

An intervention study of formative assessment in English as a foreign language writing classes in Norway¹

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Abstract

This article reports on an intervention study that aimed to investigate transformations in formative assessment of writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. Initial historical and situational analyses revealed critical tensions around teachers' and students' perceptions and practices of assessment, and to some extent between students' perceptions and experiences of formative assessment of writing. The tensions laid the foundation for interventions that were planned together with the teachers and were based on the principles from portfolio assessment. These included the following changes: giving students more formative feedback, giving them the opportunity to revise their texts, encouraging them to develop writing logs and reflection statements, and engaging them in self- and peer assessment. Three EFL teachers and their three EFL classes ($n=70$) completed a year's intervention study. Data collected and analyzed using multiple methods suggests that students appreciate the changes, despite initial resistance due to the use of novel assessment practices. The teachers have improved their assessment practices by becoming more systematic and talking more about assessment. The study underlines the importance of introducing an external tool that enables teachers and students to implement and modify in order to improve teaching and learning activities.

Keywords: Formative assessment; Writing assessment; Intervention study; Portfolio assessment; EFL; Norway

Introduction

This study focuses on transformations in teachers' and students' perceptions and practices of formative assessment in English as a foreign language (EFL) writing classes. Redhill² middle school in Norway has a long history of working with formative assessment. The researcher spent half a year at Redhill to gain a deeper understanding of its assessment culture, both from an historical and a situational point of view. Some major problem areas were discovered and included tensions and contradictions in teachers' and students' perceptions and experiences of formative assessment of writing, and also to some extent within the student group. The tensions and contradictions revolved around feedback practices, grades, self-assessment, revision of texts (or multiple drafting), and student involvement in assessment practices. The students did not always understand the teachers' intentions behind the feedback provided on written texts and expressed that they would prefer to receive more positive, clear, and selective feedback. At Redhill, grades are downplayed and more effort is placed on providing useful feedback, but some students reported that they prefer grades. The teachers emphasized the importance of student self-assessment, but this was not done regularly and systematically, and some students clearly did not see the value of undertaking self-assessment. The students said they prefer to write more, revise their texts more, and to be more involved in assessment practices. The teachers were uncertain about students' follow-up of feedback. They also said that they prefer to be more systematic in their assessment practices, which was a motivation for taking part in the research project.

Engeström's activity system (Engeström, 1987) was used to analyze the tensions and contradictions that paved the way for interventions (Engeström, 1999, 2000; Engeström &

¹ This paper is part of a longer article which has not yet been published. Any reference to the content should therefore be to the presentation given at the IAEA conference in May 2014.

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Sannino, 2010). Thus a year of intervention followed, which is the phase of the study reported in the present article. The purpose of the interventions was to align assessment more closely with the intended learning outcomes in EFL (KD, 2006). The interventions contributed to developing the field of practice, and to bridging the gap between assessment theory and assessment practices. The interventions involved concrete changes based on formative principles of portfolio assessment (Burner, in press; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Weigle, 2002). Another purpose of the intervention study was to examine possible transformations in the teachers' and students' perceptions and practices of formative assessment of writing when using portfolio as a tool. There is scarce research on formative assessment in EFL (Abedi, 2010; Lee, 2011a), particularly formative assessment of writing (Lee, 2007, 2011a, 2011b; Lee & Coniam, 2013). In Norway, the context of the study, there is literally no research on formative assessment of writing in EFL. The present study attempts to contribute to the field of research by exploring the following research questions:

- (1) What changes occur in teachers' and students' perceptions of formative assessment of writing in EFL classrooms when using the portfolio as a tool to facilitate the formative processes?
- (2) What changes occur in teachers' and students' assessment practices when using the portfolio for formative assessment of writing in EFL classrooms?

