

## A PLEA FOR CULTURE-INTEGRATED LANGUAGE TEACHING

### Abstract:

Foreign language teaching no longer focuses on the development of the learners' linguistic competence only. It has also set itself the aim to develop their intercultural communicative competence. The observation that this aim is feasible constitutes the rationale for the present paper which argues for a place for culture teaching within the English course syllabus in the English Department at the University Mentouri, Constantine, Algeria.

**ATAMNA Elkhiair**  
Département d'Anglais  
Université Mentouri  
Constantine (Algérie)

### Introduction

The teaching of English at the university level in Algeria is winning more and more prestige because of the government policies, the opening of the Algerian market to foreign companies and investors and the recent rapid changes in the world (globalization). In fact, the educational authorities deem the study of English so important that all students, regardless of their field of study, are required to achieve a minimum level of proficiency in English. With regard to the teaching of English in the English Departments in the Algerian universities, the English course aims at training students in different language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. In addition, the students are imparted with a

body of knowledge about the British and American history and literature. Added to these are new teaching units, such as translation

### ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى تبيان الميزات الإيجابية للمقاربة الثقافية في تعليم اللغات الأجنبية واقتراح العمل بها في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية وذلك من أجل بلوغ الأهداف التي جاء بها النظام الجديد (ل.م.د). فتعليم اللغات الأجنبية لم يعد يهدف فقط إلى تأهيل المتعلم للتمكن من وسائل التعبير الكتابي والشفوي بل تعدى ذلك إلى تنمية قدراته على الاتصال والتواصل مع الغير مع القدرة على فهم واحترام الاختلافات الثقافية والاجتماعية بين اللغات.

Arabic/English/Arabic, English for specific purposes (ESP) and research methodology, which were introduced into the course with the implementation of the LMD reform system.

In theory, the course objectives are to enable the students to become competent English language users in different domains such as banking, tourism, translation, communication and marketing both at the national and international levels and to be active participants in international exchanges be it cultural, social, economic or political. Unfortunately, the majority of these students end up with a fairly good command of the English grammar, sentence structure and lists of vocabulary items (lexis) but with no competency for language use. Emphasis is placed on teaching competence in macro-skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), and micro-skills (vocabulary and grammar) without much emphasis on the development of intercultural communication skills. These learners are usually able to produce and comprehend a fairly large number of sentences, but when it comes to conversational exchange be it with native speakers or among themselves, they show some kind of deficiency. In fact, most of them resort to transferring the interactional conventions of their native language (Arabic or Berber) or first language (French) into the conversational routines of English. More important is their failure to clear up misunderstandings in intercultural communication and to realise that their linguistic behaviour may come into conflict with the English norms and conventions of daily life communication. In brief, they are communicatively speaking incompetent. This is because the course syllabus is devoid of the intercultural elements necessary in any kind of communication in which English is the medium. Culture has always been treated as an adjunct to the English syllabus – “information conveyed by the language, not as a feature of the language itself” (Kramsch, 1993:8). Educational authorities are very slow if not unaware that teaching a foreign language entails the teaching of its culture. Research on foreign language teaching has shown that an effective language teaching program should not only enable the learners to be accurate in the foreign language, or to be able to use ready-made expressions in their classroom communication but also to enable them to be culturally competent, to develop an awareness of the target language culture as well as its conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of the target language culture. Recognition therefore of the importance of culture-integrated language teaching for social, economic and political development within an increasingly globalised world is more than a must for the Algerian learners of English at the university level. A good starting point therefore would be to start with a definition of the term ‘culture’ in relation to foreign language teaching.

### **What is Culture?**

For the sake of easiness in following the type of reasoning adopted in the present paper, a delimitation and definition of the term ‘culture’ is necessary. This is because culture is so vast that different scholars, sometimes within the same field of study, look at it differently. Within the field of foreign language teaching, for example, teachers, syllabus designers, education specialists and even foreign language learners themselves view and perceive culture differently.

