

How Can Chinese English Teachers Meet The Challenge of Creating a Learner-Centered, Communicative, Intercultural Classroom to Achieve Optimal Student Learning Outcomes?

COMMENT LES PROFESSEURS CHINOIS D'ANGLAIS PEUVENT-ILS RELEVER LE DÉFI DE CRÉER UNE AMBIANCE CENTRÉE SUR L'APPRENANT, COMMUNICATIVE ET INTERCULTURELLE POUR ATTEINDRE LES RÉSULTATS OPTIMAUX DE L'APPRENTISSAGE DES ÉLÈVES?

SONG Ying¹

Abstract: Effective reforms on English education in China are necessary and essential. Concepts of western English education, such as learner-centered, communicative, or intercultural bring both enlightenment and confusion to Chinese English teachers. However, the adoption of these concepts must be done based on Chinese its own English teaching and learning context.

Key words: learner-centered; communicative language teaching; intercultural; task based

Résumé: Des réformes efficaces de l'enseignement de l'anglais en Chine sont nécessaires et essentiels. Des concepts de l'enseignement de l'anglais occidentaux, par exemple un enseignement centré sur l'apprenant, communicatif, ou interculturel, rendent les professeurs chinois d'anglais à la fois éclairé et confus. Toutefois, l'adoption de ces concepts devraient être réalisée en fonction du contexte propre de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage en Chine.

Mots-clés: centré sur l'apprenant; enseignement de langue communicatif; interculturel, basée sur le travail

¹ Graduate from University of Sydney, Australia; Master in Education; teach English in English Department, School of Foreign Languages, Hebei Polytechnic University, PRC; lecturer and the assistant of English Department; research interests include genre, Systemic Functional Linguistics, teaching methodology, intercultural communication, applied linguistics, etc. Email: songyingts@163.com.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English learning in China is quite a daunting task. Million of EFL learners take regular English courses, 4 teaching hours (less than one hour) a week, 18 weeks a term, for 12 terms in middle school, 4-8 terms in university (Wu, 2001, p.191). In 2001, a policy required primary students in grades three and above (ages 9-11) to receive two or three 40-minute English lessons per week and for junior and senior middle school students (ages 12-18), the norm is five or six 45-minute English classes per week (Nunan, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). However, after approximately 800 hours of instruction, most Chinese students "are still deaf and dumb in English", since the English courses are test-oriented and grammar-based (Ashmore, 2003, cited in Wighting, Nisbet and Tindall, 2005). The discontentment with the traditional teaching methodology and learning outcome called for CLT, which emphasis on the function of language for meaningful communication.

Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) has been introduced to China since the mid 1980s. However, it was not until the early 1990s that the application CLT gained the substantial progress. In 1992, the State Education Development Commission made the official revision to replace the grammar-structure based syllabus with a new communication-based one aiming at developing communicative of competence.

According to Yu (2001, p.195.), Li Xiaojun and her associates first compiled a series of communicative English text books for Chinese learners in 1979, and then in 1984, Li published "In Defense of Communicative Approach", the first article published in ELT Journal in support of CLT by claiming that "language is communication, and learning a language is learning to communicate" (p.2). Her article greatly influenced Chinese English teachers' attitude toward CLT and resulted in several projects that integrated contents relevant to Chinese learners with common communicative expressions as well as grammatical structures. However, in the late 1980s, 87 percent of teacher in China's middle schools used the traditional structure based method (Zuo et al, 1990, p.40). Even recently some findings also indicate that both teachers and students demonstrate a preference for grammar-based methodology and a resistance to communicative methodology (Hu, 2002; Rao, 2002). In an English Language Teaching (ELT) context, which was previously dominated by traditional grammar-translation approach, the adoption of CLT has been fraught with challenges as well as welcomes (Wighting, Nisbet and Tindall, 2005, p.87).

