Developing young learners' reading competence in Ethiopia: A critical review of the Ministry of Education's guidelines for developing supplementary reading materials

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Abstract

This study presents a critical review of the official guidelines established in 2016 by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education offering detailed criteria for the development and selection of supplementary reading materials (SRMs) for primary school learners to enhance their reading competence. Despite interventions during the last couple of decades to enhance reading performance in Ethiopia, sufficient improvement has not been seen. The study examined the extent to which the Ministry's guidelines are conducive to appropriate development of students' reading fluency and reading comprehension with a focus on Grades 1–4. We analyzed the criteria in view of current research in the science of reading, building also on theories of multimodality and text linguistics. Findings show that the SRM selection and development guidelines align with a traditional *simple* view of reading (SVR). We argue that developing and selecting SRMs based on an *active* view of reading, highlighting a learner-sensitive *affective* dimension of learning, has the potential to make SRMs more motivating and thus more conducive to young learners' reading development. With this perspective on the SRM guidelines, the article ends with a reflection on the potential pedagogical implications of these new insights as part of reading teachers' professional knowledge base.

Introduction

During the last three decades, Ethiopia has made significant efforts in the field of schooling. Increased access to primary education has been an important first step. Between 2004 and 2018, primary enrolment rose from 49% to close to 95%. However, according to UNICEF, the net enrolment to primary education in the school year 2021-2022 decreased to 88.7% (UNICEF Ethiopia, n.d.). Rates fluctuate from year to year; conditions like the

COVID-19 pandemic, national conflicts, floods, droughts, and other contextual factors have an impact on the general educational situation.

With the process towards universal access in motion, programs and projects with the aim to ensure *quality* in education have been introduced, with funding and consultancy from USAID and other donors. The development of teacher education, in-service professional development, mother tongue curriculum and instruction, textbooks and supplementary reading materials with appropriate grade-level progression, teacher guides, and various learning materials were some of the targeted areas to ensure quality of education. Central initiatives have been GEQIP (General Education Quality Improvement Program) since 2008, GEQIP-E with its focus on equity, and ESDP (Education Sector Development Plan), the current phase being ESDP-VI for 2020–2025 (GPE, 2024; MoE, 2021). However, despite interventions and actions to enhance primary students' reading performance, sufficient improvement has not been seen (Haile & Mendisu, 2023; USAID, 2019). As a case in point, around 90% of 10-year-old children are found to be lacking basic reading skills (GPE, 2024). In the endline evaluation of the EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) project in 2018, 60% of the students demonstrated insufficient reading skills after Grade 3, a combination of non-readers, i.e., students with zero scores (28%), and students "reading slowly with limited comprehension" (32%) (USAID, 2019, p. 66). Stagnating reading development is a deplorable situation, not least because the main concern in Grades 2 and 3 is that students "learn to read", to prepare them for Grade 4 and continued schooling, where the focus will progressively be "reading to learn". There is also the risk of students dropping out of school altogether between lower and upper primary.

The state of affairs described here is doubtless a complex one, with a variety of interacting actors, factors, and contextual realities at work. In this article, our purpose is to explore one element in the educational ecology: the nature, role, and function of supplementary reading materials (SRMs) and the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education for their development and selection. SRMs are a valuable offer to children who do not have access to a rich array of colorful children's books. With the launch of a new curriculum for Ethiopian schools in September 2022, new rationales for SRMs have been conceptualized; they have still been intended not only to supplement, complement, and enrich textbooks, but also to contribute independent reading and learning (MoE, 2020, p. 64). Moreover, a clear strategy is articulated in MoE (2021) i.e., to "encourage publishers and writers to produce supplementary reading materials on different topics, appropriate for school levels which deepen positive values and national unity in diversity" (p. 52).

In the MoE guidelines for developing supplementary materials, a basic distinction is made between *decodable* SRMs and *leveled* SRMs. Decodable and leveled SRMs are intended for use both at school with teacher scaffolding, and as practice resources for learners to use independently. Decodable books target specific patterns of spelling, letter–sound correspondences that are taught, including sight vocabulary and some high-frequency words that learners need to know, thus addressing issues of phonics, phonemic awareness and word recognition. These books are primarily aimed at Grades 1–2. Leveled books, by contrast, comply with a levelling system to ensure gradual mastery of difficulty throughout schooling, in accordance with the criteria set out in the guidelines. These books may contain different

stories or more informational or expository texts. Our focus in the following analysis will be on leveled SRMs.

Furthermore, the construct, "supplementary material", needs to be deconstructed. What are the SRMs meant to supplement? The logical response would be that basic reading-pedagogical materials and processes are in place, but that there is a need for consolidation resources. Ideally, the use of SRMs is meant to enhance reading skills development, building on curriculum-based reading instruction that takes place in the classroom organized and supported by the teacher.

The MoE guidelines are to be used by the authors and validators of SRMs. The guidelines comprise seven criteria pertaining to design and physical characteristics on the one hand (font size, illustration, text density, spacing); and linguistic properties on the other (sentence length and type, words and syllables). Other issues include advice about avoidance of bold or italic text, left text alignment, considerations about the use of color, details about binding and paper quality (MoE, 2016). All these criteria and the "other issues" align with a research-based report on best practices for developing supplementary reading materials (USAID, 2014).

A set of general directions is presented in the guidelines, of which the last three concern early primary Grades 1–4. They state that SRMs for this group of learners should be written by skilled authors who know the languages learners speak and are instructed through, and who know how to reach groups of young learners. Next, the general directions define reading materials as comprising fiction or informational texts either created in local languages or adapted to these languages. Finally, the MoE mandates that materials for the early grades must follow a leveling system, with the aim to "meet students' instructional needs" (p. 4).

Thus far, teaching materials have been developed by local writers who are primary school teachers and teacher educators from colleges and universities. In some cases, educational officers from regional educational bureaus have been involved in the process, but without a formal background in SRM development. The question is whether these writers represent "authors who are skilled and well experienced in writing materials for early grade children", one of the general directions in the guidelines (p. 3). Since there is a great need for materials to supplement textbooks used in the classroom, the guidelines for the development and selection of such materials contain criteria with very detailed graded descriptors.

