

Theme Based: An Alternative to Improve Students' Attitude

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Abstract

The present action research project was designed for a deeper understanding in how a change in a methodological approach could modifier students' attitude towards learning English. The approach used was theme based instruction conceived from students' interest to formulate a plan to implement thematic units and at the same time follow the curricular program of the public institution where this study took place. The data was collected through interactive techniques and the results revealed that students' attitude can be modified when a topic of their interest is used to teach English. It means, when a topic is used instead of teaching grammar directly produce a change the appreciation students have about their learning process of a second language.

Keywords: Approach, Learning Process, Students' Attitude, Theme Based Instruction

Requirements

This action research project is as a requirement to obtain the grade of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

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Preface

The elaboration of the present action research emerged from my personal interest on the change of students' attitude towards learning English. During the course of the teaching program in foreign languages, I always had my own concern on students centered education as in a special way students' interest as a factor to motivate them to learn a second language. In this way, the main purpose on this study was to describe students' attitude and then, try to change the negative aspects of that attitude into positive ones and at the same time, I brought up to keep the positive aspects of that initial attitude.

From my pedagogical courses, I was provided a theoretical background of several approaches or methodologies to teach; from them, I selected theme based instruction as a way of teaching English in a non-conventional manner or in a distinctive method to expose students to grammar through a topic from their daily life. It means teach grammar but hide it behind a thematic unit.

Description of the Context

At the beginning of a practicum process it is crucial determine several aspects with a great relevance at the moment of perform the actions that allow to enrich the experience of a teacher in training. These aspects are related to how the Institution is in terms of place, philosophy, and curriculum. Besides, the people involved in the process like the cooperating teacher and students.

First, San Jose school is a public institution located in the municipality of Itagui. The environment around the building is noisy because there are several streets, enterprises and institutions in the surroundings. The school is formed by two buildings. One, it is old but well conserved. It has three floors with classrooms, laboratories of physics and chemistry and a bilingual room. Inside the second building the “Auditorio Sur” is located. This setting belongs to the municipality but school use it for academic purposes.

The classroom where the observations for the research was on the first floor, it was overcrowded and hot. Chairs are in good conditions but all of them are in different styles and materials. Inside the classroom there are two armchairs one of them has the name “Bibliobanco” it seems there are different kind of books, but it is always closed. The other one had cleaning issues. After, students were moved to a classroom on the third floor where the conditions did not change enough.

Concerning school, its philosophy looks for an educational high level focused in an education with great values and in a humanist formation. The main objective is to build a society with competent people, able to affront global issues. Institution has the challenge of

improving its education. School not only think in to be the best institution because of their academic awards but also in the human side of their students.

In regard to English program, it is organized grade by grade in four period each one. They establish the competences they want students achieve in every grade. And the approach that the institution chose to guide the teaching of English was the communicative. They expect that with the use of communicative strategies students be able of reach basic standards on English language.

My cooperating teacher is John Jairo Mejia Polanco. He is graduated from the teaching program in basic education with emphasis in English and humanities from Luis Amigó University in 2003. He says the principle that support his teaching is his love for children. He believes that English language is an important subject because it is needed in all commercial traits and economical activities. For him, it could be as important (even more) than math but he does not say it aloud. The activity he enjoys the most to make students learn is through dialogs but he stands up the importance of the writing and reading competences too.

Finally, the present action research was conducted in a sixth grade with students from 11 to 13 years old. What was found in this group was that students were more concentrated in their own business than in English class. Discipline was a hard aspect to treat. This aspect was treated inside the classroom in different ways. First, teacher tells of students, second he threats them with reduce their grades, at the end he could implement a disciplinary card. It is necessary to mention that if a student accumulates three of these cards she will lose the subject of ethics. In spite of the scolding and the threats with regard

to the discipline, the teacher has very good relation with the students they treat each other nicely and even they do jokes in class.

Statement of the Problem

In Colombia, it is being implemented in school a policy design by Ministry of Education. This policy, called “Colombia, very well”, looks for the reinforcement of all previous policies in foreign languages in the country as National Law of bilingualism “Ley 1651 de 2013”. The main idea of the policy is to obtain an articulation of several sectors or areas of the society and trying, in turn, to avoid teaching languages out of the context; making that the topics are related to students’ live and experience.