However, Liao (2004), despite of Bax's "Context Approach" (2003), Larsen-Freeman's "relativism" (2000, p.182) and Holliday's warn (1994) that a method cannot be easily exported from one context to another, adopted Larsen-Freeman's "absolutism" (2000, p.182) view on CLT, claiming that CLT is best in China. He concluded: "the adoption of CLT is the government's position and application of CLT will bring about a positive effect on English teaching and learning" (p.272). Hu (2005), responding to Liao's absolutist claim, pointed out Liao's assumption that CLT is the default methodology for developing communicative ability and appropriate for all context where communicative competence is the pedagogical goal is problematic; his argument that the centrally-controlled education system does not allow teachers to develop their own methodologies and the official imposition of CLT makes it appropriate for teachers to adopt is untenable; his evidence does not make clear whether only CLT feature and communicative activity are observed in the class; and his dogmatic stance toward methodology. Finally he claimed that for any particular methodology, a more rational and productive stance for teachers is to "adopt an eclectic approach and draws on any methodological option at their disposal to meet their specific context" (p. 67).

2. CLT: APPROACH VS METHOD, ADOPT VS ADAPT

CLT is best understood as an approach not a method. It is therefore a set of theoretical assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning and serving as the source of practices and

principles in language teaching” (Brown, 2000, p. 266; Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.19). And method is the overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon, the selected approach, an approach may give rise to more than one method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). For much of its history, ELT is characterized by a search for a single, correct method. Many methods include grammar-translation method, the direct method, the audio-lingual method etc (Brown, 2001). Pennycook (1989, cited in Kumaravadevelu, 2006, p.66) claimed that the concept of method “reflects a particular view of the world and is articulated in the interests of the unequal power relationships” and that it “has diminished rather than enhanced our understanding of language teaching”. Prabhu also argued that there is no best method and the teachers need to learn to “operate with some personal conceptualization of how their teaching leads to desired learning.” (1990, cited in Kumaravadevelu, 2006, p.66). Therefore different methods overlap in the actual language teaching practice and it has developed into what Kumaravadevelu (1994) called postmethod condition. In China, in the mid of 1990s, CLT has become “a general approach in language teaching and learning” or “a principled communicative approach” rather than a specific method (Gong, 1999, p.116). A vast majority of English teachers, researchers or education practitioners focus on the need to adapt CLT to suit the specific context of English teaching and learning in China (Rao, 2002, p.86). The use of CLT discussed in this article is mainly on the development of speaking skills.

2.1 Characteristics of CLT and context-based adaptation

2.1.1 Learner-centeredness

CLT is learner-centered rather than teacher-dominated. In the traditional classroom, the teacher transmits information to the learners and “controls” the learning. On the contrary, in learner-centered instruction, students are actively involved in the learning process making choices about what to learn, how to learn and how to be assessed, while teacher adopt a guiding and facilitative role. Learners are involved in learning through doing or using (Nunan, 1999). The concept of learner-centered method accords well with that of autonomy (Littlewood, 1996). Benson (2003, p.290) thought “autonomy is perhaps best described as a capacity... because various kinds of abilities can be involved in control over learning. Researchers generally agree that the most important abilities are those that allow learners to plan their own learning activities, monitor their progress and evaluate their outcomes.” The characteristics of a learner-centered classroom can be summarized as:

- ◆Explicit learning goals: Teacher should make the instruction goal clear to learners and allow learners to create their own goals.
- ◆Strategy-based instruction: Teacher should help learners to identify their own preferred styles and strategies.
- ◆Personalized learning: Teacher should choose the learning content based on learners’ interests or daily life, for example football, chatting online, etc.
- ◆Active learning: Teacher should help learners to raise awareness of learning process and encourage learners to speak English outside of classroom.
- ◆Reflective learning: Teacher should help learners self evaluate their learning outcomes and identify the weak points that still need practice.