Context of the study

In Norway, the competence aims in the English curriculum are influenced by the Common European Framework for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). The aims convey what the students should be able to do after completing English studies. "Choose and use different writing strategies that are suitable for the purpose", "use own notes and different sources as a basis for writing" and "write different types of texts with structure and coherence" are examples of competence aims from the English curriculum for middle school in Norway (KD, 2006, p. 10). The aims are summative by nature, but require years of training, so that the way to achieve the aims is formative. This calls for an approach that aligns assessment more closely with the learning processes. The Norwegian Department of Education introduced new assessment regulations in 2009 (KD, 2009), where the formative purposes of assessment were as strongly emphasized as the summative purposes. The regulations were influenced by international research on the benefits of formative assessment, particularly the work of the Assessment Reform Group in England (ARG, 2012). As a result, a number of courses and workshops have been offered to teachers. "Assessment for learning" has been pointed out by the Norwegian Directorate for Education as one of the main strategies for the 2010-2014 period (UDIR, 2010).

The assessment culture at school level is essential for creating the environment needed to develop formative assessment practices (Smith, 2011). Redhill middle school is located in the south-eastern part of Norway and was purposeively selected for the present study. The school has been oriented towards formative uses of assessment, i.e. ways to use assessment to support student learning, since the beginning of the new century. In this respect, Redhill is several years ahead of the average Norwegian middle school, taking into consideration that the national regulations were first introduced in 2009. The school culture is of the type where teachers rarely give grades on student texts and where the focus is on providing high quality feedback. Moreover, teachers aim at sharing assessment criteria with their students.

Elevundersøkelsen is a national student survey conducted every year at all middle schools in Norway. A major aspect of the survey asks how students perceive assessment practices. In the 2012 survey, Redhill scored above average compared to national results on questions relating to formative assessment, most notably student involvement and self-assessment. Approximately 70% of the students at Redhill are on the positive side of a five-point Likert scale,

compared to approximately 50% at the national level. Thus Redhill provided a good starting point for studying formative assessment and conducting interventions to facilitate the improvement of formative assessment.

Theoretical framework

Formative assessment of writing

Assessment is formative when it is used to promote learning. Formative assessment's positive impact on learning is well documented in reviews of research (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Ross, 2005). However, much research on formative assessment has focused on oral interactions taking place in the classroom (Torrance & Pryor, 2001), such as questioning and sharing of assessment criteria. Little attention has been given to relating formative assessment to writing assessment (Lee, 2011b). Assessment in EFL writing has traditionally focused on assessment of learning (Lee, 2007; Lee, 2011a, 2011b; Lee & Coniam, 2013) to the neglect of formative uses of assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black et al., 2003; Sadler, 1989, 1998). Important formative elements in writing can contribute to seeing the holistic practice of writing (Lee & Coniam, 2013), such as self- and peer assessment, reflection, useful feedback, multiple drafting, revision and selection of texts – all of which are inherent in portfolio assessment (Klenowski, 2002, 2010). The portfolio is an assessment tool that can realize formative assessment in the writing classroom (Burner, in press; Lee, 2011b). Thus the writing portfolio has been chosen as the tool to facilitate formative assessment of writing in the present study.

Changing assessment perceptions and practices

One of the aspects of education most difficult to change has proven to be assessment (Carless, 2005; Tierney, 2006), particularly in secondary education (Hill, 2011) and in foreign languages (Black et al., 2003). A three-year national research project in Norway, where English is one of the subjects investigated, concludes that elementary school teachers have reached farthest when it comes to developing their assessment practices (Sandvik et al., 2012). Furthermore, crucial aspects of successful formative assessment, such as involving students in the assessment processes, are more common in subjects such as Norwegian (being the first language in Norway) than English as a foreign language (Havnes, Smith, Dysthe, & Ludvigsen, 2012; Sandvik et al., 2012). Another longitudinal study from Norway focusing on the development of formative assessment used the e-portfolio as a tool, and reported that both teachers' attitude and practice changed. The changes were noticeable in teachers' feedback to students and teachers' interaction with students during multiple and varied documentations of learning using the portfolio (Smith, 2011). Smith (2011) underlines the importance of spending substantial time on team work within a school when developing formative assessment practices if a full change of assessment practices is to be expected.