Summing up, the problem addressed in our study is to what extent SRMs based on the MoE guidelines are in fact conducive to reading development for early-grade learners in Ethiopia. Central issues are addressing the question of whether they align well with the texts they are supposed to supplement, and whether they have appropriate and motivating content for young learners. And, at a more theoretical level, the question is whether they concur with recent research within the science of reading. By critically exploring the guidelines, we aim to contribute new insights to enhance teachers' reading-pedagogical knowledge base and practice. Important empirical issues such as the reception of SRMs among children and the systematicity of the literacy curriculum are beyond the scope of this article.

Theoretical Orientation

Meta-analyses of research published in influential language-pedagogical journals, for instance; in *The Reading Teacher*, have identified four salient theories that explicitly or implicitly underlie studies of literacy development (Moody et al., 2018). The theories identified are socio-constructivist/sociocultural theories, schema and psycholinguistic theories, motivation theory, and dual coding theory, and combinations of these. In the following, all four will be presented as relevant in the way they variously frame the topic of our study.

Discussions about the presence or absence of teacher scaffolding, which is a vital part of learning-centered reading instruction in the classroom, clearly relates to sociocultural theory, which highlights the value of collaboration, that is, meaning construction in interaction with others. Schema theory refers to the cognitive and conceptual structure in our minds and how knowledge is represented. This theory is relevant when we wish to account for phonological awareness and its relation to decoding skills, and for the importance of learning sight vocabulary for easy retrieval. It is also relevant in connection with processes of activating prior knowledge, which is central to the process and outcome of reading comprehension.

Motivation theory as it applies to reading development "posits that readers become engaged with a text when it aligns with their goals, desires, and objectives within a particular social milieu" (Moody et al., 2018, p. 6). These are affective aspects of learning, such as engagement, interest, and aesthetic attraction. In addition, two key motivational processes that affect cognition are self-efficacy and self-regulation, according to Schunk and Zimmerman (2007). These are both highly relevant in connection with personal confidence and strategy use and, as we have seen, implied when SRMs are meant to "encourage independent reading and learning" (MoE, 2020, p. 64).

Finally, dual coding theory has to do with the fact that our minds process information from the environment via two independent mental systems, one being verbal and the other non-verbal. The verbal system deals with language, and the non-linguistic system has to do with visual semiotic resources, among other non-verbal stimuli. In our case, the issue of illustrations and its relation to the verbal text is essential. Visual support is often considered an asset in teaching and learning contexts. When it comes to its relevance in connection with reading comprehension, a dilemma may occur in that pictures can detract the reader's attention away from print. This is less than desirable in the early phases of reading development.

Turning now to theoretical contributions about aspects of reading itself, a simple view of reading (SVR) was proposed by Gough and Tunmer (1986) and developed further by Hoover and Gough (1990). This view appears to be strongly implied by the MoE guidelines. In the following paragraphs, we will give a brief description of the SVR and move on to present recent alternative views of reading. We will also present some insights from text linguistics and multimodality theory, including a brief account of the construct of readability.

The Simple View of Reading (SVR)

The SVR comprises two related skills, namely decoding and comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). It has gained immense support for its claim that *decoding* and *listening comprehension* together predict reading comprehension. For beginning readers, decoding involves matching written letters with sounds and blending the sounds together to form a word, whereas for more experienced readers, decoding refers to efficient word recognition. In fact, in later studies, decoding has been reconceptualized as *word recognition* and listening comprehension as *language comprehension* (Hoover & Tunmer, 2020). Comprehension is the ability to take in lexical information (i.e., semantic information at the word level) and derive sentence and discourse interpretations.

Catherine E. Snow, an influential reading and literacy researcher, explained how the SVR has gained its robust position: it contributed to explaining reading difficulties at a time when many children did not receive explicit instruction in decoding; it was thus seen as a request to emphasize phonics instruction (Snow, 2018). Snow also explained that disagreements exist among reading research scholars, although no one would disagree that decoding and listening skills are important factors determining the outcomes of reading comprehension. The disagreements that exist are related to (a) the question of how much of the variance in reading comprehension can be explained by the product of decoding and listening comprehension, (b) the nature of the contributions of decoding and comprehension, (c) the best methods for assessing listening and oral language skills for testing learning models, and (d) the degree to which the predictors share variance (Snow, 2018). Snow's main objection to the SVR was its exclusive focus on the reader, to the extent of ignoring the content and structure of the text, and its adequacy for experienced readers rather than beginners.

Alternative models to the SVR were presented in Snow (2018), namely the Complete View of Reading (CVR), which accounts for contributions from both the reader and the text, plus an extension of the CVR. The CVR, thus reflects the developmental shifts inherent in the increasing levels of challenge represented by the texts that students are expected to understand during primary school grades, and the extension refers to tasks and activities undertaken by older learners and adults. Thus, the alternative views extend beyond the reader and take textual characteristics into account, i.e., the level of difficulty, genre, and writers' intentions and perspectives.

The Active View of Reading

Duke and Cartwright (2021) offer an alternative view of reading. They use the construct "reading" to mean "reading comprehension". The authors admit that their model of reading is a "reader model" (p. S33), acknowledging that other relevant factors are the texts involved, tasks, and the sociocultural context. The significance of the adjective "active" in their model of reading lies in their inclusion of an *agentive* component beside the two that are included in the SVR, namely word recognition and language comprehension. This additional component is "active self-regulation", which includes properties like motivation and engagement, executive function skills, and strategy use. An example of the last factor is the use of word-recognition strategies, comprehension strategies, vocabulary strategies, etc.

Executive function skills are cognitive self-regulatory processes used by a reader when tasks are complex and goal-directed: cognitive flexibility, working memory, and inhibitory control, i.e., the ability to be selective about what to devote one's attention to. Katzir et al. (2013) argued that future studies should examine how readers monitor their comprehension and learning process while reading a text and how disfluency affects such higher-level processes of monitoring.

In addition to the three components mentioned so far, Duke and Cartwright (2021) argue that word recognition and language comprehension, which have been identified as separate skills in SVR, are not entirely separate; there is an overlap between them. In fact, the authors add "bridging processes" to their model of reading, and this fourth component includes features like print concepts, reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, morphological awareness, and graphophonological-semantic cognitive flexibility. This last characteristic refers to letter-sound-meaning flexibility. In sum, reading is the outcome of the reader's active self-regulation working on aspects pertaining to word recognition, language comprehension and the bridging processes between the two. The value of Duke and Cartwright's (2021) contribution is the clarity and systematicity of their exposition. Moreover, the authors are able to justify the importance of each component in their model by referring to research studies that demonstrate how instruction, taking these into account, leads to students' improved reading.

