A University Level Linguistics Course Classroom Research: Vocabulary Retention and the Use of L2 and L1

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Abstract

This study is a classroom research carried out in the Linguistics course at university level. The present study aims at finding out to what degree the technical vocabulary of the course is retained by the individuals, while also investigating the effect of using L2 and L1 in the classroom during the lectures. Participants were second grade (N=70) and fourth grade (N=30) university students in the English Language Teaching Department. The data were conducted through a vocabulary and knowledge retention test, and the visa and final exams of the linguistics course. Students' opinions about the Linguistics course were also collected by the help of an interview. The findings suggest that the technical vocabulary as well as the knowledge of the course is forgotten at a significant rate within a certain time. Considering the grades of the students as an indicator of success, the study also revealed that the use of L1 contributed positively to the comprehension of the subject.

Key words: Classroom research, action research, L2 and L1 use, vocabulary retention, Linguistics course, teacher education.

Introduction

Classroom Research

Classroom research is often encouraged by professionals who claim that action research and reflection are very important factors in the professional development of the individuals. Hopkins (2008:1) stated that classroom research is an act teachers embark on, to improve their own or a colleague's teaching, to practice the assumptions of educational theory in live circumstances, or as a means of assessing and implementing all priorities of the school. Likewise, McKay (2006:1) indicated that teachers do research to become more effective. She noted that research contributes to more effective teaching not by just providing definitive results, but by cultivating innovative pedagogical ideas related to the learning and teaching process. Nunan and Bailey (2009:17) suggested that action research is unique because it is done by classroom practitioners with the purpose to change and develop their own practices and experiences at first hand. Lightbown (2000) concluded that the existence of a wide range of realities urges the need for more classroom-based research in wider context. What is more,

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Macaro (2003) demonstrated that classroom research might be integrated in the learning and teaching process, and thus, should not be ignored. Therefore, it seems unavoidable for a responsible and caring educator to conduct research on his/her own practices for the benefit of the students, and to contribute to the literature as well.

In fact, the need to investigate the efficiency and effect of the Linguistics course offered to the foreign language teacher candidates throughout the country was the main motivation of the present study. The focus of the study, on the one hand, is on the retention of the technical vocabulary and knowledge brought by the Linguistics course, while on the other hand, the effect of using L1 and L2 in the delivery and explanation of the lectures is investigated.

In the present study, foreign language (FL) learning and/or teaching is going to be used preferably, to refer to both foreign and second language learning and/or teaching. The reason of this is due to the tendency in the literature to use the two terms interchangeably for some specific reasons. Likewise, I am going to use learning and acquisition interchangeably throughout the manuscript.

Retention (Vocabulary and Knowledge)

It should be noted that the foreign language teacher education program (FLTEP) that is applied at the universities throughout the country contains two types of courses. One type consists of the courses such as Contextual Grammar, Speaking Skills, Advanced Reading and Writing, etc., which aim at improving the linguistic proficiency of the students, while the second type courses such as ELT Methodology, Teaching Foreign Language to Young Learners, Material Evaluation and Development in Teaching Foreign Language, etc. aim to contribute to the pedagogical knowledge of the students. The Linguistics course, however, does not fall into any of those two types. It is quite technical, and the aim of this course is not that clear, at least when it comes to define how it will contribute to foreign language teaching in practice. Although one might propose that it will help students learn about the phonetic system of the language, which is already given by the Speaking courses, or enable them understand the structure of the language, which is again given by other courses such as Contextual Grammar, the question that raises here is whether it is beneficial to spend language teacher candidates time with this course, which contains a great amount of technical vocabulary and knowledge. For this specific reason, before investigating the use of L2 and L1, I wanted to check how much of the vocabulary and knowledge of the Linguistics course is retained by the students, and also, to collect their opinions about the contribution of the course to their personal and professional development.