However, Chinese culture of teaching and learning and the traditional grammar-translation method exist as two of the most important constraints on adoption of learner-centered method. Traditional Chinese classroom regards the transmission of authoritative knowledge as the most important task of the teacher, while most varieties of CLT or learner-centered method define teacher’s role as co-communicator, a needs analyst, an organizer of resources, a facilitator of procedures and activities, a negotiator or learner. Learners are traditionally assumed as passive receiver of knowledge and performer of teacher’s direction, but CLT or learner-centered method proposes that learner should be negotiator, communicator, discover and contributor of knowledge and information (Nunan, 1991). Yu (1984) compared accumulating knowledge and using knowledge to saving money in bank and using it later and revealed that learning is traditionally viewed as accumulation of knowledge rather than practical process

of using knowledge for practical purposes. Brick (1991, p.154) also added “learners must first master the basics and only when this is accomplished are they in position to use what they have mastered in a creative manner”. CLT principles advocate practice of teaching to specific needs, and this “learn by using” approach does not fit in the Chinese “learn to use” philosophy (Hu, 2002). Hu (2002, p.100-102) also summarized learning strategies valued in Chinese culture and tradition as four Rs and four Ms, which are:

- ◆Reception: Learning is a process of reception.
- ◆Repetition: Learners need to repeatedly study what they do not understand.
- ◆Review: Learners review what they have learned and repeated not only to consolidate learning but also to gain new knowledge and deepen understanding.
- ◆Reproduction: Learners are expected to be able to reproduce accurately the transmitted knowledge on demand from teacher and test.”
- ◆Meticulosity refers to the smallest detail of knowledge and no tolerance of ambiguity.
- ◆Memorization is distinguished from rote learning, instead, it emphasizes memorize with understanding to memorize what is understood and understand through memorizing, which results in mental activeness rather than verbal activeness.
- ◆Mental activeness
- ◆Mastery is regarded as the end of learning.

It is obvious to see that the learning strategies of four Rs and four Ms are in absolute contradiction with the CLT practice. And then three preparations are identified as the prerequisites for the implementation of learner-centered method.

◆Psychological preparation

Psychological preparation means teacher should help learners become willing to take responsibility for their own learning and build their confidence in learning independently from teacher by raising their awareness and changing their attitude. When learners become willing to be in charge of their own learning, their motivation will surely increased, which undoubtedly causes the effective learning outcome. Furthermore the effectiveness builds learner’s confidence in a greater extent involvement in learning.

◆Strategy preparation

Strategy preparation refers to teacher helps learners to develop new learning strategies serving the learner-centered method. Wenden (1986, cited in Yang, 1999) claimed that learners’ preconceived beliefs about language learning would affect their learning strategies used in language learning. Therefore, first learners’ old concept about English learning must be changed, which prepares the change of learning strategies. And then some strategies stressed by learner-centered method will be introduced to learners, such as verbal interaction, tolerance of ambiguity and error, collaborative learning, self evaluation or peer evaluation etc.

◆External preparation

Some external preparations are also essential to the learners’ taking care of their own learning, for example teaching facilities should be equipped and some teaching materials should be written to support the adoption of learner-centered method.

2.1.2 Cooperative learning

CLT encourages cooperative and collaborative learning with learners working in pairs and groups for much of the time, therefore, teacher should provide enough time and opportunities for learners to communicate and share information in class. In the context of college English, students come from different regions all over the countries, which causes the great difference in their previous English learning experience, strategies and ultimately their English proficiency. Generally speaking, English of students from economically developed coastal provinces and urban area is better than those from inland rural areas (Hu, 2003). To gain the expected outcome from cooperative learning, one of the most important things is to ensure that group members have the similar English proficiency, especially the spoken English proficiency and listening ability. Like Skehan (2002, p.290) said “what may be presented to a group may only be appropriate for a small number of learners within that group”. For some ones it is

too difficult, yet to some others it is too easy. So based on their scores of entrance English exam, an oral test should be conducted as the additional standard for grading students into different levels. Some major Chinese universities, for example Northern Communication University (Bao, 2002, Nov 30), have already adopted such measure to grade students into different levels and design tailored syllabus. In the syllabus for students graded with high proficiency, communicative competence takes a dominant position. Even the students with similar general English and spoken English proficiency do not necessarily cooperate harmoniously because of their different learning styles. Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory (1983) may provide a method for dividing students into groups sharing similar learning styles as well as an interesting in-class activity.