Contributions from Text Linguistics

Duke and Cartwright (2021) recognize that "[r]eading is also impacted by text" (p. S33), it is important to keep in mind that verbal content that is consumed by readers is most frequently more than single words and sentences. Text linguistics can contribute to highlighting the challenges in verbal text comprehension and, thus open up for potential additions to the SRM guidelines. We do not wish to challenge that urgency in the need to develop decoding skills in early graders is vital. However, insights into how texts are organised and how different text elements have a role to play as parts of a coherent whole should be part of any reading teacher's knowledge base (Van Dijk, 1980, 2008; Halliday & Hasan, 2014). Therefore, the text linguistic perspective is relevant in an examination of the Ethiopian guidelines, and it is also a recognized perspective for determining the readability of a text (Bailin & Grafstein, 2016). If the guidelines for SRMs were based on principles of coherence and a well-formed structure for educational texts, they could help authors shape engaging and comprehensible texts for different grade levels.

Schema-theoretical and Constructivist Perspectives

When schema theory is applied in reading research, important features are readers' previous experiences and background knowledge and the relevance of these to representations or constructions in readers' minds. For instance, the construction-integration model indicates that reading is composed of the propositional representation of a text and the reader's background knowledge, often understood as cognitive schemata of previous experiences (Kintsch, 1998; Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1978). The model highlights the process by which a reader integrates the information gained from a text with their prior knowledge to

form a mental representation of the text's meaning. Among the more current developments in the field, schema theory has been shown to be relevant when used in prereading activities for struggling readers (Little & Box, 2011). Further, an experimental study has shown that having or not having established schemata is crucial for reading comprehension among college students (Liu, 2015).

Furthermore, Langer (2005), and Langer and Nicolich (1981), and Snow and Sweet (2003) adopted the constructivist approach and stated that readers *construct* meaning based on the information in a text and the information readers bring with them, that is, a reader's background knowledge. A situational model takes the constructivist model a step further and considers text comprehension to be a dynamic and cumulative process that highlights a reader's growing knowledge about a topic (Kintsch, 2009; Tapiero, 2007).

Multimodality

In their approach to multimodality, Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) pointed out that text and illustrations are distinct modes of communication, with their own expressive possibilities and limitations. When the two modes are used together, each mode carries only a part of the meaning or "informational load" (Kress, 2003, p. 141). The visual mode of illustrations has the potential to carry additional information, which might have a significant impact on readers' responses to a text. It is important to consider how illustrations interact with written text, as this plays an important role in improving young readers'comprehension (Wyile, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000; 2006).

Readability

A quantitative perspective on illustrations, words, syllables, sentences, and graphic elements, such as font size, text density, and spacing permeates the criteria in the guidelines for SRMs. This attempt to establish levels of progression by applying a kind of quantification of readability can be traced back to the 1970s in Europe with a considerable interest in the readability of texts, mainly in library and informatics studies and the psychology of reading (Falkenjack et al., 2013). Different measures of readability, including readability formulas and tests, were established with the aim to advise users in the selection of texts. In Scandinavia, a readability index called LIX was developed by Swedish researcher Björnsson (1968). Readability identified as LIX could be measured in every text if the following data were inserted in the formula: the length of the sentences and the percentage of long words (defined as words with more than six letters). The formula is as follows:

$$LIX = A/B + (C \times 100)/A$$

A = the number of words
B = the number of sentences (defined by period, colon, punctuation, or by capital initial letter)
C = the number of long words (> 6 letters)

A low LIX value indicates readable text, while a high value indicates the opposite. LIX values are usually under 25 for children's picture books, 25–30 for simple texts, 30–40 for general fiction, 40–50 for informational articles, 50–60 for other non-fiction texts such as

newspaper articles, and above 60 for subject-oriented texts such as research and law discourse (Bram, 1977).

A low LIX score, which denotes high readability, does not guarantee that the text is comprehensible. Among other things, readability measures are computed irrespective of how a text is structured, the proportion of unknown words, or the requirements for comprehending different sections of the text. Neither sentence construction nor inferencing – aspects that might cause challenges in comprehension – are considered. Some types of readability indexes may capture a few of these conditions, but in general they are nothing more than simplified measures of overall readability. However, a text-linguistic perspective would consider both sentence construction and inferencing.

It is also worth noting that a text becomes longer as readability increases, even when the information conveyed remains the same. This is because, if difficult domain-specific words are retained, the number of easy-to-read words must be increased to improve readability. Still, it may be possible to replace some of the difficult words with simpler ones to avoid increasing the length of a text. A long text will negatively affect LIX, indicating that the material is difficult, while easy-to-read words will make the text more comprehensible.

Interestingly, the readability of texts with the same LIX scores can widely differ based on a reader's knowledge of the topic and how the reader experiences or approaches the text. It is of great value for readers' comprehension of the text if they consider the text exciting, which often happens if it is of good quality, simple, and engaging (Lundetræ & Walgermo, 2021). A final qualification is that readability formulas are partly language-specific (Oakland & Lane, 2004); implications for the Ethiopian context, therefore, are difficult to determine.

The aim of this paper was to critically review the guidelines from the perspective of research in the areas of reading and reading development, text linguistics, and multimodality. The study is framed by the following research questions: (1) What are the issues constituting the minimum quality standard in the MoE guidelines for SRMs? (2) How is reading comprehension conceptualized in the guidelines?

The findings of the first research question form the basis for exploring the second question. The criteria listed in the guidelines are examined in relation to existing research on reading comprehension and reading development. Practical-pedagogical implications of our findings for teachers, authors, and readers are suggested in the concluding part of the article.

Methods

The method applied in this study is a critical analysis of a central practical-pedagogical document, i.e., the MoE guidelines for developing supplementary materials in support of reading skills development in primary school. We considered the general directions for all grades and types of SRMs as well as the criteria for each grade, primarily focusing on the seven criteria: font size, illustration, text density, spacing, sentence length and type, words and syllables, and what is referred to as "other issues".