As an effort to include the National policies in public institutions in Itagui, schools have created a curriculum based on the communicative approach. With it, learners have to use their natural strategies for language acquisition. However, inside classrooms, teachers continue using a traditional model of teaching or grammar translation approach.

Concerning students, during my observations I could notice that their attitude towards learning English is negative. They spend the time in other activities than English class causing misbehavior inside the classroom and low grades. As evidence in the journal the following two examples:

“.....Some students started talking in Spanish about a homework from other subject and when I told off because of this fact a student answered me: “prof, if I do not understand you when you speak English, then, I do something else that I do understand. In that way, if I fail English subject at least I do not fail the other subject” (Journal 22, April 11, 2016)

“...At the end of the session only two teams were missing to present the dialog. And when I asked to one of them why they have not prepared the dialog she answered to me “prof, I do not like English, that does not work for me” then, I said that I put an example that they could copy almost the same dialog she had only to change the topic and she said: please, grade the activity in “cero”, do not shake your hands because of that” (Journal 25, April 29th, 2016”

Then, trying to involve the government's concerns and students' behavior observed in class it is decided to conduct an action research study about the impact that the implementation of thematic units could have in attitude of students of sixth grade in a public school in Itagui.

Theoretical Background

In recent times, the way of teach English has been changing from a traditional model of grammar translation to a model that requires more interaction by students. Between those models, theme based instruction was chosen in order to implement a change in the point of view of the students. According the observation made and the condition found in the classroom theme based instruction is an alternative to teach the educational program school has for the English area from another perspective. As Lúðvíksdóttir (2011) said theme based instruction has as a main characteristic that the teaching, learning materials and classroom activities are organized around a particular theme or topic. The objective is to organize grammar content of the course program around a topic; then see the impact of this implementation on the perception or attitude they have towards learning English.

Theme based instruction is a methodology that allows students a way to connect language arts with real life issues (Borges de Menezes, 2011). These aspects of the topic based approach made that it could be apply in the scholar environment where the action research take place. Beside it gives to students the opportunity to choose and interact with daily life topics and use English as a tool for learning something else that just grammar.

Concerning students' attitude, it is necessary to take into account the different aspects in which this concept is divide. Before all else, attitude is defined as a the belief students have and this belief can influence behaviors such reading a book or speaking I a foreign language (Gajalakshmi, 2013).

According to different author it is possible see the attitude from several perspectives: cognitive, affective and behavioral. These three attitudinal aspects are based on the three theoretical approaches of cognitivist, humanism and behaviorism respectively. (Zainol Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzwari, 2012). First, cognitive attitude this aspect reflects the belief that students have about the knowledge they have received so far and the understanding of their own learning process. The cognitive attitude has four classification or steps; connecting new knowledge with the previous one, creating new knowledge, checking new knowledge and applying new knowledge to different situations not only the taught ones (Gajalakshmi, 2013). Second, emotional of affective perspective; Feng and Chen say that "learning process is an emotional process. It is affected by different emotional factors. The teacher and his students engage in various emotional activities" (2009, p.94) for this, feelings and emotions can influence what students perceives in their learning process. Finally, the behavioral perspective of the attitude which involves the way student behaves and acts according to particular situation some authors like Gajalakshmi

(2013); Zainol Abidin et al.,(2012) affirm that the successful language learning enhance the learners to identify themselves with the native speaker and adopt several behaviors that characterize members of the target language.

In accordance with Jain (2014) attitude is divide in three components. The affective that is the neural element integrated by feelings and emotions. It is the emotional response towards an attitude object i.e. students like or dislike English class. Second, behavioral; it means the readiness component. It consists of actions or observable responses that could be favorable or unfavorable to do something rewarding attitude object. Third, cognitive that is the mental component. It is an evaluation of the object or idea that constitutes an opinion or belief about the object.

Research Question

How does the implementation of theme based units have influence on students' attitude?

Main Objective:

Establish how the implementation of theme based units has influence on students' attitude.

Specific Objectives:

- Characterize the attitude that students of sixth grade have towards learning English.
- Implement theme based units to evaluate the change in students' attitude.
- Evaluate how the theme based units impact the attitude students have for learning a second language.