2.2 Task-based VS PPP / Indirect VS direct

The Chinese traditional approach is PPP: presentation, practice and production. It focuses on instructed rules which are then automatized as a set of habits. It is regarded as direct approach and accords well with Chinese philosophy of learning to use. However such a belief that learners will learn what they are taught and in the order in which they are taught does not carry credibility in linguistics or psychology (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; Ellis, 1985, cited in Skehan, 1996), and teacher's focused inputs were not necessarily converged into learner's output.

CLT uses task-based (TB) instruction. This means that learners are given tasks that require them to "comprehend, manipulate, produce and interact in the Target Language" for genuine communication (Nunan, 1989, cited in Richards, 1999, p.3). It is also called indirect approach (Richards, 1990, cited in Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell, 1997), since other aspects of communicative competence are acquired incidentally in such a process of learning through using. Examples of this include the 'information-gap exercise' and various 'problem-solving tasks'. The tasks primarily focus on meaning rather than form. However any method or approach must undergo a cyclical process, which is first proposed, accepted, applied and finally criticized, and TB is no exception. Schmidt (1991, cited in Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell, 1997, p.145) criticized it is not accordance with principles of cognitive theory; and Widdowson (1990, cited in Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell, 1997, p.145) also argued that incidental or natural language acquisition is a "long and rather inefficient business". For EFL learners in Chinese context, this TB approach provides opportunities to develop communicative competence on one hand and a series of questions to be answered on the other hand.

First, we have to notice that learners do the communicative tasks under limited time and pressure, especially while interacting with teacher or foreign teacher. Although learners can rely on strategic competence or prefabricated chunk to get meaning across, it is still not beneficial to their long-term interlanguage development. Some linguistic competence such as certain lexical items or grammatical structures may be acquired naturally through negotiation with teacher or other learners, however, pragmatic competence or socio-cultural competence such as pragmatic regularities, polite strategies, turn-taking system or nonverbal strategies etc is truly difficult to be acquired and negatively influences their communicating process. For example, many language learners "have great difficulty in getting into a conversation, knowing when to give up their turn to others, and in bringing a conversation to a close." (Nolasco and Arthur, 1987, cited in Paltridge, 2001, p.37) In such a case, some certain instructions about specific items are necessary. Therefore, an eclectic approach to integrate indirect approach with direct approach could be ideal for Chinese context or most of other contexts.

Second, how can we set an appropriate pedagogical goal? Usually speaking, the three pedagogical goals for language teaching are accuracy, fluency and complexity. Accuracy, which traditional grammar-translation method emphasizes, concerns the extent how well learner's outputs accord with the rule system of target language. Fluency, which is the focus of TB approach or CLT approach, concerns whether learner produce language in doing a task with reasonable or acceptable pausing and hesitation. And complexity, concerns the elaboration and ambition of the produced language. It is obvious that we cannot cover all the three pedagogical goals at the same time, and the pursuit of one of them is necessarily at the expense of the others. Therefore, we have to compromise between them, which is not only beneficial to the learners' capacity in problem solving but also their long-term linguistic development. That requires teachers or material designers to design specific situational tasks to "maximize" all the three goals to a possible extent and ensure learners' balanced development in them

(Skehan, 1996).

Third, will the tasks be finally carried out by learners for them to reach the expected outcome or objective, in other words, will “the teacher’s intention and the learners’ interpretation of a given task converge” (Murphy, 2003, p.353)? Breen (1987, cited in Murphy, 2003) also stated that there are two kinds of learners’ purposes to do tasks; one is “achievement orientation” which learners adopt when they perceive that tasks relate closely to their personal needs, the other is “survival orientation” which leads to learners’ simplest strategy to do the task when they feel no relationship between tasks and their personal needs. Therefore it is necessary for teachers or material designers to conduct needs analysis among learners so that the designed tasks to directly address learners’ specific needs. In addition, the difficulty of tasks should also be carefully considered. It is quite easy to understand designed tasks should be neither too difficult nor too easy because excessive difficulty causes learners reliance on lexicalized communication which carries the danger of fossilization and routine solution to communication problem; and too easy tasks do not positively stimulate interlanguage development or consolidation. Skehan (1992, cited in Skehan, 1996.) suggested two general categories of language factors and cognitive factors should be analyzed. Language factors include syntactic complexity and range and lexical complexity and range. Cognitive factors include:

◆Familiarity of the materials in the task which means whether the learners are familiar with the materials in the task; do learners simply need to retrieve some ready-organized language forms from memory or do they have to draw on new materials. For example, the film ‘Titanic’ is a very familiar topic to learners, and they can recall any part of it while talking about it.