To start with, a range of different research disciplines have “culture” as their object of study. Ethnography, anthropology, and cultural studies are all concerned with

the study of culture but each looks at it from a different angle. Anthropology investigates how membership of a particular social group is related to particular sets of behaviour; ethnography seeks to explore and describe how the speech systems and behaviours of groups are related to their social structures and beliefs; and cultural studies seeks to understand and interpret the ways members of a group represent themselves through their cultural products (poems, songs, dances, graffiti, sports events etc...) (Corbett, J. 2000). Scholars in these disciplines have worked out different definitions each emphasising one of the many aspects of culture. The result is a multiplicity of definitions which show that culture has resisted any kind of agreement among scholars from different disciplines (Byram, 1989). It is therefore not an easy matter to adopt one single definition for the present paper as this may be contested within the field of foreign / second language teaching.

The vagueness of the term culture (Nelson, G. 2000) has its origin in the difficulty as to which elements of society and / or human behaviour are /are not to be included within its realm. In addition, scholars tend to think of culture in terms of the functions it performs in human society rather than delimiting its essence. One is therefore inclined to agree with Hinkel that there are “as many definitions of culture as there are fields of inquiry into human societies, groups, systems, behaviours and activities” (Hinkel, 1999: 1). In an attempt to work out a definition that is appropriate to the importance and place of culture in foreign language teaching, the subject matter of the present paper, mentioning some definitions given by different scholars seems necessary.

To start with, Tylor’s most quoted definition runs as follows: “culture is...the complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society” (Tylor, 1871:1). In this sense culture refers to the total characteristics of human society in general. But the facet of human society which is given more importance is that of the socially patterned behaviour which a human being learns in his own society.

For some others, culture is a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in a symbolic form by means of which men communicate and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life” (Geertz 1973:89). Inherent in this definition is the idea of knowledge. This knowledge, partly inherited and partly acquired or learnt, is expressed through customs, traditions, norms and the overall societal rules to which individual members of a society must conform. It is this whole network of elements which establishes different patterns of meanings and makes an individual member within a society able to act and to react in appropriate ways in different social settings.

For others culture is “something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and, of course, through linguistic communication” (Duranti,1997: 24). Seen from this perspective, culture is that which is learnt and transmitted among individuals within a particular environment. Of crucial importance in this definition is the interpersonal relationships and the medium (language) used to communicate that ‘which is learnt’.

Another view of culture which also makes reference to language is that of Goodenough,

“As I see it, a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning knowledge, in a most general, if relative, sense of the term.” (Goodenough, 1957:74).

This view assumes that culture is learnt knowledge which enables individual persons to be familiar with the various communication interaction patterns and strategies be it those of their own group or that of outsiders.

A close look at the above mentioned definitions reveals that they all refer in one way or another to different facets of human life. They all encompass such elements as knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, habits, meanings, attitudes towards life, conceptions and achievements. Together these elements represent what may be termed accepted and patterned ways of living and behaviour learnt and shared by members of a particular group. Hence culture, in the context of the present paper, is not only the total sum of customs and traditions or proprieties; it is also a symbolic system by which members of a particular society express and experience different meanings in their daily life. Culture, accordingly, is a set of rules which governs a person’s linguistic behaviour within human societies.

### **The Relationship between Language and Culture**

Now that the key element in the present paper is delimited, the next step will be the exploration of the relation(s) of culture to language teaching which in turn will help decide which aspects of culture are to be taught.

Language and culture, as asserted by many imminent scholars, are closely related. This relationship becomes very apparent in daily communication practices.

“Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication.” (Samovar, et al, 1981: 24)

Language, accordingly, is influenced and shaped by culture. Viewed from a cultural perspective, language is the symbolic representation of a people, which encompasses their historical and cultural backgrounds, their view of life and their ways of living and thinking. Language is inseparable from culture; it is a medium for expressing culture. It expresses and embodies the values, beliefs and meanings which members of a given society share. In short, it is a replication of culture. Thus, understanding language presupposes an understanding of its culture. In terms of language teaching pedagogy, teaching a foreign language means teaching the learners to see the world through the native speakers’ eyes, to be aware of the different ways language reflects their ideas, customs and behaviour. The teaching of English or any other foreign language will inevitably entail the teaching of its culture. So, what does

the term 'culture' mean from the point of view of those who are involved in the process of teaching / learning a foreign language?