Action Plan

This research was endorsed in the qualitative paradigm, and it was intended to obtain a description of the educational conditions of the students' attitude towards learning English and the change this attitude could have with the implementation of thematic units to teach topics programed by the public institution. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2005) qualitative research means “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”. This definition represents what this research aimed.

Within qualitative research the type of study selected was action research. This research involves a process of systematic inquiry that seeks to improve social issues affecting the lives of everyday people. Its methodology is cyclical, dynamic, and collaborative in nature. Through repeated cycles of planning, observing, and reflecting, individuals and groups engaged in action research can implement changes required for social improvement. (Stringer, 2013).

To conduct the present action research, it was necessary to use different techniques like observations, interviews and focus groups. Besides, the use of instruments such as journals, note taking and audio recordings. All these with the purpose of collecting data that demonstrate how the students' attitude was and how was it affected after the implementation of thematic units.

First, observations and the technique to collect data were journals. Observations were done through the whole research process; this because as Burns (2010) says “collecting data through observation is... seeing things that are before our eyes in ways we

haven't consciously noticed before". Also because observations provided to this study to record events, reflections, beliefs and teaching philosophies, the ideas and insights about the setting, and also, personal histories as a teacher researcher.

Second, semi structured interview was applied in order to enlarge the information collected during the observations. Semi structured interview is the technique that as a researcher I consider the best for gather this kind of information and besides according to Corbetta (2007)

.... The interviewer has a "script". However,he can establish a conversation as he wish, asking questions that he believes they are adequate and he does this in terms and time he considers convenient, he can explain the meaning of some questions, ask to interviewed for some clarifications if there are doubts or ambiguity in the answers or even, interviewer can ask for a deeper answer if he thinks it is necessary.... ¹(p. 351).

The interview should have been applied once at the beginning of the implementation to get the initial point of view of students and their perceptions and believes towards learning English.

Other instrument applied was "Colcha de retazos", it will be called from now on as "paper quilt". This technique was adapted from the Social qualitative research techniques because it ... "is based on the representations in which people recognize and express their sensations, experiences, feelings, intentions and expectations concerning their daily life... this technique allows to uncover different ways how people appropriate their

¹ Author translation

reality”(Garcia Chacon, Gonzalez Zabala, Quiroz Trujillo, Velasquez Velasquez, & Ghiso Cotos, 2002, p 69). This technique was applied twice. Once at the beginning to go deeper on the characterization of students’ attitude and the second one, to know if there could be any change in those aspects.

Finally, the focus group with the technique anecdotes. The idea of this technique was to obtain life experiences with English learning that allowed to the research the identification and later the explanation about attitudes students had. This instrument is about short stories around single events, begins and close with a single idea, includes concrete details.(Van Manen, 2008).

After the application of these techniques it was implemented the triangulation analysis. Triangulation means using more than one technique to collect data on the same topic. However, the purpose of triangulation is not only to validate data but also to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon.(Kulkarni, 2013). Also it was used a software called Atlas.ti to facilitate the qualitative analysis of the data collected. At the end the analysis allowed to elicit the conclusions.

Development of Actions

Action strategies in the classroom were implemented following the theme-based instruction approach by taking into account not only the time required to implement but also the waste of time for the unexpected changes in the schedule of classes, psychological advisories or pedagogical journeys of the students. With those aspects in mind, the plan for thematic units were developed according to the stages proposed by Enright & Mc-closkey (1988).

First stage, it was indispensable the election of the “themes” for the thematic units. Two thematic units were implemented. The first thematic unit was about football. This was chosen because students during the first interview, which was applied at the beginning of the implementation, said they were interested on sports. Football was chosen because it was a sport no so common for girls. In this case, all students had the same knowledge on the topic. This could not happen with sports like skating, swimming or basketball that are sports that were being practiced by students and some could have an advantage over the others in terms of vocabulary, rules and movements related with these sports. Football gave the same chance to learn new aspects for everyone. The second thematic unit was about transportation. This theme was chosen only as a requirement of the curricular program of the public institution.

