Academic Adaptation Experiences of Indian International Students: English Language and Cross-Cultural Barriers in EAP Program at an Australian University

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, there has been an increasing trend for international students from non-English speaking background countries to study abroad in English-speaking destinations. This international education industry and its market have been primarily shared by the UK, USA, Australia and Canada. Australia has played a key part in the provision of high quality education to these international students. It appears that the inflow patterns of these students in the Australian higher education sector are influenced by: their home countries' economic status, social and political climates, and the effects of the global environment. The latest and most prominent pattern of these students' engagement with Australian higher education appears to be the rapid expansion in the number of Indian students applying to and studying in Australian universities. This trend has increased more than two times over the past years. In order to make appropriate and current changes to the transitional education curriculum, this new trend must be into consideration.

The main aim of this study is to investigate a wide range of academic adaptation experiences of Indian international students, particularly those who are, or were, enrolled in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP II) program at an Australian regional university. The study explores the uniqueness of this particular cohort's problems and their adaptations to academic contexts in the Australian higher education system. Whilst encountering a new academic environment in an Australian university, Indian international students from diverse language backgrounds experience various types of difficult English language and cross-cultural issues. Further, the study explores how the students adapt to resolve such difficulties to continue their studies. It also discusses ways of assisting this particular cohort for the successful completion of their higher education at Australian universities.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the recent decline in the number of international students in Australia (Collins, 2011), there has been a steady growth of Indian international students in Australian universities (Johnson & Kumar, 2010). This particular group of students are ranked in the second largest of Australian international education market at present. According to International students' enrolment data in 2013, a total number of 49,265 Indian students' visa applications were granted (Studies in Australia, 2016). Knott (2015) in the Sydney Morning Herald reported that "China was the biggest source country for higher education enrolments, at 35 per cent, ahead of India on 12 per cent". Senator the Hon Richard Colbeck (2016) addressed that "Nationalities in the top ten countries – China, India, Vietnam, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Brazil, Thailand, Nepal, Indonesia and Hong Kong – together contributed just over two thirds, 66.2 per cent of total international student numbers" (p. 1).

More importantly, this continuing inflow of Indian international students, especially their engagement with enabling programs, is now an increasing trend that should be taken into special consideration. It is obvious that bridging programs such as EAP (English for Academic Purposes) has played a crucial role in transitioning this particular cohort into a favourable Australian university learning environment. Jonson and Kumar (2010) also suggested that academics and accompanying staff who support this particular cohort need to understand their unique cultural backgrounds in order to make a smooth transition into Australian tertiary education. A fair volume of previous research has stressed the importance of customer care/client service focus when exporting Australian international education (Wright & O'Neill 2002; Hellstén, 2002; Xiao, 2006; Park & Son, 2011; Son & Park, 2014; Park & Son, 2016). In support of this statement, there is a substantial need for research on this particular cohort's experiences in the Australian tertiary learning environment. This study seeks to answer and describe this need by looking at Indian students' English language problems, cultural differences and how they adjust them to the Australian academic context. Primary research questions of this study include: What kinds of language problems this particular cohort has? What is the most difficult academic context to which they need to adjust? By reflecting on their own learning experiences, what is the best pedagogical strategy to accommodate them in effective transitions into the Australian universities?

ENCOUNTRING ISSUES WITH INDIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

It is obvious that exporting Australian higher education to international education markets contributes a vast percentage of Australia national gross income every year. Hare (2016) stated that "The international education sector contributed $5.3 billion to the economy in the March quarter, the highest ever recorded" (p. 1). In fact, it has played an important role in promoting Australia's national economic growth since the Australian government introduced a new international policy on overseas students in 1985 (Park, 2010). This steady wave of Indian international students and their engagement with the Australian higher education has taken place for a long time as the second largest group of international students in Australia. However, most previous research conducted related to international students in the Australian higher education has mainly focused on investigating English language, cultural differences and adjustment difficulties (Park & Son 2016, 2011; Son & Park 2014; Park 2010; Yazbeck 2003; Hellstén 2002; Hughes 2002; Anderson 2001; Biggs 2001; Rambruth 2001; Coventry 1998; Ballard & Clanchy 1997, 1992, 1988).

More interestingly, the primary cohorts and objects for this sector were composed of students from the east and south Asian countries. It means that Indian students' problems with language and culture have not been deeply considered, and it is likely that they have been overestimated unconsciously either intended or not. In a common sense, many people tend to believe that this particular cohort would not have serious language and cultural adjustment problems. They, however, seem to have as much difficulties as other international students whilst undertaking courses. This is despite the fact that even though they have been historically and politically exposed to imperial/colonial English cultures for an extended period of time. There are a limited number of research works completed on this particular cohort that include: if academic and support staff in Australian tertiary education can accommodate Indian international culture, then their transition to Australian higher education will be much more feasible (Johnson & Kumar, 2010); Indian business students' study experiences at a regional Australian university and academic cultural gaps to be acknowledged (Nayak & Venkatraman, 2010); inadequate learning experiences in India mainly result in facing unexpected hardships in the Australian academic context (Ninnes, Aitchison & Kalos, 1999); Indian students' course preferences and motivations for choosing Australian universities should be monitored (Rafi & Lewis, 2015); and the voicing of Indian students' expectations in

Australian universities should be considered as customer service focus (Ahmad, 2006). The results of these studies clearly imply the importance of understanding Indian international students' English language problems, cross-cultural mismatch and their adjustment progress. These issues should be investigated in order to help them transit smoothly into the Australian tertiary education environment.