### **The Importance of Teaching Culture**

Now that we have a more or less precise meaning of the term "culture", the obvious beginning point is to understand what is conceived to be the utility of culture in foreign language teaching and learning.

For some people, learning a foreign language is summed up to remembering a workable stock of vocabulary with the ability to put it together in a way acceptable syntactically and to pronounce the resulting utterances or sentences well. For a person with such a conception of foreign language learning, everything else outside the realms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation is not language and, thereby, supplementary or secondary. Learning a foreign language, accordingly, is merely a process of sequential acquisition of language units, a belief that should be rejected if only on the basis that no such claim should be expected of any approach or perspective fifty years after the grammar translation method was initiated.

For others, learning lists of vocabulary items, putting them together appropriately and pronouncing them accurately without being conscious of their social dimension are just not enough. For these people what matters most are the results brought about by the generated sentences or utterances. They believe that "Learning to engage with texts and discourses...entails far more than language development or skill acquisition per se. It involves the development and articulation of common sense, of hegemonic 'truths' about social life, political values, and cultural practices" (Luke, 1995: 35). Language teaching in this sense means inevitably 'language and culture' teaching.

As mentioned above, language is closely related to culture. It represents one element of the complex system that makes up the culture of a community. Language, in this sense, does not only include mechanisms of grammar, vocabulary, morphology, phonology...etc, but it also includes other mechanisms which are said to be necessary in inter-personal communication. These mechanisms include, among other things, linguistic and non-linguistic elements that may differ from one person to another. These non-linguistic elements may be referred to as the mechanisms of discourse which in turn are culturally bound. In fact one can hardly imagine communication taking place without language and culture or between un-socialized, un-aculturated people. In addition, culture shapes and influences a person's view of the world, i.e. one's reactions to different life situations in which intercultural communication (verbal or silent) is necessary are conditioned by culture. When a person speaks, when s/he chooses to be silent and how close to strangers s/he stands show whether s/he is aware of the culture of others, whether other's culture differs from her/his own, and most important of all if s/he is able to interpret the world around her/ him correctly.

Viewed from such a perspective, Language and culture should be learned and taught in an integral manner because language is a means of communication by which the cultural identity of members of a particular community is marked just like other cultural markers such as dress, housing, or social institutions. Of course, culture is not a fifth skill to be added to the other four skills (Kramersch, 1993) but it can always be a

challenge to language learners and teachers. Teaching culture, accordingly, should enrich and raise the learners' knowledge of the foreign language and culture, however, the assumption is that it should be incorporated in teaching the language and not separated from it. Linguistically speaking, separating culture from language will result in what Byram called an 'epiphenomenon' of the mother language (Byram, 1991); the process whereby the foreign language is attributed the cultural understanding of the learners' first language. Concealed in this last sentence is the idea expressed by Edward Glissant as follows: "Je te parle dans ta langue et c'est dans mon langage que je te comprends" (Glissant 1981:14). This idea is a clear indication that the expression of meaning involves some non-linguistic elements that are culture specific.

Following the above argument, the integration of culture with language within a foreign language course is motivated by a multiplicity of interconnected reasons. In the first place there is the pressing need to take account of the cultural elements of communication which are always contested but always omnipresent and necessary in any act of communication. Second, a foreign language course should help the learners develop an awareness of cultural and social norms and behaviours of the target language which in turn helps to enhance intercultural competence. Third, the course should aim to foster the learners' ability to behave and use language in ways acceptable, appropriate and familiar to native speakers. Last, but not least, emphasis is to be laid on the promotion of the learners' ability to carry out successfully the various interactive needs in the target culture while avoiding discrimination based on stereotypes of the 'other' which ideally leads to an awareness of one's own and the others' culture-bound behaviour. Meaning expression, in this sense, means the successful fulfilment of particular social purposes in appropriate contexts.

In practice, the question that raises itself now is whether the university learners of English in their standardised classroom environment have access to the system by which meanings are expressed in the English society or are just loaded with a body of information or knowledge about the English culture and history.