For the second stage, it was necessary to establish the objectives of the thematic unit, but those objectives had to be in two types. The first type should make reference to the theme what teacher intended to obtain with the topic, and the second type were related to the language; in this case the focus was grammar. As a thematic objective in the football unit was established to learn about basic aspects about the sport like movements, players’ positions and some rules. In relation to grammar focus was the present continuous. Then, all the activities and explanations had to lead for learning the progressive tense. Regarding the transportation unit, in turn, the thematic objective aimed to learn about different means of transport and the grammar focus was the present simple with a special attention to the conjugation of the third person.

The Third stage dealt with the planning of the activities to develop. It is fundamental to take into account that every area of knowledge has a specialized set of

vocabulary. Students had to be contextualized with the unknown words this aspect can be the key to engage and motivate students to develop the activities in the planned way. The development of units is described below.

For the football unit, the activities were three lessons learning vocabulary about field, players, clothes and movements. After, students had to rehearse the vocabulary learned in the firsts lessons through a paragraph where were involved all elements seen so far in football, students modified the paragraph join new facts or avoiding aspects they were not interested in. The next lesson, there was a visual presentation of Colombian football players where students had to identify the position in which players played by making use expressions like "he is playing as..." with the intention of starting the use of progressive tense. The following lesson, it was presented a set of videos where players were doing different actions like dribbling, kicking, or passing the ball and students had to say their actions using present continuous without notice it. There were two more lessons in which a workshop was applied where students showed the appropriation of the topic.

In the case of thematic unit about transportation there were two lesson about vocabulary. First lesson a vocabulary about different kind of transportation was taught. This vocabulary was built as a cooperative work in class. Students had to give the means of transport they would like to learn, or the common ones or the means they would like to use. In a second lesson for vocabulary was a set of verbs related to transports. These verbs contained mostly movement verbs. In a third lesson the creation of a poster was demanded. In previous classes it was asked to students for images or pictures related to the topic this action make easier the development of the activity. On this poster, students had to join both sets of vocabulary, means and verbs, making use of their creativity. The poster should

contain sentences with these words; then, students did not receive an extra command trying that they express their originality in their own style. The activity received an extra grade because of the creativity of some works. In the last lesson students had to solve a word search puzzle and used the words found there to create sentences.

After the implementation of the activities it was indispensable to assess them. Then, as a requirement of the institution it was applied a grammar based test to put in evidence the students' knowledge.

Thematic units did not change evaluative process, but it was necessary to implement new instruments as audiovisual resources, handmade activities and games where students can show their understanding not only on the "topic" of the unit but also, in the grammar aspect. The main idea of the activities in thematic units was that teacher had to be able to hide grammar aspect behind the activities of the topic.

Findings and Interpretations

The findings in this paper are presented after the analysis of the data gathered with techniques as the journals, the semi-structured interview, paper quilt and the focus group. The outcomes obtained with the application of these techniques allowed to depict the students' attitude following the three main categories proposed by Gajalakshmi (2013): Emotional, Cognitive and Behavioral.

Emotional Attitude

The Emotional aspect of the attitude at the beginning of the project was characterized by taking into account aspects like English as an enjoyable subject and as a like for studying English. These two subcategories were the most remarkable in the pleasant side of feelings. “I believe that English is enjoyable, it is good speak in two languages, and I like English” (Paper quilt 7, August 4th, 2016). Also, negative emotions were evidenced in aspects such as the dislike of studying English and the boringness of the English as a subject. As a student expressed in the following abstract from the interview:

“Interviewer: ...then, why does not English call your attention?”

Student: because...it does not seem to be good for me, English is a boring subject.

(Semi-structured interview to student 11, July 19, 2016)

In a second stage of the analysis, after the implementation, the emotional side of the attitude took part in learning English when students who liked and enjoyed the topic showed an additional interest to know more about their favorite sport, as some students expressed in the paper quilt:

“The good point of football unit was that I learn about movements, positions and how I could pronounce these things in English, the parts that are common for us in Spanish. It was interesting to know how they were called in English” (Paper quilt 2, October 31, 2016)

“I liked so much football unit because it was interesting to know more about this sport and especially in English ...” (Paper quilt 16. October 31, 2016)

The same was evidenced on the focus group when a student said:

“I do not like English but I do like football, only to know more of a sport that I really like, it does not matter if it is in English” (focus group, November 1, 2016)

The emotional aspect of the attitude was modified when the topic developed in English class was related to a personal interest of the students. A remarkable aspect of the implementation of the theme based units was that it permitted to engage the students in the classroom activities by calling their attention with a topic that they were close to in their daily lives. Besides, students showed to improve their confidence to talk in front of their classmates, as some of the shiest students increased their oral production in English, and the amount of students that did not present homework decreased considerably.

