study can be carried out on mentoring practices of novice English teachers at the secondary level incorporating a large sample size, greater contexts and a mixed-method approach.

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