Some people claim that the learners of English we teach are imparted with a sufficient body of cultural knowledge about the English society; they know the English institutions, such as the church, the parliament...etc; they study English literature, and they can speak about the English history. By contrast, some others claim that very few of the learners we teach are aware of the cultural meaning of these institutions which native speakers of English share and take account of in their daily interaction. They insist that the kind of knowledge the learners we teach have is useless because knowledge about different English institutions, as currently taught to the learners, has no significance in their speech or writing. This is quite apparent from the fact that the learners we teach usually face some comprehension and communication problems not necessarily caused by a lack of systemic knowledge, i.e., the formal properties of the English language which comprise its semantic and syntactic aspects or by a lack of cognitive knowledge or factual information. These problems arise because of the lack of schematic knowledge, i.e. the socially acquired knowledge. Evidence of this point of view can be traced in the following examples produced by third year students reading for a BA degree in English in the English Department in oral expression sessions.

*A: Would you like to see a movie?*

*B: Excuse me, but I am not free.*

This example illustrates the kind of unexpected problem that these students may run into when they try to be polite. In fact, this example shows that a particular routine is extended to where it is not appropriate. It is not appropriate because the use of "excuse me" in this particular context is not the usual way a native speaker of English may respond when he/ she is invited to see a movie.

The following is another example that confirms or rather consolidates the present argument. The meaning of many routines is idiomatic; therefore, knowledge of the meaning of their constituent parts (lexical items) does not help the learners we teach but impedes their communication efforts. For instance, an utterance like "You bet!" is used to mark argument or confirmation; but many learners understand it literally. A further example which shows the students unfamiliarity with English and in which they seem to combine an English linguistic form with an Algerian way of thinking is the following dialogue:

A:                   Where                   are                   you                   going?  
 B: *I'm going to the library.*

Although the above forms are linguistically speaking correct, they are not appropriate. The natural reaction of a native speaker to such way of greeting would be 'Why do you ask?' or 'It's none of your business.' and may be considered as an intrusion on one's privacy. In addition, many expressions in English are said to be fixed. For example, when native speakers ask for the price, they say 'How much, please?' whereas many third year students say 'How much do you charge me?' These cultural deviations on the part of the learners are to be accounted for in differences of customs and traditions.

All the above deviations stem mainly from the learners' unfamiliarity with the English cultural background. The learners' inappropriate behaviour in such situations is not due so much to linguistic factors as to cultural ones. It would seem, therefore, that foreign language learners in their learning experience are subject to novel cultural data. Hence the adoption of a "cultural view of language is to explore the ways in which forms of language, from individual words to complete discourse structures, encode something of the beliefs and values held by the language user", Pavlenko, et al., (2000:156). Awareness, therefore, of the influence culture and context may have on the learners' behaviour will enable them to behave in more informed ways and to avoid being offensive, inappropriate, or socially unacceptable towards the English native speakers.

To follow the same line of thought, a teacher who presents his learners with some aspects of the English systemic knowledge through some unfamiliar contexts as the 'pub' or 'Halloween' will find it difficult to make the learners understand these aspects of the English culture regardless of how much explanation is provided. This is mainly due to the learners' ignorance of the English culture. It is therefore clear by now that conversational exchanges with native speakers is a form of cross-cultural encounter.

In addition, cultural misunderstanding is not peculiar to oral interaction but can also occur in the learners' writings. Studies in contrastive rhetoric, Ulla, C. (1986) has shown that writing is conditioned by one's specific cultural patterns. English rhetoric, for example, is characterised by digression. The English rhetoricians make use of syllogism in their reasoning whereas the Arab rhetoricians use repetition in their

attempt to reach textual effectiveness. These differences, which cannot be attributed but to culture, may cause misunderstanding on the part of our learners because most literary texts or novels, with which the learners we teach are presented are written by English writers. As a result, they may not be able to follow the reasoning of a particular writer and will find him too direct.