On the contrary, if the topic of the unit was about something they did not feel sympathy with, the emotional attitude turned to be negative. Students in this case were more concerned for understanding the reason why they were studying a topic that they considered was not supposed to be used for learning English. A student expressed her dissatisfaction saying: “I do not know why you put a theme that belong to physical education in English class” (Journal 66, August 30, 2016).

Cognitive Attitude

The Cognitive aspect of attitude was completely positive in terms of thoughts, beliefs and ideas that students had about English. Typically, these come to light in generalities or stereotypes; in this case, all students recognized the importance of studying English for multiple reasons. Most of them perceived English as an important language that will contribute for their future careers or even, there were some students that have family in countries where English language is spoken and they manifested their interest to travel there to study, to work or just to have fun.

“Interviewer: do you like studying English?”

Student: yes

Interviewer: why?

Student: because I have some family in United States, I would like to travel there and I do not want to be in trouble there without knowing English.” (Semi-structured interview student 6 July 19, 2016)

In the case of the students’ cognitive attitude towards the knowledge received and their own learning process were found different positions. Some students manifested they like the way English has been taught during their academics processes. However, there were some students that expressed that English could be learned in an easier way if the method used to teach it change. They perceived that if English could be taught in a fun way they could change their perspective and improve their learning process therefore, improve their knowledge about English.

After the implementation, the cognitive aspect of the attitude in terms of beliefs did not change. For students the relevance of studying English is highly important; then, the category remained constant. Students had different motivations to learn English. One student expressed in class that her father received a promotion in his job, but the new position was in United States. The family got separated because of this but the girl was deeply motivated to learn English to keep in touch with his father and be able to travel there without disturbing their parents because of her lack of knowledge. (Journal 80, October 25, 2016). Some students expressed that they could have better job opportunities if they learned a second language.

In contrast with the first review of the cognitive attitude towards learning process, this attitude suffered a change. Students that had expressed that they learned English only as a requirement of the school; started to show more interest in learning. They started to be aware of the knowledge acquired so far and the lack of some grammar structures. In fact, there were some students that recognized the fact of having seen a specific topic in previous scholar periods but they had not pay enough attention to remember them as a student manifested in the interview:

Interviewer: You are telling me that English classes when you was younger you liked them, then, that like has increased or decreased? What do you think?

Student: it has increase. Well sometimes. It has increased because some topics that I like here in school. But sometimes, some topics that we forget and teacher had to repeat them again. (Semi structured interview student 10, July 19, 2016)

Sometimes, students expressed that the procedure used by the teacher to introduce the topic was not attractive for them; “you should try to change the topic or to make something enjoyable; look for different strategies to teach English such as games to avoid a boring class and make easier the learning” (Semi structured interview student 10, July 19, 2016). The implementation of thematic units gave to students some instruments and ideas were the knowledge acquired can be used for real issues and not only to pass a test in the school. In journals it was registered an experience:

It is the first time that we used English for talking about topics that normally we see on the news or read in the newspaper but this time we talk about some football matters in English, it was not unpleasant. (Journal 72, September 20, 2016)

Behavioral Attitude

Concerning the behavioral aspect of the attitude towards learning English, it was characterized by aspects like misbehavior. defined by Sun & Shek (2012) misbehavior are “activities which disrupt and impede the teaching-learning process”. Between these activities observable in class, it was possible to find: doing nothing in class, talking with their partners without paying attention to explanation and after interrupt class saying they do not understand or students asking for explanations in order to waste time and avoid to submit the activities.