We do not understand reading as only involving decoding, i.e., word recognition as a result of the application of phonological awareness, letter-sound matching, and comprehension; rather, we extend our perspective to include texts of increasing levels of challenge from Grade 1 to Grade 4. We first apply a text-linguistic approach which focuses

on how texts are structured. The visual mode is then integrated, and we perceive images as generally having more than one function, i.e., they do not only depict the same content as the verbal text but may also widen and even contradict it. Throughout the analysis, comparisons are made with children's picture books since these books and narrative SRMs are types of children's literature intended to be read for interest and pleasure.

Having broadly presented the theoretical perspectives based on which we will critically review the guidelines in this article, let us introduce our analysis with a general observation regarding SRMs. These texts can be seen as constituting a text type of their own. They are not curriculum-based textbooks; nor are they picture books. SRMs are defined by their function – their aim is to provide a supplement to other reading materials. In other words, SRMs are sources of intentional literature, both narrative-based and subject-oriented, and they may include expository texts or information texts. The guidelines for SRMs are constructed to facilitate text production, which implies that authors follow a set of norms that govern what texts for Grades 1–4 are to be composed of. The guidelines include specific and detailed requirements organized according to a desirable progression. Consequently, they can be seen as enacting the MoE's efforts to meet the expected needs of a typical reader at each of the four early-grade levels.

The general directions of the guidelines state that SRMs should support or enhance educational curricula (MoE, 2016). This means that SRMs supplement the textbooks used in classrooms, with the intention of providing reading experiences, practice, and strengthening children's knowledge about the world. There are several differences between children's literature and books that serve as SRMs, both in terms of the production process and how the texts are written. A major difference is that children's books are written by authors enjoying creative freedom, whereas authors of SRMs are constrained by relatively strict quality standards.

The general directions mention that it is important for authors of SRMs to be skilled and experienced in writing materials for children in the early grades (MoE, 2016, p. 4). Moreover, they are required to know the languages used for classroom instruction and used by the students themselves. It is also mentioned that SRMs should include both fiction and non-fiction texts for all grades.

Writing SRMs in accordance with the guidelines established by the MoE entails that authors must refrain from developing their own style and using a range of rhetorical expressions, including illustrations. SRMs are supposed to strengthen a learner's reading skills and knowledge about the world. Such books are at risk of being purely instrumental and based on a predefined set of expected descriptors for reading development. Decodable books are instrumental in that they are constructed with a phonics rationale. Leveled books, on the other hand, are supposed to be engaging and interesting. There is a potential dilemma involved in commissioning texts with a mandated content and simultaneously expecting engaged reception. Motivated reading is an aim and an important aspect for children's reading experiences, both when they are being read to and when they read independently.

Results and Discussion

The guidelines posit seven criteria for developing SRMs: font size, illustration, text density, spacing, sentence length and type, words and syllables, and 'other issues' (MoE, 2016). Every grade from first to fourth has its own specifications as well as A and B levels, corresponding to the two halves of a school year. This leads to a detailed set of specifications and eight levels for each criterion. Each of these criteria will be explored and discussed in the following sections.

Our analysis in this paper is a critical reading of what the guidelines say based on research in text linguistics and the current field of reading and reading development. The guidelines outline both legibility and readability. Legibility is a typology criterion that has to do with the ease with which type characters can be read, while readability is related to linguistic and content-oriented issues. Criteria clearly related to legibility are font size, text density, and spacing.

Font Size

The guidelines provide detailed recommendations for the use of either Latin or Geeze fonts, which can be seen as an indication of the importance of these fonts for SRMs. Font size is mandated to decrease with subsequent grade levels. Table 1 illustrates how this works out in practice for each grade level. For the Latin font, one vowel and one consonant have been selected; since Geez alphabets are not phonemic but syllabic, the initial two alphabets, ሀ and ለ, have been chosen.

Table 1

Grade Levels and Font Sizes

Grade Level and Font Size	Latin Font (Times New Roman)	Geeze Font
Students below Grade 1: minimum 30 pt.	Aa Bb	ሀለ
Grade 1, Level A: 24–26 pt. (Example in 24 pt.)	Aa Bb	ሀለ
Grade 2, Level A: 22–24 pt. (Example in 22 pt.)	Aa Bb	ሀለ
Grade 3, Level A: 16–18 pt. (Example in 16 pt.)	Aa Bb	ሀለ
Grade 4, Level A: minimum 14 pt. (Example in 14 pt.)	Aa Bb	ሀለ

The perceptual features of words and how they affect children's comprehension have scarcely been investigated compared to research on linguistic, cognitive, and metacognitive skills. However, two studies have focused on this textual aspect. Katzir et al. (2013) demonstrated that font size has implications for children's comprehension. Font size, line length, and spacing were manipulated in an experimental study involving second and fifth

graders, and the results showed that second graders received lower comprehension scores as font size decreased (Katzir et al., 2013). In contrast, a decrease in font size led to higher comprehension scores among fifth graders (Katzir et al., 2013). The researchers were careful when generalizing these results, as they had not controlled for reading time, and students with good comprehension skills often read more fluently.

The second study of the perceptual properties of text-related reading comprehension investigated how reading comprehension starts with understanding text design and information. Reading rate and reading comprehension were assessed as measures of text quality, whereas font size, font type, and font formatting (e.g. italics and bold) were measures of text legibility (Sheedy et al., 2005). The following conclusions were reached: First, a font size larger than Verdana 10 pt does not improve the legibility of words or letters. Second, the most legible texts are those in sans serif fonts. Third, a font enhanced with bold is more legible than the default text. Finally, the use of italics makes the text less legible.

The two studies presented above indicate that font size matters and that young students need a reasonably large font size. As students grow older, smaller font sizes are recommended. Font size is indeed an essential criterion for developing alternative guidelines for SRMs.

Illustration

The guidelines show a clear understanding of the importance of illustrations for young students. Accordingly, they highlight that "supplementary reading materials should prioritize students' attention to print and use illustrations to highlight core features of the text" (MoE, 2016, p. 5). The function of illustrations is a combination of supporting print content and providing aesthetic pleasure or triggering engagement.