Furthermore, when it comes to oral interaction in the Oral Expression sessions, the learners often approach the subject of discussion in a spiral way. They tend to make use of unnecessary supporting facts they think will make their point of view clearer and their argument stronger; whereas native speakers of English may consider these facts irrelevant. Of course, this kind of language use is not due to the learners' inability to use the linguistic code but to their cultural assumptions.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned facts, the inclusion of cultural elements of the above mentioned type within the English course is more than necessary. This is because a good learning program should develop not only the learners' linguistic capacities but should also provide them with opportunities for participating successfully in real life situations by giving the cultural aspect of the English language its right place in the curriculum. The main arguments for such integrative approach towards culture and language teaching, as stated by Dlaska, A. (2000), may be summarised as follows.

1- Since language and culture are inseparable, neglecting one of the two aspects will be to the detriment of the other.

2- With regard to the course objectives (see the introduction), culture will be a motivating factor for the learners due to their career considerations.

3- Since the learners are likely to work, live, and travel abroad there is a pressing need to go beyond a tourist approach in teaching English.

4- Culture-integrated language teaching encourages meaning negotiation rather than speech reproduction.

5- The often disconnected and disjointed modules of the English course will be given some coherence.

6- Culture-integrated language teaching raises the learners' awareness and helps to overcome their ethnocentrism.

7- Culture-integrated language teaching may represent an intellectual challenge for the learners.

Furthermore, these same arguments can stand against the view that, due to time constraints, the teaching of culture, considered by many a cumbersome and unwieldy subject, may compromise the students' linguistic progress. In addition, I shall argue that because of the mutually enriching relationship between language and culture, the cultural component will create within the learners more motivation and curiosity and will give the unrelated topics in such modules as oral expression, written expression and general culture more coherence.



Nevertheless, the question that raises itself at this point can be phrased as follows: What aspect(s) of culture is / are to be taught?

Given the above mentioned facts, one can assume that the classroom environment offers adequate conditions for teaching culture and raising cultural awareness as asserted by Fischer who considers classrooms as ‘a symbolic linguistic arena’, (Fischer, 1994: 261), where the learners take new roles, show curiosity, cope with the unknown and enter new and unfamiliar situations. In addition, if culture is defined as attitudes, beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering which are common to all members of a speech community (Kramsch, 1993) and which make the functioning of the members of that community possible, i.e. language enables them to communicate in culturally appropriate manners, the teaching of culture, then, will revolve around these themes. Further evidence that consolidates this view is that expressed by Brooks, N. (1986) who pointed out that the word "culture" carries the following meanings: growth, refinement, fine arts, patterns of living, and a total way of life. Among these, Brooks believes that ‘patterns of living’ is the aspect that should matter most to foreign language teachers because it is the one that focuses on native speakers behavioural patterns or lifestyles such as food habits, expressing attitudes towards friends and members of the family, expressing approval and disapproval etc ... Therefore, knowledge of and about these lifestyles would constitute the basic core of a cultural syllabus which in turn will help the learners of English to find solutions to their communication problems.

Moreover, imparting our students with a body of knowledge about facts of English history or geography would not help them to have a view of what life is really in the target culture. Facts and figures are no longer believed to give an adequate picture of the language communities. So, the teaching of culture, as dealt with in this paper, refers to something beyond art, literature and history (civilisation). It encompasses the system of values, beliefs and norms of human behaviour. Teachers in the English Department therefore have good reasons to go beyond ‘background studies’ or what are usually called “civilisation modules” in the English teaching programs.

#### **Teaching Culture: A Lesson Sample**

At this point in the discussion, it is worth mentioning that teaching culture should be integrated into the foreign language classroom practices in the English Department. More important, since most of the teaching materials, if they exist, are devoid of culture teaching, it is the teachers’ responsibility to find practical solutions to this problem and to integrate culture into their teaching in one way or another. Of course there is no clear cut framework for teachers to follow, and the task is so difficult because, as was mentioned previously, culture is so complex and vast in nature. Teachers, therefore, should be careful in choosing selecting or adopting cultural teaching materials. The chosen material should mainly reflect several aspects, such as the life style, uniqueness, behavior, conceptions, common sense, religion, and family values of the native speakers. Some of the strategies which can be used are movies, audio-taped interviews with native speakers, video-taped observations of the target language community and authentic readings. To set an example, the following sample lesson would be one way among others to approach the teaching of culture (adapted from Mike Handford, 2002:10).