At the beginning some students showed a little resistance saying that they did not understand what I wrote on the board. Then, teacher asked for what they did not understand and one student said “nothing” but teacher said that it was not possible. Then, he asked again which words they did not understand and the same girl said that the word “their”; so teacher told off the student because it was a topic of previous period and she should lost the score. After this event, students changed their attitude and she said that she really had understood the dialog but she pretended to receive a new explanation to waste time. (Journal 27, April 12th, 2016)

Inside the behavioral category it was also found the aspect of students doing activities different of those assigned in class and when a teacher asked for a reason they just say “because I do not understand what she is saying; then, I do an activity from the subject I understand. In this way, if I fail English subject I would not fail the other” (Journey 26, April 11, 2016).

With the implementation it was possible to notice a change in the behavior of those students that were really engage with the topic of the unit. The behavior changed from

students that were talking of other issues or doing activities different to those assigned in class to students talking in topics proposed in class and students doing homework in the established time, even in some cases students summited the activities before the deadline as the case of posters in transportation unit. Nonetheless, there were students that rejected the topic; in those cases, the misbehavior was a trouble because they not only did not pay attention to the class but also looked for a reason to start a discussion for inquiring the logic of teaching a sport in English class. They did not do the activities and they were trying to sabotage the class. “I do not know why the student-teacher is teaching football, which is not for English” (Journal 69, September 7, 2016)

Fortunately, those students who had positive attitudes towards the theme could positively influenced other students around them and changed their mood. “She is trying to teach English in a different way but you all the time are complaining about everything, I do not like football but I recognize the fact of learning a useful English” (Journal 69, September 7, 2016).

Conclusions

Deriving out of implementation and findings it was possible to conclude that students attitude can be modify depending on the stimulus they received. In this study, this stimulus was oriented to a change in the methodology used to teach English. Consequently, the attitude that students have towards learning English was modified when a topic of their interest was put in scene for learning a grammar aspect in English class. Where this change was more evident was in the emotional and behavioral attitude were students showed more interest in classroom activities. Students, that normally did not speak in English because

they were afraid of the teasing they could receive from their classmates, during the implementation these same students wanted to be the first to give the answers to the exercise or to participate in oral practices in class.

In regard to cognitive attitude, it was manageable since the belief of how is the knowledge construction but it was not occur with the importance of learning both aspects related with this variety of attitude. From the knowledge construction the change was to stop conceiving English as a requirement of the school to start conceiving it as an object to learn about topics to describe facts and aspects non academics of their lives. From the importance of learning English, there was not a change. For students is highly important to learn English when they think about the utility in their future careers or the use in different countries where they have family.

A significant aspect was that students were focus in grammar and some dislike the fact of a topic to teach English. The change of methodology made them fell they were studying something that was not related to English area. Students were used to the same manner of receiving classes, their expectations did not consider big changes, just some modifications in activities. When thematic units replaced what they considered “normal” in their classes they feel uncertainty, insecurity and in some cases anxiety for the assessment of the topic. They considered student-teacher could not evaluate their knowledge in English but they could be evaluate in the knowledge about football a topic which was not everyone’s liking. A possible solution to avoid the feeling of discomfort is to try of involve students in different ways of teaching and learning English. For a student that is framed in only one teaching methodology could be normal feel confusion when their normal

parameters have been changed. Teachers should integrate different methods to the curriculum enable students to acquire knowledge from different perspectives.

It is important to mention that some students expressed they did not like English, no matter the way teacher presented the topics in class. This is an aspect to take into account for a future research. As a researcher it is possible to think in an idea to make students change their negative emotional attitude to a positive one.

Reflection

During the practicum process there were presented satisfactions and disappointments.

One of the hardest constraints was the time. The classes that were not available to implement the actions were so many. The time of class that was lost because pedagogical journeys, psychological advisories, the development of school projects (sexuality education, environment protection, etc.) Most of the time it was necessary to plan again or reschedule some activities of the thematic units. Other constraint was the ability to choose a theme which could engage most of the students. It is impossible to enroll the totality of students in a topic but it is difficult when students act rudely because they dislike the topic of the unit and they complain every class saying and repeating the same.

One of the most positive aspects was the cooperating teacher that was accompanying the process. Teachers should be always open minded. It is good receiving new ideas of ways to teach it does not matter the time and the experience teachers think they have. Teachers should be able to change and adapt their methods to the requirements of the new generation of students.

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