Time has proven to be a decisive factor in changes of assessment practices (Inbar-Lourie & Donitsa-Schmidt, 2009; Lee, 2011a; Lee & Coniam, 2013; Smith, 2011; Tierney, 2006). It takes at least a year before one can trace changes in teachers' and students' assessment practices (Lee & Wiliam, 2005; Timperley, Parr, & Bertanees, 2009; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004). Research also indicates that teachers developing formative assessment need support, encouragement, and idea exchange with other teachers (Carless, 2005; Coffey, Sato, & Thiebault, 2005) at a school that enables and promotes risk-taking (Hill, 2011; Timperley, Parr, & Bertanees, 2009). Moreover, teachers' beliefs and conceptions about learning and assessment are important factors enabling or impeding changes (Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Tierney, 2006). The more critical teachers are of the use of alternative assessment the less are the chances for implementing them, for example the lack of trust by some teachers towards the use of portfolios (Inbar-Lourie & Donitsa-Schmidt, 2009). According to Hayward and Hedge (2005), it is important to explore existing perceptions before initiating change in

assessment practices. In Activity Theory (Engeström, 2000), the theory that underpins the interventions in the present study, historical and situational analyses lay the foundation for change, where reflecting on changes is also an integral part of the theory.

Research design

Leont'ev (1981) developed the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) based on Vygotsky's original thoughts on mediated activity (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1981). Later, Engeström developed the activity system based on CHAT (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2000).

The activity system and formative interventions

The units that have been chosen for the present study are the EFL teachers and the EFL students. Teachers and students do not act alone, but interact within a community. The relations they have and develop are the basis for the common object that they construct and act on in their respective activity systems. Each of them, the EFL teachers and the EFL students, have their own activity system since they do not share the same object (Sadler, 1998), as illustrated in Figure 1 below. Agency is in this way problematized, which is useful when studying a dialectical concept such as formative assessment (Pryor & Crossouard, 2008).

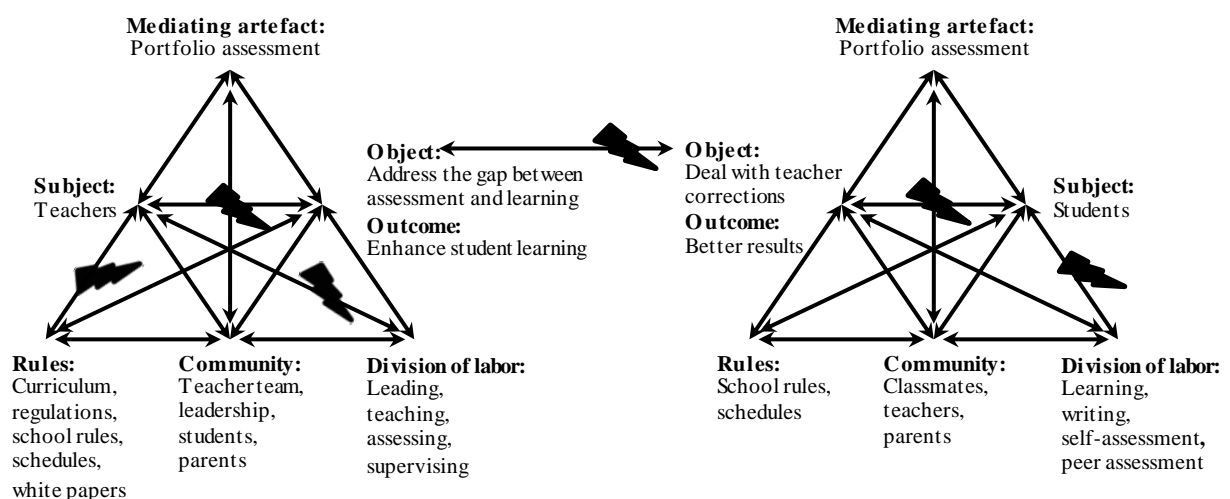


Figure 1. The activity systems for the teachers and students developing formative assessment of writing

In formative interventions (Engeström & Sannino, 2010), the researcher can mirror teachers' practices (Coffey, Sato, & Thiebault, 2005), in order to discuss tensions and contradictions. This is the window to development. The lightning bolts in Figure 1 illustrate areas of tensions and contradictions. There was approximately one workshop per month during which time was set aside to focus only on writing assessment in EFL classes. The researcher's role during the formative interventions was to support, encourage, and enable the sharing of ideas (Carless, 2005; Coffey, Sato, & Thiebault, 2005).