The guidelines cover three aspects of this criterion: the number of illustrations per page, the level of detail in the image, and the relationship between the meaning of the image and the meaning of the verbal text. The guidelines recommend one illustration per page for Grade 1, one illustration every second page for Grade 2, and one illustration every third page for Grade 3. For Grade 4, one illustration per chapter is recommended. It is mentioned that the level of detail should increase as students grow older, but this is not explained further. Moreover, the relationship between the meaning of an illustration and the meaning of printed text will change as children's reading skills develop and their reliance on visual support for understanding becomes less important.

In picture books, illustrations are important for developing and conveying meaning, whether they display the physical appearances of characters and the unfolding events in a story (Wyile, 2001), enhance the atmosphere of a story (Lewis, 2001), or show a discrepancy when compared with the words, thus facilitating an understanding of a larger meaning (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000).

With regard to picture book theory, Nikolajeva and Scott (2000; 2006) outlined the interplay between illustrations and written text as either symmetrical, implying that the illustration and verbal text convey approximately the same message, or an enhancing or complementary function, which means that the additional information provided by the text or the image may be minor or very different (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000).

The first type of relationship is addressed in the guidelines, i.e., the verbal and non-verbal text conveying the same information; the second relationship is not. The focus is on the supportive role of illustrations and their level of detail. Importantly, it has been documented in research on language comprehension and language learning that images have a clear impact on reading among children aged 5–6 years (Sandvik & Spurkland, 2009). In a small qualitative study involving six children aged 11–14 years, illustrated and non-illustrated books were compared. The illustrated book was found to engage readers more deeply and critically than the non-illustrated one (Aggleton, 2017).

However, not all researchers agree on the positive impact of illustrations in children's literature. Elster and Simons (1985) argued that illustrations can impair readers' comprehension and recall of the information presented in the verbal text. They claimed that readers would be distracted by the pictures, and, consequently, their reading skills would be affected. This is not the only caveat; over-reliance on pictures for comprehension might detract from a concentration on print. This is an unwelcome risk if the main objective is to enhance learners' decoding skills. This implies that illustrations are intended to be purely informative at the beginning, to support readers' comprehension of the written text. Thus, the guidelines seem to play down the aesthetic role of illustrations as well as the fact that illustrations can challenge readers by contradicting or extending written text. However, this fact is justified in the description of the different levels with respect to learners' perceived needs.

In the "Other Issues" section of the guidelines, the use of colors is commented upon: "Black and white, four color and full color materials appear to be equally effective in teaching children to read. However, using color in early grade materials may motivate children to enjoy reading" (MoE, 2016, p. 10). From the guidelines, it is also clear that colored books are expensive to produce, and in a school context where there is a lack of reading materials, the decision about what to prioritize is clear: increasing the number of books is more important than making them attractive using colors. To conclude, we wish to emphasize that the guidelines are not explicitly aligned with theoretical, research-based knowledge about multimodal texts and their role in reading comprehension and motivation to read. One reason may be that in Grades 1–4, the role of any semiotic resource is primarily to support comprehension, avoid distractions, and enhance emergent reading capacity. In this way, readers will not have to rely on their own attention-controlling strategies (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

Text Density

According to the guidelines, text density refers to the number of words per line and the number of lines per page. Low densities are recommended for younger students, subsequently increasing with grade level. Implicitly, the lengths of long words affect text density, with the occurrence of long words resulting in fewer words per line.

Text density for Grade 1 (Level A) starts with 4–6 words per line and 4–6 lines of text per page. If the textual material has long words, each line is reduced to 2–6 words and/or 1–2 sentences per page. For Level B, the recommended words and lines of text per page increase by two to 6–8 words per line and 6–8 lines per page. For grade 2 Level A, both the words per

line and lines of text per page increase to 8–10. Level B requires more than 10 words per line and lines of text per page.

Text density increases gradually with each grade level, and for the third grade, the quantifications are given in paragraphs: 1–2 paragraphs for both Level A and Level B, and a paragraph is to have 2–4 sentences. For Grade 4, a paragraph is required to have 3–5 sentences for Level A and 3–6 sentences for Level B. The number of paragraphs per page is not specified but should probably be more than one. Furthermore, the guidelines specify the number of chapters required for each type of book for Grade 4. A narrative book is required to have 1–3 short chapters, while an expository book should have 4–5 short chapters. However, the guidelines do not mention anything about the length of a short chapter. For some criteria, the question arises whether the leveling system is appropriate, or whether the step from one level to the next is too steep given the unique Ethiopian context.

In Katzir et al.'s (2013) experiment (see the section about "Font Size" above), line length was a perceptual factor that had a negative impact on the reading comprehension of first graders, whereas it had no effect on fifth graders. This result is relevant for our examination of the guidelines, and we are positively inclined towards requirements that take line lengths into consideration. However, the detailed requirements for the eight levels in the guidelines are not justified by reference to research and create a rather challenging system of quantification for authors to follow.

Authors of children's literature may seem to be oriented towards some norms of words per line and number of lines per page, which they adjust according to children's age. This norm orientation may come from the publisher, or it may come from knowledge about how other authors of children's literature have solved the question of text density. However, such norms are implicit and not stated in official documents.

Long words are not defined in the guidelines, but their existence is consequential. This is a flawed specification in guidelines that otherwise give quite detailed specifications, although not always convincingly. The frequency of long words is partly language-dependent, in that a language may have long words due to their typological status as a synthetic language.

The lengths of narrative and expository books are specified without explicit connection to the content and topic being treated. Therefore, we may expect that an exciting narrative with an intricate problem would require more pages than an animal fable or an everyday story about a routine shopping trip. The same applies to expository texts. Determining the number of chapters restricts authors from developing the plots of their stories and from presenting the background knowledge they find relevant to expository texts. However, this critical reflection may appear overly theoretical if the realities of classroom routines of 40-minute lessons are taken into account.

Spacing

Spacing concerns the distance between lines and between words. Materials for students in Grade 1 are required to have a double space between lines and three letter spaces between words. For Grade 3, a double space between lines and two letter spaces between words are required. For Grade 4, the spacing between lines should be 1.5, while the space between words should be one letter, which is the normal spacing.

Katzir et al. (2013) showed that line spacing had no effect on the reading comprehension of second or fifth graders. Thus, research has been conducted, but the results have been inconclusive so far. However, as observed above, space is among the set of norms that the authors of children's literature are oriented towards.