◆Nature of the material which means do learners simply do tasks for practical purposes or do they have to deal with generalization or abstraction (Brown, Anderson, Shilcock and Yule, 1984). For example, the role play of shopping belongs to the former one, while discussion of the advantage and disadvantage belongs to the latter one.

◆Reasoning operation required which means does the task require mental operation besides linguistic aspects for its completion (Brown, Anderson, Shilcock and Yule, 1984). For example, a game ‘who is the murderer’.

◆Degree of structuring which means do learner have to follow some specific structure for the completion of task, for example, presentation on ‘an unforgettable experience in my life’. Learners have to follow the structure of beginning, development and end for narration.

Finally, to ensure a task of appropriate difficulty for a certain group of learners and selected adequately for their communicative competence, simply analyzing and selecting task is not adequate, the very-organized implementation of task is also of great importance. Skehan’s (1996) stages in implementing tasks are quoted as a reference.

Table 1

stage	goal	techniques
Pre-task	Cognitive: ease subsequent processing load	Foregrounding: introducing topic of task Observing Doing similar task Planning
	Linguistic: establishing necessary language form.	Explicit teaching Implicit teaching Consciousness-raising
During-task	Handle pressure	Speed, deadline Stakes Number of participants
	Calibrate: influence processing balance	Provide visual support Introduce surprise element
Post-task	Retrospect: remind learners of important form	Public performance Analyze Consciousness-raising

At the pre-task stage, relevant knowledge to task is introduced to learners so that the cognitive demand for completion of task will be reduced and learners can channeling more attention to linguistic demand. By foregrounding, necessary information about task topic is introduced and thus learners' previously-possessed relevant knowledge can be activated. Observing and doing similar task enable learners to be familiar with the requirement and process of doing the task, so in the actual completion of a task, more of their attention can put on the linguistic aspects. Planning can release learners from using too much attention during task completion when they have to compose thought and prepare what to say. Crookes (1989) claimed that planning time can prepare learners a greater complexity of syntax and breadth of lexis, and fluency can be improved, which is opposite to Skehan and Foster's (1994) report of planning time's association with greater accuracy. As linguistic preparation, some linguistic form that would be used in the completion of task will be taught either through direct focusing on specific linguistic forms or through indirect approach to raise learners' awareness of what may occur in the task.

During task completion, teacher still have a lot of choices to direct the learners' production towards accuracy or fluency, and adjust the difficulty of task. For example, the time limit given to learners to do the task influences accuracy, complexity and fluency of their production. That is less time, less accuracy and complexity, but more fluency. The more pressure put on learners to use certain structure, the less fluency and creative language use in their output. The more participant a group contains, the more fluency learners need to interact with one another. When task appears to be a little more difficult to learners, teacher can use some visual aid to help learners understand certain information and thus the attention to be used for understanding that can be put to somewhere else. Or otherwise, teacher can add some new and more difficult items to the task if it proved to be easy for learners.

Learners may adopt what Breen (1987) termed "survival orientation" to finish the task in a simplest way. But if teacher informs before doing task that certain groups will be invited to publicly perform the same thing as they did in doing the task after completion of task, they may well focus on accuracy and complexity during doing task.

2.3 Evaluation

Language tests must accord with the teaching approach, only by which, can learning outcome be adequately tested and the teaching approach be proved to be effective. Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1997) also said "any language teaching approach must be accompanied by tests that best measure the learning outcomes promoted by the particular program, otherwise the washback effect of the test drawn from other approaches or methods will undermine the program's effectiveness." Since the communication-based syllabus was officially adopted in the early 1990s, communication, more or less, has emerged in English classrooms at any level ranging from primary school, middle school to university. But the test forms remains unchanged, including three extremely important tests: senior middle school entrance exam, college entrance exam and post graduate entrance exam. Since the focus in CLT is on communicative skills it may be inappropriate to assess learners by means of the standard exam. Just as Savignon (1990, p.211) concluded "many a curricular innovation has undone by failure to make corresponding change in evaluation". CLT may require a change to a more 'qualitative' form of evaluation, involving presentations, oral interviews etc. Testing and teaching are actually interwoven with each other. Formative assessment can be adopted to assess students in the process of "forming" their communicative competences and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process for example portfolios assessment of students' oral performance in class.