Although there is no evidence in the literature about the acquisition and retention specifically of the technical linguistic vocabulary, a great spam of research has been carried out related to the various aspects of vocabulary learning (e.g. Tonzar et. al., 2009; Uzun, 2009; Ma and Kelly, 2006; Grace, 2000; Meara and Alcoy, 2010). Hummel (2010) described that students' L2 vocabulary acquisition may be increased by exposure to sentence translation equivalents and participation exercises. Similarly, many studies suggested that learners who were exposed

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to translation equivalents in isolation or in lists performed at high levels (e.g. Prince, 1996; Laufer and Shmueli, 1997).

The Use of L2 and L1

The other concern of the study is whether the use of pure L2 or the use of both L1 and L2 in the explanation of the subject during the lectures is more contributory to the comprehension of the subject. The literature contains a huge amount of information on the matter, but not a certain consensus has been reached yet. The existing theories of foreign language acquisition underlie both the use of L2 as an input for acquisition process (Long, 1981; Krashen, 1982; VanPatten, 2004) and the use of L1 as a cognitive equipment that facilitates interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Nonetheless, as there are not established criteria regarding the amount of target language (L2) input that a learner would need to learn (Edstrom, 2009), it seems that the tendency is shifting towards allowing the inclusion of L1 in the process, in recent years.

In spite of the early assumptions and propositions in FL teaching that L1 should be avoided since it has an inhibitory effect on learning the target language, most research in the recent literature suggests that the mother tongue (L1) of the individuals has a facilitating role in all aspects of language instruction and might be very beneficial when it is used appropriately (e.g. Nation, 2003; Cianflone, 2009; Schweers, 1999; Butzkamm, 2003; Levine, 2003; Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002; Wells, 1999). Even though, Nazary (2008) revealed that the Iranian EFL teacher trainees and teachers showed reluctance to use their L1. This finding clearly indicates how strongly the memorised knowledge and dogmas influence individuals' practices, even when they are proven to be not certain or correct. So, it could be concluded that the use of L1 by both teachers and students might increase not only comprehension but also the acquisition of L2.

The present study is going to report on the classroom research carried out during a university level Linguistics course. The purpose of the study is two-fold. First, to determine to what degree the technical vocabulary of the specific course, which is Linguistics in this case, is retained by the individuals who have taken the course at a certain period of their education. Second, to reveal the effect of using L1 and/or pure L2 while teaching the course. According to my personal observations students lose their motivation and interest in the lesson when it becomes hard for them to follow the lecture. And, the hardness is mostly caused by two factors: the continuous use of L2 and the overwhelming presentation of technical information. So, the present action research aims at finding solutions to the mentioned matter. The research questions are as follows:

- To what degree the technical vocabulary of the linguistics course is retained by the students?
- Is there difference between the grades of the students from the visa and final exams with relation to conditions where L1 and/or L2 was/were used in the teaching of the course?

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Method

The present study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods in the procedure of investigation and data collection.

Participants

The participants were 100 students (72 female and 28 male) in the ELT department at a Faculty of Education. They attended their second (70 students) or fourth (30 students) year in the department, and their age ranged between 19 and 24. All subjects' mother tongue was same, and they have been learning English as a foreign language. None of the second grade students knew other languages except English and their mother tongue, while 7 fourth grade students reported that they knew beginner level French, German, or Russian. The grade point average (GPA) mean of the second year male students was 2,935 and female students' was 2,989 out of 4,00; while the fourth grade male students' GPA mean was 2,595 and female students' was 2, 864 out of 4,00. The mean GPA levels of the students show that the academic achievement level of the subjects is similar. The distribution of the GPA according to grades and genders is presented in Table 1. The number of the female subjects was higher than the male subjects in both grades (2nd and 4th) as this represented the total student profile in the department.