Sentence Length and Type

In the guidelines, sentence length and sentence type are described separately, although these two criteria are closely interrelated. Therefore, we examine them separately below. Only a few criteria in the guidelines address text properties that lie beyond the boundary of the sentence and encompass the text in its entirety.

Sentence Length

For Grade 1 (Level A), 2–6 words per sentence are recommended. The length should then increase progressively with each subsequent grade and level. If a language has long words with many morphemes, the average number of words per sentence for this level is 4, but it should not be more than 9. For Grade 1 (Level B), an increase in the number of words is recommended, but the average should not be more than 11 (for example, when dialogue is used), which might indicate an understanding that direct speech is easier to comprehend than indirect speech. Furthermore, the recommended lengths are 14 words for Grade 3 (Level A), 17 words for Grade 3 (Level B), and 20 words for Grade 4 (Level A). For all grades and levels, the average number of words per sentence is listed, so we assume that a certain degree of freedom is given to the authors.

The lengths of sentences and paragraphs, as well as syntactic complexity, affect how easy or difficult it is to understand a text (Cutting & Scarborough, 2006; Scott, 2009). Several studies have shown that syntactic competence and syntactic awareness are correlated with and contribute to reading comprehension in primary school (Brimo et al., 2017; Gallagher et al., 2000; Gaux & Gombert, 1999; Poulsen & Gravgaard, 2016; Scarborough, 1990). The guidelines for SRMs indicate that sentence length is one of the predictors of the decodability of a text. The other predictors are average word length and average number of sentences in a text (the length of the text). These features indicate the level of difficulty in decoding the text but not whether the content is easy or difficult to understand (Staphorsius & Krom, 2013), which we find regrettable. Therefore, we claim that the guidelines establish a set of criteria separate from contextual factors; they are applicable to the development of SRMs, regardless of topic and genre.

Sentence Type

For Grade 1 (Levels A and B), the requirements state that sentences should follow a very simple structure (SVO/IO) (subject-verb-object/indirect object) comprising one verb and one simple tense. Each sentence should start on a new line. Compound sentences are permitted only if they are natural to the text. However, the nature of the descriptor "natural" is not explained in the guidelines.

For grade 2 (Level A), the guidelines prescribe "[m]ostly sentences with a very simple structure (SVO/IO + one modifier), more than one verb, additional tenses are permitted at

this level. Each sentence starts on a new line. Compound sentence only if natural to the text" (sic) (MoE, 2016, p. 8). The guidelines for Level B call for "[m]ostly simple sentences, some compound sentences. (SVO/IO + two modifier), more than one verb, additional tenses are permitted at this level. A sentence can flow to the next line as there is space" [sic] (MoE, 2016, p. 8). Then, for Grade 3 (Level A), the guidelines permit compound sentences: SVO/IO + 3^+ modifiers. Additionally, the requirements allow a sentence to flow to the next line when there is space, and a new sentence may begin on the same line. However, a new paragraph should start on a new line. For Grade 3 (Level B), the complexity of sentences is greater since it allows more complex sentences in the form of compound sentences and more complex verb forms.

Finally, for Grade 4 (Levels A and B), the guidelines allow the following: A mix of simple and more complex sentence structures (numerous compound sentences, range of verb forms, etc.) (SVO/IO + 3^+ modifiers). A sentence can flow to the next line as there is space. Also a new sentence can continue on the same line. Only a paragraph starts on a new line. (MoE, 2016, p. 8).

As the above descriptors show, sentence type is a rather detailed criterion and may be considered a stricter criterion than the others in the guidelines. This is because of the use of the expression "permitted", which is not used in any other description. Authors who follow the guidelines will likely read this as a strong suggestion and try to realize it when writing SRMs.

The research literature does not include any justification for the increasing degree of complexity required with subsequent grades and levels. Although it is known that syntactic complexity is challenging, we could not find research that supports the specific requirements listed in the guidelines for differentiated levels within the same grade. For example, Poulsen and Gravgaard's (2016) study on the syntactic aspects of sentence comprehension and text comprehension in Grade 5 classrooms revealed that some types of relative clauses may cause comprehension challenges. A guideline simply stating the number of allowed modifiers does not take into account the variable level of complexity in modifiers.

We also do not see the rationale behind not permitting any sentence structure other than SVO/IO for Grade 1 Level A. The use of one verb and one simple tense is allowed, but what if an author needs an additional tense to convey something, such as a past action that is relevant to the ongoing narrative? Moreover, only one modifier is permitted for Grade 2 Level A. Instead of using an extra modifier, an author must create a new sentence to provide relevant information.

As is the case with sentence type, the guidelines for sentence length are formalistic and detached from how text processing evolves when an author works within a specific topic and genre. We believe that the guidelines may hinder rather than help the authors of SRMs. Based on the current guidelines, the authors of SRMs have several quantitative requirements to consider, which restrict their stylistic freedom. For example, the field of stylistics has established that a short sentence will be given more attention when it occurs among longer sentences. Therefore, an author's use of a short sentence may be an intentional choice to gain more attention. The author may also need to explain something that has occurred, requiring a shift in tense and often involving a subordinate clause. However, the act of writing SRMs

involves many restrictions that clearly prevent authors from expressing themselves with stylistic freedom. Stylistics is a discipline within the field of linguistics that concentrates on how every linguistic choice can influence the overall effect of a text (Leech & Short, 2007). Taking stylistics into consideration can improve the flexibility of the guidelines, resulting in improved SRMs. At the same time, there is the risk that emergent readers might struggle with decoding and understanding the text.

Words and Syllables

Words and syllables are treated separately in the guidelines; therefore, we examine them separately below. The criteria presented for words depend on whether they are known to the reader, whether they are repeated in the text, and whether they are loanwords.

In SRMs for Grade 1 (both levels), 75% of the words used need to be frequent words – that is, words used in texts that students have read before. The high repetition of words in the text is also a requirement. For the second grade (both levels), 50% of the words used need to be frequent, and only some words need to be repeated. In SRMs for the third and fourth grades (both levels), frequent words need to account for 25% of the text. Loanwords are required in fourth-grade texts, although some simple loanwords may be used in third-grade materials. A few words can be repeated in SRMs for the third grade, whereas almost none of the words, except for the most common ones, can be repeated in texts for the fourth grade.