**Lesson Outline**

**Purpose:** To raise awareness of Social Contextual factors in communication, and to discuss how language can change according to differences in these variables. In particular the lesson is concerned with participants and the communicative situation, and how these factors affect the way people talk.

**Text:** Dialogue (see below) from the Mike Leigh film ‘Secrets and Lies’, involving a telephone conversation between two of the main characters, Cynthia and her brother Morris

**Pre reading**

**Activity purpose:** Develop students’ schematic knowledge of participant and situational variables.

**Activity:** Write these variables (gender, time etc.) on the board, tell the class that they are going to read and then watch a telephone conversation and that they should ask you questions before they read the text about the participants and the situation e.g. ‘what sex are the characters?’ Alternatively, a more advanced group could be encouraged to first come up with the variables themselves.

**Activity purpose:** Activate students’ schematic knowledge of how social distance and the social situation may affect communication.

**Activity:** In small groups, predict how the participants’ social distance (in this case very little, especially as perceived by Cynthia) and the social situation affect communication. Encourage students to come up with specific examples

**While reading**

**Activity purpose:** Highlight relevant points in the text, and keep the reading focused on the lesson purpose.

**Activity:** Read through and find evidence of

1. the closeness of their relationship
  2. Morris not wanting to say no to his sister
  3. a problem between Morris’ wife Monica and Cynthia
  4. the unimportance of Morris’ status (a successful self-employed businessman)
- here
5. Cynthia’s neurotic disposition

**Post reading**

**Activity purpose:** show that the way we communicate affects how we appear to others.

**Activity:** write a description of the two characters, including a description of their personalities and how you imagine them to look. Then, watch the film clip. Discuss whether or not the descriptions should be changed, and why.

**Activity purpose:** Highlight how stylistic appropriateness is dependent on the social context.

**Activity:** Underline all the informal language in the text. Imagine that an acquaintance of Morris is asking to bring a friend to the barbecue; change the dialogue accordingly. Then, role-play this situation in pairs. Then, role-play another situation, for example one that is more similar to the original. Discuss how the language changes according to the context. Discuss the possible effects of using inappropriate language in these two contexts.

### The Text

Cynthia is at home. She is talking on the phone. Morris is in his office with his secretary, Jane, listening and eating a bag of crisps.

C: Listen, Morris, Sweetheart. I wanted to ask you a favour.

M: Oh yeah. What's that then?

C: You know the party Sunday...

M: The BBQ, yeah

C: Yeah. Can I bring a mate, Sweetheart?

*Silence.*

C: Hello?

M: Is it a bloke?

C: Course it aint a bloke, silly bugger. Chance'd be a fine thing!

*Both laugh.*

M: Who is it then?

C: Oh just somebody at work. We've been out a couple of times and I was meant to

have seen her Sunday only I forgot. That alright then?

M: I suppose so.

C: What do you mean 'you suppose so'?

M: No, it'll be fine.

C: Smashing.

M: Have to check it out though.

C: Check it out? Who with?

*Short silence.*

M: Listen, Erm, if I don't ring you back then bring her. Right?

C: I don't want to upset nobody.

M: Don't worry.

C: Are you sure then?

M: Yeah, yeah. No problem. Yeah.

C: O.K. then sweetheart. Looking forward to it.

M: Alright, well, say hello to Roxanne for me.

C: Ta ra then.

M: Alright ta ra sis.

### Conclusion

In sum, the main argument in this paper is that the integration of culture in any foreign language teaching course should be a basic feature to the study of English. The point is not to privilege culture at the expense of other possible explanations and ways of developing the learners' intercultural communication competence, but to accord it the importance it deserves in the English department for the purposes outlined by the new reforms (LMD) implemented four years ago. This is because one of the stated aims of these reforms is to broaden the range of options for the learners as to the possibilities of their professional development and preparation in an increasingly globalised world, in contrast to the present pedagogical practices which assign the teaching of culture an informational role.

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