Materials

The data were collected through a vocabulary and knowledge retention test (see Appendix 1), and the visa and final exams of the Linguistics course. Students' opinions were also collected by the help of an interview (see Appendix 2). Both the test and the interview setting was prepared and implemented by the researcher. The vocabulary and knowledge retention test consisted of two parts. The first part (vocabulary retention) required students to complete the given sentences by the correct word(s) such as 'phonetics, psycholinguistics, semantics, computational linguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, diphthong, onomatopoeic, epiglottis, elision, etc.'. These terms would complete the given sentences so that they form their definitions. All terms were extracted from the material of the course that would be taught during the lectures. There were twenty four items in this part. Some examples are as follows:

' is a small flat part at the back of the tongue which closes wher
you swallow to prevent food from entering the tube which goes to the lungs
(epiglottis)
' is the categorisation of world's languages into types
(typology)
' is the study of meaning in human language' (semantics)
' is a vowel sound in which the tongue changes position to
produce the sound of two vowels' (diphthong)
is omission of sounds which would be present in the deliberate
careful propunciation of a word' (elision)

careful pronunciation of a word (elision)

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The second part (knowledge retention) asked students to select whether the given statement was 'true [T] or false [F]'. There were forty two items in this part which aimed at eliciting whether students knew what kind of sounds were the given ones. Three items from each kind (voiced, voiceless, nasal, bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveo-palatal, palatal, velar, glottal, fricative, affricate, lateral) were included in this part. Some examples are as in the following:

- [f] is a voiced sound. (T / F)	- [h] is a fricative sound. (T / F)
- [v] is a voiceless sound. (T / F)	- $[\theta]$ is a fricative sound. (T / F)
- [p] is a voiceless sound. (T / F)	- [z] is a fricative sound. (T / F)
- [b] is a voiced sound. (T / F)	- [dʒ] is an affricate sound. (T / F)
- [s] is a voiced sound. (T / F)	- $[t]$ is an affricate sound. (T/F)
- [z] is a voiceless sound. (T / F)	- [ð] is an affricate sound. (T / F)

These two parts comprised a large part of the Linguistics I course that is taught at the foreign language teacher education departments of the universities nationwide. This is a 3-credit course that is delivered in the first semester of the second year. The FLTEP also contains the Linguistics II course (3 credits), which is taught in the second semester of the second year. All materials were piloted with and validated by three colleagues and four last year students in the department.

Procedure

The present study was conducted during the usual class time within the first semester of 2010-2011 educational year. Two aspects were regarded in this research. The first one was about the vocabulary and knowledge retention, and the second one about the effect of using pure L2 or both L2 and L1 in the classroom.

Vocabulary and knowledge retention

In order to reach a conclusion related to the first matter, I tested the students with the help of the vocabulary and knowledge test which I prepared considering the content of the course. The data collection tool (Appendix 1) was applied to the second grade students right after the formal lectures were launched (pre-test) before any of the requested information was taught to the students, and reapplied in the end of the semester (post-test), which was three months later. Randomly selected items (5 out of 24) from the vocabulary part and (12 out of 42) from the knowledge part were asked to the fourth grade students during the interview sessions in the last week of the semester. Each session took no longer than 20 minutes for each student in the pre-test and post-test applications, and 5 to 7 minutes in the interview sessions. The subjects were informed that it was a research about the course, and that the results would not affect their grades, so that they should feel comfortable. They were also discouraged from giving responses that they were not sure about to assure that the data would reflect what is not by chance or luck.

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The data were gathered and examined separately for the pre-test and post-test sessions, which were applied to the second grade subjects, and results were compared. Following these analyses, the findings were compared to the results that came from the fourth grade subjects to determine about the approximate vocabulary and knowledge retention rate. The findings were presented in percentages, and discussed in the findings part of this article.

L2 and L1 use

In order to reach a conclusion related to the effect of L2 and L1 matter, I randomly divided the second grade students in two classes (35 students in each class). Before the visa exam was done I delivered my lectures both in L2 and L1 to the both classes for a period of five weeks. After the visa exam, I examined the grades of the students and estimated the average score of the two classes. So, before putting my plan into action I had some concrete data about the success level of the students in each class who were treated in the same way by the same lecturer.

Having this in hand, I decided to deliver the lectures in pure L2 with one of the classes, and in both L2 and L1 with the other class. For this reason, I preferred to use pure L2 with the class which provided higher average regarding the grades they got from the visa exam. With the other class in which I used both L2 and L1, English was still used most of the time, but I provided explanation in L1 as well whenever I felt that something was not clear, or when as a teacher I saw it in the eyes of the students. With the other class, however, all additional explanation was in English. This procedure took five weeks until the final exam.