In the guidelines, the references to frequent words – that is, words used in texts that students have read before, demand that the authors of SRMs have knowledge about these texts to reuse some of the known words in the SRMs. The idea behind this criterion is reasonable since students need to hear and use a word several times and in different contexts to learn the word (Horst, 2013). However, it may be challenging for the authors to be aware of students' previous experiences with texts and words. This can be solved by familiarizing oneself with textbooks used for different subjects in the same grade. Notably, the gradual decrease in known words throughout the first four grades is not justified empirically and can be seen as a random downscaling. Alternatively, this decrease can be interpreted as a result of space constraints and the need to give room for progressively increasing decoding challenges and use of strategies in connection with new and unknown vocabulary.

In addition to known and unknown words, the guidelines include criteria for the number of syllables in a word and syllable structure, whether common or irregular and complex. For Grade 1 (Level A), words are required to follow the most common syllable structure, with an average length of two syllables. This requirement increases gradually. In SRMs for Grade 2 (Level A), some irregular syllable structures may occur; the average syllable length is 2–3, but no more than seven syllables are recommended. In texts for Grade 3, many complex syllable structures may occur, and the average syllable length is 2–3, with the longest word allowed consisting of eight syllables. No specifications are given for Grade 4; the guidelines merely state that authors must use grade-appropriate word lengths.

The criteria for syllable length and structure are not as detailed as the other criteria in the guidelines. Further, the details provided for each grade may seem rather arbitrary, except for the fact that short words are easier to decode than long words: words with transparent orthography and simple syllabic structures make reading easier for students in the second grade, both in Finland (Hautala et al., 2012) and in Germany (Hasenhäcker & Schroeder,

2017). In principle, we find this criterion reasonable, as long as variable structural properties in the seven different mother tongues addressed are taken into consideration.

Other Issues

The criteria listed under this heading focus on the graphical and material aspects of SRMs, stating that bold and italic text formats are not suitable for early-grade reading materials, except in titles. Furthermore, the text should be left-aligned, with hierarchical spacing between the different text elements, such as headings, paragraphs, and lines within a paragraph. The use of colors is also commented upon (as mentioned under "Illustration" above). Finally, binding and paper quality are described. This is understandable given the risk of wear and tear in connection with potential transport from school to the home community or reading camps and clubs outside school.

As mentioned above (see "Font Size"), research has shown that fonts enhanced with bold are more legible than default text, whereas text enhanced with italics becomes less legible (Sheedy et al., 2005). Although these research results are supported, we assert that bold formatting must be used only when there is a need to highlight elements in the text.

So far, we have combined the findings based on our exploration of the guideline criteria in an order that aligns with the organization of the document itself. In this part of the Findings and Discussion, other relevant features are included. We need to note that there is explanatory potential in purely contextual and non-literacy factors if we wish to paint a wider picture of why students' reading competencies have declined rather than grown over the years. Obvious, candidates are the simple facts of availability and access to SRMs in all locations, including rural settings. In fact, one of the strategies highlighted for quality and equity improvement in coming years is ensuring timely distribution of SRMs to schools, a highly practical aim.

If empirical studies demonstrate that SRMs unaligned with the guidelines are in use, especially as regards the types of text that are offered, for instance, a higher proportion of expository than narrative texts, books that are too long to be used in 40-minute lessons, and that have too long sentences and multi-syllabic words, the question arises whether a contextually sensitive bottom-up construction of guidelines for the Ethiopian mother-tongue-educational setting would be more effective than a top-down adaptation based on reading research from another cultural context. This might make the progression of levels more in line with actual local situations.

We argue that a formalistic, quantitative approach to readability disregards important factors such as lexico-syntax, semantics, and other qualitative features. A case in point is the *affective* dimension of activities and learning. The degree to which a text is interesting, amusing, and engaging, as well as the semiotic relationship between text and illustrations, has not been addressed in the guidelines.

The first research question raised in this paper forms the basis for our discussion. The second research question regards the conceptualisation of *reading comprehension* in the guidelines. We have shown that most of the criteria in the guidelines are quantitative. The recommendations cover the number of words per line, the number of syllables in a word, the number of illustrations, and how much text is allowed per page as well as the use of known words and loanwords and the repetition of words. We see these strict recommendations as

representative of the Simple View of Reading (SVR), which is concerned with decoding and comprehension as separate components and how this view is mediated by a focus on formal aspects of texts, such as the lengths of words and sentences, the number of lines per page, the distribution of illustrations, and spacing. The content of the text and the reader's background knowledge are ignored. However, these aspects of reading are crucial in all genres, including narratives, and have been recognized as important aspects of reading comprehension for more than four decades (Bublitz, 2011; Smith et al., 2021). Similarly, the agentive role of the reader is not taken into consideration in the guidelines. This factor is strongly implied in the framework for the new competency-based curriculum from 2022. SRMs are meant to be effective, culturally appropriate and grade-relevant. They are also supposed to create an interest and motivation for devoting time to reading in the first place. Also, students' self-efficacy and independent reading and learning are at stake.

The criteria are perceived as formulas based on defined norms for what is expected by an idealized reader in each grade. While some norms may be reasonable, they may be far too detailed in sum to be fully manageable for authors of SRMs. The guidelines are construed at a generalized level and are in essence adaptations to an Ethiopian context of characteristics based on other education-cultural and local realities (USAID, 2014).Thus, they are idealized frameworks which seem to imply that all students in a grade X A/B classroom are at the same level of reading development, share the same background experiences, and are engaged in the same content. This is hardly likely and not even desirable. Every classroom represents a diverse and complex group of students with differing levels of reading comprehension and engagement.

The diversity of ordinary classrooms leads us to the next point, namely that SRM can be seen as a text type of its own, written by authors applying the guidelines established by the MoE. At present, Ethiopian students are meant to have access to SRMs in addition to textbooks, but we are aware of the country's contextual challenges. Under more favorable conditions, we would recommend that SRMs be complemented with children's literature across various genres and topics not bound by the guideline standards. Children's literature can meet the reading and cognitive development levels as well as the interest and motivation levels of every student. However, given the current level of reading achievement for early graders in Ethiopian schools, this would require substantial scaffolding by teachers well informed by reading-pedagogical expertise. Children's literature today raises challenging questions related to identity, diversity, and the environment and can be seen as having its own aesthetics. In many classrooms, children's literature is used for a range of reasons, from learning to read to reading to learn (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2011). The overarching purpose of this paper is to encourage the MoE and teachers to explore the use of children's literature for literacy and learning purposes. Authors of children's literature can also be encouraged to develop SRMs.