2.4 Intercultural competence

The confusion caused when native speakers hear the typical Chinese way of greeting 'have you eaten' revealed importance of the intercultural competence for the successful intercultural communication. Canale and Swain (1980, cited in Tseng, 2002) divided communicative competence into four categories, and sociolinguistic or intercultural competence is one of them, which refers to the appropriate use of language in a specific cultural context. It is so defined by Byram (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002)

as the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality. Intercultural Competence Teaching pointed out the link between language and culture and the need to understand communication as the intercultural communication between non-native speakers and native speakers, rather than communication in the target language. Its ultimate goal is to “help learners transcend their single world view (source culture) through learning a foreign linguaculture (target culture), leading them progressively towards intercultural competence (interculture)” (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999, p.115) (see figure 1). In other words, cultural knowledge helps to increase the comprehension in the target language (Tseng, 2002).

2.5 Interculture

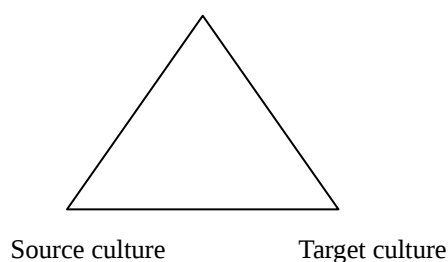


Figure 1

Traditionally, culture is taught as factual information. By mechanically memorizing, learners remember a lot of cultural knowledge. For example, when meet some at the first time, you should say ‘how do you do’; it is not polite to ask girl’s age or marital status, etc. However, there is no opportunity for them to connect the target culture with their source culture or individual culture and produce interculture, so when the real situation comes for them to communicate with native speakers, the cultural knowledge they remembered does not help at all. The implementation of intercultural teaching can be followed basically by three steps:

◆Step 1 Learning about culture

Culture is not easily to be accessible to be noticed and analyzed. It is embedded in language and teacher should try to catch it. It includes the pragmatic norm, polite strategies, communication strategies, elements of conversational structure such as opening and end, turn-taking system, or the factual information in literature or patterns of behavior, etc.

◆Step 2 Comparing culture

While introducing the specific aspect of target culture, teacher should always help learners to recall their own culture on this aspect, compare the two cultures and find out similarities and differences.

◆Step 3 Intercultural exploration

Native speaker do not usually expect non native speaker to speak or act exactly like themselves (Mase, 1989, cited in Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999). Teacher should help learners try to create a “comfortable third place”- negotiation of cultural difference for a both comfortable solution.

◆Step 4 Situational task

Teacher designs situations for learners to work out intercultural solutions.

3. CONCLUSION

Learner-centeredness is the common characteristic of communication based ELT methods, be it Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), or Intercultural Language Teaching (ILT). Its goal is to make learners responsible for their own learning, and learn to how to learn, for nothing worth learning can be taught. Since communicative competence covers linguistic competence and intercultural competence, CLT actually provides a principled approach for CBLT, TBLT and ILT. In such a post method condition (Kumaravadivelu, 1994) of English Language Teaching (ELT), CBLT, TBLT and ILT are often integrated with one another to achieve some certain pedagogical goal. That is to say, ICT can be appropriately implemented in communicative tasks, which is often embedded in personalized content. However, it has to be mentioned that the innovation in teaching methodology must be supported by reform of other pedagogical factors such as policy reform, change in evaluation, equipment with teaching facilities, tailored teach materials and the most important, the change in the role of teacher and learners. And in the current English teaching context of China, there are still a lot of constraints on the adoption of CLT approach. Therefore, our English teachers must create flexible CLT methods based on the specific teaching context and not simply transplant one from other contexts.

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