After the final exam, I again collected and examined the grades of the students and estimated the average score of the two classes in order to make a comparison in relation with the effect of L1 and L2 use in the treatment.

In addition to data collection and treatment procedure, the interview session was done one by one and face to face in the office of the researcher. Totally 30 students were interviewed and each interview took approximately 5 to 7 minutes. Additionally, all second grade students were asked whether the Linguistics I course contributed to their personal and/or professional development or not. The findings are discussed in the following part.

Findings

Acquisition and Retention of Technical Vocabulary and Knowledge

According to the observations and findings obtained in the present study, half of the second year students (n=35) indicated that the Linguistics I course has not added much to their personal and professional development. The interview results of the last year students were similar. They have stated that the Linguistics I course was not beneficial for them, and that they have never used the knowledge they learnt in the course (see Table 2).

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Likewise, most of the both second and fourth year students reported that they used the 'memorisation' technique while studying or preparing for the exam of the course, whilst few student stated that they regularly read the texts given by the lecturer for each week and did the exercises, and claimed that they internalised the vocabulary and knowledge somehow.

Another finding was that the mean number of the specific linguistics vocabulary and knowledge related to the content of the course that the students knew before the implementation of the course was 0% (pre-test), whilst it increased up to 49,25% for vocabulary and 64,88% for the knowledge rate (post-test). Nevertheless, the evidence that was observed form the last year students indicates that this rate decreases significantly (see Table 3).

Considering the findings obtained from the present study it would be possible to comment that the technical vocabulary and knowledge that is learned mostly by memorising and also not having much opportunity to use the information in future applications, significantly decreases the retention rate. Similarly, regardless of their age or academic achievement level students tend to drop or forget the information that they believe will not be needed or used. Again, students seem to have more concrete and certain opinion about the benefit, advantages or disadvantages that courses provide them as they have more opportunity to experience and assess their knowledge in practice. This seems to be the case with the fourth grade students in the present study. It is noticeable that although the academic achievement level of the second and fourth year students was similar, half of the second year students believed that the Linguistics I course contributed to their personal and professional development, whilst only few last year students claimed this. So, it is obvious that the belief in technical or impractical knowledge decreases sharply as future applications do not allow access to prior knowledge or their use.

The Effect of L1 and L2

Observations related to the effect of pure L2 use, and both L2 and L1 use on students' success level indicated that there was a significant improvement in the total success of the second group (where both L2 and L1 were used during classes) and in the individual grades as well (see Table 4).

According to the visa and final examination grades of the two groups, the first group seemed to be generally more successful but it was noticeable that the difference between the average grades of the two classes in the two examinations decreased significantly. While the average grade of Class 1 in the visa exam was 68,7 it was 62,2 for Class 2 where the gap between the two classes was 6,5 points. However, the final examination average of Class 2 was 76,3 whilst it was 77,8 for Class 1, a finding revealing that the difference decreased by 5 points. Moreover, I noticed that there was improvement in the individual level. After detailed investigation of the student grades I observed that only five students in Class 1 scored higher than 90 in the final exam, whilst this number was eight in Class 2. And what is more, it was remarkable that only one of the students in Class 1 had a grade of 95, whilst five students in

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Class 2 scored over 95, which indicated that although the overall average of Class 1 was higher, Class 2 surpassed Class 1 in terms of individual success level. This might be interpreted that the involvement of L1 made positive addition to students who were already successful.

Conclusion

To sum up, the Linguistics I course taught students some vocabulary and knowledge which have never been used, and for this reason forgotten suggesting that three hours a week for four months has been spent with no or very little benefit. What is more, the similar process is going to be spend the second semester as well during the Linguistics II course, which is a mandatory course in the ELT program of each university nationwide. However, what the present study proposes is that teacher trainees do not believe in the contribution of the Linguistics course to their personal and professional competencies.