The role of children's motivation in reading is an important aspect of understanding reading comprehension (Frost, 2009). In a review paper, Ahmadi (2017) provided solid documentation of the relationship between motivation and reading comprehension for different age groups. The findings indicate that young students should be given exciting books and several texts to choose among at different levels of reading competence. This is an important factor in promoting students' reading (Guthrie, 2003; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

These books should be richly illustrated, with artistic quality being a specific requirement for the design of illustrations, to provide rich opportunities for interactive reading experiences.

Viewing the situation from the perspective of SRM authors makes it clear that strict quantifications can inhibit and limit authors' design of the text if they have to abide by the quantifications. Authors are required to be conscious of every single word they write. This limits the authors' stylistic choices and may, in turn, negatively affect the quality of the texts.

Having claimed that the guidelines represent the Simple View of Reading, we agree that many of the criteria are relevant – with some modifications. For instance, the text should not be too dense. Moreover, the words used should not be too long, and the text should not stand alone without illustrations. Everyday words should be used in combination with a small number of unknown words to convey what the authors have in mind and to promote leaners' use of strategic processes. These recommendations can support authors of SRMs.

As outlined above, the criteria for the choice of vocabulary depend on whether the words are known to the reader, whether they are repeated in the text, and whether they are loanwords. For Grade 1, 75% of the words used are supposed to be frequent words (i.e. words encountered in texts students have read before), with a high degree of word repetition. These requirements may cause the text to lack natural coherence (Halliday & Hasan, 2014). Authentic texts would include chains of nouns and pronouns, with the pronouns referring to subjects introduced in previous sentences (if a given mother tongue does in fact make use of this type of referential substitution). Further, reading research has shown that even when some words are unknown, a reader may still infer meaning based on the context and surrounding words (Rhoder & Huerster, 2002). This view needs to be balanced against the need to first manage to read in the sense of decoding and understanding the words that are on the page.

Determining what words are known words is a difficult task, even though authors may have knowledge of children's local languages and what can be anticipated from their vocabulary at a certain age. It may also be that "known words" are intended to simply refer to vocabulary that is used in the mandatory curricular textbooks and used in the classroom within a particular topic. Ideally, authors of SRMs should have the freedom to write texts that they deem likely to suit the target age group and enrich the topic, and teachers should thereafter prepare their classes for the content and its related vocabulary.

We recommend that the guidelines should consider other perspectives on reading, not just the SVR (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). The Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021) is a promising alternative in that the agentive role of readers is taken into account, and the view that word recognition and language competence sometimes overlap rather than function as two separate components of reading competence. Writing for higher grade levels, authors should have the freedom to choose vocabulary that strengthens the coherence of the text and provides engaging variation for the reader. Text that is organized in paragraphs is easier to interpret, so instead of merely specifying the number of lines required in a paragraph, the guidelines should highlight the function of a paragraph in relation to the whole text. Furthermore, the guidelines should be based on insights from approaches that take the reader's background knowledge into account, as this is a long-recognized aspect of reading comprehension (Langer, 2005; Langer & Nicolich, 1981; Smith et al., 2021; Snow & Sweet, 2003).

Finally, we recommend developing guidelines where the importance of the interplay between text and visual illustrations is acknowledged, drawn from research on children's picture books (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000; 2006). The present guidelines focus on the number of illustrations per page, the level of detail required in images, and – to a certain extent – the relationship between the meaning of an illustration and the meaning of the associated text. The guidelines outline only the symmetrical relationship between images and text and neglect the fact that images can convey additional, or even different, information. We recommend widening the view of illustrations and going beyond their supportive role to progressively include both their aesthetic function and potential meaning in higher grades.

A modest but positive development in reading skills among Ethiopian students was documented in the last EGRA report (USAID, 2019), and a range of significant resources were shown to have an impact: the implementation of mother tongue textbooks, the ratio between mother tongue textbooks and students in Grades 1–4, the availability of teachers' guides for mother tongue teachers, the number of mother tongue teachers at a school, the educational qualifications of teachers, the percentage of mother tongue teachers that have received in-service training, availability of SRMs, and Grade 2 and Grade 3 students' use of the school library. With this in mind, we claim that the continuous improvement and distribution of SRMs can further strengthen this positive development.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Some practical implications of enhanced and more context-sensitive guidelines for teachers, authors, and readers have been mentioned in the Findings and Discussion part above. First, we believe that SRMs would be richer and more engaging if they would involve stylistic and visual variation and not written for idealized readers, based on a clear education-political rationale. Giving the authors of SRMs more freedom and agency in the production process would motivate and stimulate them to develop their profession. For the sake of the teachers, improved guidelines might also call for a more active and interactional role, thereby impacting students' reading comprehension. This may be a challenge in classrooms with many students and one teacher, but group work and discussions can be organized in such classrooms. Another challenge is the reported fact that many teachers lack reading-pedagogical expertise (Haile & Mendisu, 2023).

The Ethiopian context for which the MoE guidelines (2016) have been established represents a society wherein children's reading skills need to be improved, as we have seen. At present, the country does not have a rich tradition of printing children's literature in many genres, but the production of SRMs is an important enterprise with a view to promoting children's reading skills, interest, and motivation. Deplorably, the economic situation is not yet suitable for equipping classrooms with quality literature that engages readers at different stages of reading development. However, exploration and awareness of potential solutions is the very beginning of the improvement process.

Our critical and detailed review of the criteria for developing SRMs (MoE, 2016) has highlighted the need for revised guidelines based on wider theoretical approaches to reading and reading comprehension. Cognitive reading approaches, text linguistics, and multimodal

theory, along with research on children's picture books, can offer insights into reading comprehension and engagement.

The findings presented in this paper have some important implications. Authors of SRMs may perceive a set of revised guidelines as offering a kind of freedom, as they would be released from the predominantly quantitative criteria that govern the word, sentence, and structural levels of text. Perhaps these authors will approach the enterprise of writing for students with increased engagement and joy of reading. We acknowledge that the development of appealing books is associated with higher costs; however, raising the reading skills of children is crucial, and investing in quality is worth the cost.

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