Portfolio: the mediating artefact in the interventions

The writing portfolio was chosen as the mediating artefact in the present study, addressing the tensions and contradictions that arose (the first stimulus) from the historical and situational analyses. The tool or the mediating artefact that is introduced should be relevant for the object. In activity theory terms, the external mediating artefact is referred to as the second

stimulus (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). The new artefact makes the subjects see the object in a new light. The artefact can be conceptual and/or practical. By introducing formative principles of the writing portfolio (Burner, in press), interventions were planned in workshops with the teacher team and in dialogue together with the teachers, and carried out by them in the classroom (see Figure 2).

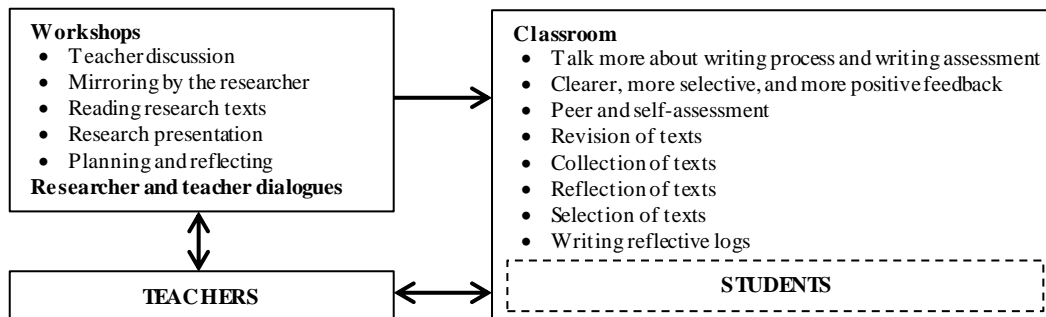


Figure 2. The interventions conducted at Redhill middle school

It is important to emphasize that the writing portfolio was not introduced as *one* way of conducting writing assessment. Rather, the principles were introduced and discussed as part of addressing the tensions and contradictions from the historical and situational analyses, and left to the teachers to interpret, try and develop in their classes.

Data collection and data analysis

The participants were purposively selected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) to shed light on formative assessment of writing as there has been a particular focus on formative assessment for 12 to 13 years at Redhill middle school. Data were collected from observations of writing classes, a student questionnaire, one-to-one interviews with the teachers and focus group interviews with the students. The data collection occurred during and after the intervention period (Aug 2012-June 2013). The first part of the questionnaire had five items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “very little extent” to “very great extent”. The items were about the effectiveness of teacher feedback, the effectiveness of grades, learning outcome in writing English, meta-cognitive strategies when working with texts, and teacher’s modeling of what a good text is. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of binary items that revolved around students’ perception of assessment practices and a corresponding set of corresponding binary items about students’ experiences of how they learn best. The items were related to feedback, grades, text revision, self-assessment, and student involvement.

The interviews with the teachers lasted around an hour and were conducted at the end of the intervention period. The student interviews lasted around half an hour, and were conducted half way through the intervention and at the end of the intervention period. They were all semi-structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviewees were asked about possible changes in their perceptions and practices of writing assessment. By using multiple data sources, triangulation has been one way of validating the interpretations (Creswell, 2007). The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and presented as frequencies, mean scores, and standard deviation. The interview transcripts were coded and categorized using the constant comparative method of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Observation notes were used to validate interview data.

Findings and discussion

Changes in perceptions

The means from the questionnaire data revealed a more positive perception of formative assessment of writing, with the exception of a few more students reporting that they learn best

by receiving only grades and that they do not learn best by receiving only feedback, whereas more students see the learning benefits of text revision, self-assessment, and student involvement. Also, there was a slightly positive change in students' experiences and beliefs. The biggest gaps were between the students' self-reported assessment practices before and after the intervention period regarding grades, revision, and student involvement. After the intervention, the students agree unanimously that grades are downplayed in the teacher's assessment of their writing. All the students (97%) agree that they are given the chance to revise their texts. And finally, the number of students that think they are more involved in assessment practices had doubled. Certainly, any changes in students' perceptions could have been influenced by other factors than the intervention. That is why it was crucial to delve deeper into the material by interviewing a sample of the students about the same type of questions as in the questionnaire.