Other remarkable results were that L1 use contributes positively to the comprehension of the subject matters, and improves the individual success. Additionally, my personal observation was that code switching, the use of L1 and L2, improved the motivation of the students and made them more alert during the classes. Again, it was determined that although the technical vocabulary and knowledge acquisition of the students increased, it decreased by more than 50% within two years.

Consequently, it would not be naïve to suggest that courses that provide technical knowledge, which do not allow for practical use and experimentation in the future lives of the students are far from being beneficial, and thus, should be removed or restructured in such a way that students may establish connections with their theoretical knowledge and experiences in order not to think that the spent time was a pure complete loss. So, the grades of the students should not mislead the teachers and authorities.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

It would be naïve to articulate that the findings of the present research might be generalised to all circumstances and conditions. Therefore, there is need to replicate the study and find out if the profile of the subjects and the action researcher might have affected the results. It would be also beneficial to conduct similar research with a higher number of students, and for other subjects than Linguistics, with different procedure and data collection tools. It might be interesting to investigate whether there is any relation between technical vocabulary and knowledge retention and the use of L1 and L2 or pure L2. It would be also useful to collect the opinions of the FL teachers, academicians, and policy makers related to the effect and benefit of the 'technical courses' in the programs of the faculties of education, and observe the difference if there is any. It might also attract the attention of the academic environments, particularly of the quantitative environments, if more and detailed statistical data and numbers were provided.

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Table 1. The distribution of the GPA means according to grades and genders.

		rade Number of students	GPA				n 1
Gender	Grade		below	1.99-	2.50-	above	Mean GPA
	students	1.99	2.49	3.00	3.00	2 5	
Male	2 nd	18	2	1	5	10	2,935
Iviale	4 th	10	-	1	4	5	2,595
Female	2 nd	52	1	3	19	29	2,989
Telliale	4 th	20	-	2	8	10	2,864

Table 2. The responses of the students given to the following question: Did Linguistics I course contribute to your personal and/or professional development?

Class	YES	NO
2 nd Year	35	35
4 th Year	2	28

Table 3. The pre-test and post-test percentage means related to the vocabulary and knowledge level of the second year students, and the retention of vocabulary and knowledge level of the last year students.

	Pre-test		Post-test	
	vocabulary knowledge		vocabulary	knowledge
2 nd Year	0%	0%	49,25%	64,88%
4 th Year -		-	20%	33,33%

Table 4. The mean grades of the two classes from the Linguistics I course Visa and Final exams.

	Number of students	Visa exam average	Final exam average
Class 1	35	68,7	77,8
Class 2	35	62,2	76,3
	Difference	6,5	1,5

Appendix 1

1	·-pponum ·
t 1	complete the sentences below with the appropriate word(s).
.sc	complete the sentences below with the appropriate word(s).
1.	is the study of how language is represented in mind and how
	this knowledge is activated in language use
	is the study of the system of rules and categories that underlies
	sentence formation in human language
	is the field that deals with the organisation of texts including
	ways in which parts of texts are connected and the devices used for achieving textual
	structure
	is the use of knowledge gained from linguistic investigations
	for other purposes
	is the categorisation of world's languages into types
	is the branch of linguistics that examines the inventory and
	structure of the sounds of language
	is the study of changes in a language through time
	is the study of the use of language by poets, novelists, etc.
	is the study of meaning in human language
•	is programming of computers to imitate human language
,	is the study of how human mind conceptualizes world through
	language
•	is the system of categories and rules involved in word
	formation and interpretation
,	is the study of various factors involved in appropriate use and
	understanding of language
•	is the study of the social aspects of language
	is the component of a grammar made up of the elements and
	principles that determine how sounds pattern in a language
•	is a speech sound produced by humans when the breath flows
	out through the mouth without being blocked by the teeth, tongue or lips
•	is pronounced by stopping the air from flowing easily through
	the mouth, especially by closing the lips or touching the teeth with the tongue
•	is a vowel sound in which the tongue changes position to
	produce the sound of two vowels
	is a word which include sounds that are similar to the noises
	that the words refer to
•	is a small flat part at the back of the tongue which closes when
	you swallow to prevent food from entering the tube which goes to the lungs
•	is related to the nose
<u>.</u>	is replacement of one sound with another
э.	is omission of sounds which would be present in the deliberate
1	careful pronunciation of a word
4.	is inserting phonemes to link two words