METHODOLOGY

The Study

Participants

The participants in this study were composed of 42 Indian international students who were undertaking a 10-week intensive enabling tertiary preparation course named the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Program This program was the only on-campus mode of study offered by a regional Australian university. Out of the 46 students in total who agreed to participate in the study, 42 students took a part in completing a questionnaire. The survey was carried out every third week of the program with the Indian students who were enrolled in the fourth and fifth sessions in 2015 and the first session in 2016. Amongst the survey respondents, four students were randomly selected and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews.

Instruments

All data reported in this paper was collected from a survey questionnaire and the follow-up in-depth interviews. The questionnaire was made up of four different parts. In part A of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to provide their demographic background information. In part B (Likert scale closed questions), they were asked to indicate self-evaluation of their own opinions on English language difficulties in the Australian academic mode. In particular, they were asked to self-evaluate their current English language proficiency (four English language macro-skills) at the time of conducting the survey based on cross-cultural attitudes as a global of language teaching in the global context (Ingram & O'Neill, 2000). In part C (Yes or No closed questions), they were also asked to respond in accordance to their own adjustment and familiarity with the Australian academic context. In part D (Likert scale closed questions), they were asked to rate their own thoughts on cultural differences and indicate self-evaluation of their own adaptability towards the Australian academic culture.

The follow-up, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with four participants on a one-to-one basis. An assistant was appointed who was part of the academic staff and colleague of the author working in the same department. He was given a full interview protocol by the author prior to the commencement of interviews. The following key questions elicited from the survey results were asked in the interviews:

1. Many students indicated in the survey that Indian students are likely to have difficulty in listening to native speakers of English pronunciation and accent. What would you think about this?

2. According to the survey results, Indian students are likely to have difficulty in developing an in-depth critical understanding of the study materials? What would you think about this?

3. Many students answered that Indian students have not had allocated consultation times with their lecturer or teacher during the course. What would you think about this?

4. Do you think Indian students are able to debate academic issues logically in sequence? What is your opinion on this?

5. Do you think moving from a hierarchical society to an egalitarian-based society is a culture shock? What would you think about this?

6. Do you think moving from a family-centred society to an individual ability-centred society is a different experience? What would you think about this?

7. Why do you think 'preparing assignments' are the most difficult activity for Indian students in adapting to the Australian academic mode?

The theoretical consideration

The study reported in this paper synthesised a set of key underpinning aspects that would be fundamental to generate the theoretical framework. This is considered to be the most pertinent conceptual structure for this topic. Within this perspective, the study applied the following theoretical ideas: Cross-cultural conflicts, cross-cultural communication, adaptation to a new culture, adult learning, second language acquisition, and Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism.

Procedure

The study was commenced following the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee's approval. The researcher organised time and dates for the survey and interviews. The researcher sent an invitation letter to those who were enrolled in English for Academic Purposes II (Upper level of the EAP program only) from the period of the second half of 2015 and the first half of 2016. All three sessions were primary components of the investigation. To begin with, all participants who agreed to participate in the study were asked to fill a consent form and complete the survey questionnaire. In order to run this survey, the author of this paper briefed the study purpose and delivered all relevant information to this particular cohort prior to conducting the survey. When the last survey was completed with the class of 2016, all four randomly selected participants were invited to attend individual interviews. These interviews were carried out based on an interview protocol provided and arranged by the researcher. The appointed interviewer spent two days for these interviews in a consecutive manner and the average time for each interview lasted approximately 37 minutes. Each individual interview was saved using a digital recorder and transcribed for further analysis and to strengthen the study results.

STUDY OUTCOMES

Survey Questionnaire Outcomes

Demographic Information

Part A of the questionnaire included five closed questions and two open-ended questions which were designed to discern the broad nature of this particular cohort. It started with a question about gender, and continued to ask questions such as age, native language, average level participants started using English in their school system, average years of English taught as a medium of instructions for their academic study, the highest level of education they completed before coming to Australia and lastly what their expected field of study in the future was.

English language difficulties in the Australian academic mode

Part B of the questionnaire contained 17 closed questions that were derived and arranged primarily from four English macro-skills that are closely related to the class activities running under the common Australian academic context. Out of 42 participants who completed the questionnaire, 15 (35.6%) participants agreed that they have difficulty in listening native speakers of English pronunciation and accent. With regards to speaking difficulties, 14 (33.2%) participants responded that they were uncertain whether they have difficulty in understanding other international students' speaking during the class. Similarly, 15 (35.7%) participants answered that they were unable to make a decision as to whether they have difficulty in expressing their ideas when speaking in English. More distinctively, 16 (38%) participants agreed to a question that they had difficulty in developing an in-depth critical understanding of the materials. With regards to writing in English, 20 (47.6%) participants responded that they were unable to make their decision if they had difficulty in avoiding grammatical mistakes when writing.