The students were more positive towards the feedback provided to them on their texts in the final interviews than the mid-term interviews: "Very concrete feedback, but could have told us more what she expects" (boy, average, 9th grade). This is a representative quote and reveals that there is also room for improvement when it comes to the teacher's clarity of assessment criteria (Rust, Price, & O'Donovan). Another finding is that low performing students tend to prefer grades on all texts as do also some of the average students. However, the high performing ones are more inclined to adapt to the formative assessment of writing where the focus is on providing useful feedback and downplaying grades (Black et al., 2003; Sadler, 1989). There was also a clear difference between the students regarding what way they preferred to receive feedback on their texts. The high performing ones preferred written feedback on written texts, whereas the low performing ones tended to value oral feedback on written texts. This may be because oral feedback on a written text is more contextualized and also enables the student to clarify any questions there and then.

However, all the students, also the low performing ones, were positive towards revising their texts in the writing portfolio. They said the revision of texts can be time-consuming, but that it is useful because they learn from it. When it comes to selecting texts for the presentation portfolio, the students were positive, but preferred to have more time for the selection and reflection process. The reflective logs that were written after each writing assessment were regarded more and more positively throughout the year. However, some students were negative to them at the end of the year, saying they did not learn so much from them. Those who were negative said they felt they wrote reflective logs for the teacher's sake, not for their own learning. The high performing students were more positive towards writing reflective logs than the low performing ones. This may be because the reflective process of writing the logs is more manageable for students who are already reflective.

Self- and peer assessment were also elements in the writing portfolio. One of the classes had more experience of conducting self-assessment than the other two. Nevertheless, self-assessment was a positive and demanding experience for most of the students. Peer assessment was a double-edged sword in that some perceived it as a good experience they learnt from, whereas others thought it was "scary" having peers assess their text. High performing students were more skeptical, saying they preferred that the teacher was the sole assessor of their texts. One of the more experienced teachers was skeptical towards trying peer assessment since she thought that her students would be too immature. As noted above, at the end of the intervention period, they were all very positive towards peer assessment. One of the teachers claimed that she believes peer assessment is as important as the teacher's assessment of student texts. They clearly saw the benefits of peer assessment by seeing how involved their students became in discussing writing, and how proficient they were in giving each other feedback. One of the reasons why teachers resist adopting more student-centered approaches to assessment is that they believe it takes more time from other more important

tasks, for example covering the curriculum (Dwyer, 1998; Webb & Jones, 2009). In light of this, it is an important finding that the teachers in the present study found peer assessment to provide them with more time. Moreover, by trying and reflecting on changes in assessment practices, it was possible to verbalize how peer assessment could be refined and developed further. Student self-assessment made it possible for the teacher to track students' reflections over time. Sharing power with the students by letting them evaluate their own products turned out to be a positive experience for the least experienced teacher who had not tried it. The more experienced teachers had tried self-assessment with their students before, but not systematically.

The teachers find that the portfolio has led them to work more with writing and writing assessment at school compared to before the intervention. Spending more time on writing at school opened up for more interaction between the teacher and her students about writing and writing assessment. The quote "Having that oral interaction with the students is much better than writing to them" illustrates the importance of an interactive space at school when writing texts. It is naïve to believe that students will follow up on their text writing according to feedback they have received if the teacher does not put aside time for this.

The teachers underline the importance of students getting used to developing their writing according to the formative principles in portfolio assessment (Burner, in press). As one of the teachers put it: "[I] found very quickly that putting on a paper what I thought was clear, it wasn't clear for the students". Based on student interviews and observations, the researcher told the teachers that the students thought the feedback given to them was unclear. This underscores the importance of mirroring teaching practices in order to initiate reflection. One of the teachers had extensive experience of using color codes when providing feedback to the students. Her students found this to be confusing, not always understanding what the color codes meant. After a mirroring process in the workshop, the teacher reflected at the end of the intervention period by stating that the color codes "actually require that you put aside time to follow up, particularly in 8th grade".