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Part 2	
Please decide whether the statement is True or	False. Mark the correct option.
1. [f] is a voiced sound. (T / F)	23. $[\int]$ is an alveo-palatal sound. (T/F)
2. [v] is a voiceless sound. (T / F)	24. [ʒ] is an alveo-palatal sound. (T / F)
3. [p] is a voiceless sound. (T / F)	25. [j] is a palatal sound. (T / F)
4. [b] is a voiced sound. (T / F)	26. [tf] is a palatal sound. (T / F)
5. [s] is a voiced sound. (T / F)	27. [dʒ] is a palatal sound. (T / F)
6. [z] is a voiceless sound. (T / F)	_
7. [m] is a nasal sound. (T/F)	28. [k] is a velar sound. (T / F)
8. [n] is a nasal sound. (T/F)	29. [ŋ] is a velar sound. (T / F)
9. [ŋ]is a nasal sound. (T / F)	30. [w] is a velar sound. (T / F)
10. [w] is a bilabial sound. (T / F)	31. [h] is a glottal sound. (T / F)
11. [m] is a bilabial sound. (T / F)	32. $[\theta]$ is a glottal sound. (T/F)
12. [b] is a bilabial sound. (T / F)	33. [g] is a glottal sound. (T / F)
13. [f] is a labiodental sound. (T/F)	34. [h] is a fricative sound. (T/F)
14. [v] is a labiodental sound. (T/F)	35. $[\theta]$ is a fricative sound. (T/F)
15. [p] is a labiodental sound. (T / F)	36. [z] is a fricative sound. (T / F)
16. [ʒ] is a dental sound. (T / F)	37. [dʒ] is an affricate sound. (T / F)
17. $[\theta]$ is a dental sound. (T/F)	38. [t \int] is an affricate sound. (T / F)
18. [ð] is a dental sound. (T / F)	39. [ð] is an affricate sound. (T / F)
19. [l] is an alveolar sound. (T / F)	40. [1] is a lateral sound. (T / F)
20. [n] is an alveolar sound. (T / F)	41. [r] is a lateral sound. (T / F)
21. [d] is an alveolar sound. (T / F)	42. [ŋ]is a lateral sound. (T / F)
22. [r] is an alveo-palatal sound. (T / F)	
W.	Appendix 2
Male ☐ Female ☐	□ cheve 2.00 □
GPA: below 1.99 □ 1.99-2.49 □ 2.50-3.00	□ above 3.00 □
- Do you remember the content of the Linguisti	cs I course? YES □ NO □
- Do you remember any knowledge about the v sounds that you received in Linguistics I cours statements below:	
[η]is a lateral sound. (T / F)	[tf] is an affricate sound. (T / F)
[h] is a fricative sound. (T / F)	[g] is a glottal sound. (T / F)
[k] is a velar sound. (T / F)	[dʒ] is a palatal sound. (T / F)
[r] is an alveo-palatal sound. (T / F)	[v] is a labiodental sound. (T / F)
[w] is a bilabial sound. (T / F)	[m] is a nasal sound. (T / F)
$[\theta]$ is a dental sound. (T/T)	[p] is a voiceless sound. (T / F)
[0] 10 11 000000 (1 / 1)	LF1 is a volcetous sound. (1/1)

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- Why do you remo	ember or not remember the knowledge you received in Linguistics I
	er the following vocabulary that is specific to Linguistics I course? If you
•	ill in the blanks below:
	is replacement of one sound with another.
	is a word which include sounds that are similar to the noises that the
words refer to.	
	is the study of the use of language by poets, novelists, etc.
	is the system of categories and rules involved in word formation and
interpretation.	
	is the study of how language is represented in mind and how this
knowledge is activ	ated in language use.
- Why do you rem	ember or not remember the specific vocabulary of Linguistics I course?
- How did you stud	dy for Linguistics I course?
- Did Linguistics I YES □ NO □	course contribute to your personal and/or professional development?

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