Changes in practices

There were no visible changes in the feedback practices the first term (half way through in the study), but in the second term students experienced clearer, more selective, and more positive feedback on their texts. The writing assessment became more structured with the reflective logs and self- and peer assessment. Some, particularly the high performing ones, went back to texts they had written earlier and improved them even after the revision process was formally over. The selection phase of the writing portfolio created a type of ownership, where students had to go back and take a look at their writing development throughout the school year. Furthermore, students had to act on the feedback provided. More time was spent at school to work with writing and writing assessment. Teachers talked significantly more about the writing process and what the students were to do when improving their texts. Moreover, there was significantly more interaction between teacher and student, and amongst students, when writing and assessing writing.

The teachers were informed on research on formative assessment, and knew the benefits of student self-assessment. By trying to do it systematically and reflecting over their practice, they could see the benefits from a new perspective. The benefits were contextualized. One of the teachers realized that "... very few [students] self-assess at another level than I would do myself". Another one reported she "experienced that what peers tell each other can be as important as what I as the teacher say". Self- and peer assessment also proved to be beneficial for the teacher: "Self- and peer assessment have made me spend less time on assessment and more time together with the students supervising them on what we can do to develop the text". By writing reflective logs (self-evaluation), the students had to think about their writing,

revision and feedback. They had to point out what aspects of writing they had improved from the earliest draft. In this way, “they [the students] have also become more aware of the subject language,” as one of the teachers noted. Also, modeling good examples of the writing product (Sadler, 1989) for students was a new practice.

Genuine formative assessment is based on a reciprocal relationship between the teacher and the student, between feedback and changing of teaching and learning activities in line with that feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998). As one teacher explained: “I receive more feedback telling me that something has happened following the assessment because they have to physically do something”. Certainly when the teacher gets access to student thinking in this way, she can better follow up students’ writing. Text revision was something none of the teachers had tried in practice before. All of the teachers agreed that students benefited from revising their texts: “They [the student] have gotten more used to writing, more used to going back and working with it”. Writing is a recursive activity, and thus writing assessment should align with it by taking a process approach. The teachers used the external stimulus, the writing portfolio, and developed it in their own way in their own particular classroom context (Hayward & Hedge, 2005; Smith, 2011). In line with the findings reported in Smith (2011), where also portfolio was used as a tool, one of the noticeable changes that occurred had to do with feedback. The teachers agree that feedback on written texts has become clearer by using the writing portfolio as a tool.

Implications and conclusions

In this study, changes in teachers’ and students’ perceptions and practices of formative assessment of writing in EFL have been investigated. The changes transformed assessment of writing in the classrooms that took part in the study. The assessment became more formative. The lightning bolts in Figure 1 did not disappear, but were addressed systematically, and the tensions and contradictions were minimized as the school year progressed. Changing perceptions and practices takes time.

One of the main implications to be drawn from the present study is that formative assessment of writing has to systematically be followed up in communities of learning where both the student and the teacher perspectives are the driving forces of development. Much research on changes in formative assessment is restricted to shorter periods of time, and often either the student or the teacher perspective is examined. Given the time needed to change, and the dialectic nature of formative assessment, it is crucial that future studies last at least a year and include both students and teachers. Another implication to be drawn is that both perceptions and practices have to be addressed, since they are interrelated. Perceptions can best be addressed through phenomenological research methods, such as interviews. Practices can be self-reported, as in questionnaires, but should also be observed in daily teaching and learning activities. Change in assessment practices can create resistance in the beginning, but in the long run one may see the benefits. The findings suggest that the students and teachers generally appreciate the changes that the interventions brought. Even though the writing portfolio is regarded as a tool that is most effective for high performing students, it created more arenas for discussions on writing and writing assessment for *all* students.

Engeström has used his theoretical approach mainly in studies conducted in larger industrial and health institutions. A methodological implication of the present study is that the CHAT approach is a useful way of conducting interventions also in schools. The activity system reveals tensions and contradictions (first stimulus), which in turn are the foundation for change through an external tool (second stimulus). It also highlights the importance of historicity in intervention studies – one has to understand the origins of perceptions and practices in order to change them.

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