Within this category, the participants were also asked to indicate a self-estimation of their current English language proficiency levels using the rating scale provided. This particular cohort estimated that their English language proficiency levels in consideration of all four macro skills were high. They indicated that they were comparatively good at listening (5.3/6) and reading (5.2/6), otherwise they rated relatively lower scores (4.8/6) for both speaking and writing. This clearly indicates that the participants are more confident with listening and reading than speaking and writing.

Part C of the questionnaire began with questions known as 'Do' questions which were asked to determine the ability of participants to actually understand, use, have, discuss, participate and find the following Australian academic contexts while undertaking the courses. The data indicated that there were three 'Do' questions showing lower percentages of their responses in comparison with other questions. With regard to this point, 28 (66.8%) participants were less likely to contact students support services and facilities. Similarly, 29 (69.1%) participants find it easy to work academic tasks collaboratively. The lowest response rate of these 'Do' questions was that 25 (59.6%) participants only used or have had consultation time with their

lecturers. The outcome of this questionnaire implies that the participants' thoughts on their adjustment with Australian academic modes are very positive.

With the second set of questions in Part C, a similar pattern about 'Can' questions is observed. Out of 42 participants, the lowest response rate of these 'Can' questions indicates that 22(52.4%) participants feel confident to debate academic issues logically in sequence. This suggests that the participants appear to be able to debate, but not as confidently as the other contexts. It was found that 29 (69.1%) participants were not likely to familiarise themselves with uploading their own thoughts onto the forums in study desk or access academic supports while undertaking the courses.

Cross-cultural differences in the Australian academic mode

Part D of the questionnaire included 22 closed questions that were extracted from a variety of different resources. Additionally, the researcher created some questions on the basis of cultural differences that international students may face in the Australian academic mode. The two most distinctive findings elicited from the survey indicate that 17 (40.4%) participants were not able to make their firm decision on cultural differences or whether they were culturally affected by moving a hierarchical Indian society to an egalitarian-based Australian society. Similarly, 16 (38.1%) participants also responded that they were unable to agree or disagree that their cultural differences resulted from moving from a family centred society to an individual ability centred society. At this stage, it seems that this particular cohort has more difficulties in the Australian academic mode rather than cross-cultural differences.

In this part of the survey questionnaire, the participants were also asked to self-assess their Australian academic skills. In response to these questions, the participants indicated that they were all well-adjusted to a variety of different Australian academic skills necessary for their study. This particular cohort seemed to have a lack of critical thinking, questioning skills and referencing skills. With regard to this, 27 (64.2%) participants responded that they are neither good nor poor at critical thinking and questioning skills. In a similar way, 22 (52.4%) participants answered that their own referencing skills were at an acceptable level at the time of conducting the survey. Overall, the participants appear to have more difficulties in

adopting critical thinking and questioning skills. This will be discussed further in the in-depth interview findings of this paper.

Finally, the survey questionnaire asked the Indian students' most difficult activity in adapting to academic life in an Australian university. The selected activities for this survey consisted of tutorial participation, presenting ideas, preparing assignments, consulting academics and participating in cooperative group work or experiment as their most common daily routine. As evidenced by the 18 (42.8%) participants that suggested that they have difficulty in preparing their assignments. This distinctive aspect will also be discussed further in the in-depth interview findings.

In-Depth Interview Outcomes

English language difficulties and adjustment to the Australian academic context

In the individual in-depth interviews the participants were asked to first describe the reasons why Indian students are likely to have difficulty in listening to native speakers' of English pronunciation and accent. Out of the four students who participated in the interviews, three (75%) participants clearly indicated that they were uncomfortable when listening to native speakers of English. On the other hand, one (25%) interview participant responded that she was familiarising herself to listening after having a few weeks of listening to native speakers of English during the class. In addition, two (50%) interview participants described that they have some difficulties in understanding other international students' speaking; especially those who are from China, Nigeria and Arab countries, because their pronunciation and accents are not familiar to them. They stated:

> *I think, most native speakers of English just like you they speak so fast and rapidly, so sometimes hard to understand what they are saying (Sani)*

> *Some lecturers speaks English faster than normal people and they what they are talking about and they are also very speedy with their accent, so it is difficult to understand (Pranj)*

> *Yeah, I agree to that point. Some native speakers of English is a bit hard to understand because their pronunciation and accent are slightly different to what we speak (Anika)*

In reference to a question proposing that Indian students are likely to have difficulty in developing an in-depth critical understanding of the study materials, one (25%) interview participant agreed to the fact that he had a difficulty in critical thinking. Two (75%) interview participants answered that they had some difficulties but gained confidence and improved whilst undertaking EAP II courses. The problems were prompted not only by low critical thinking aspects, but also by a lack of vocabulary and new terms during the class. They said:

> *My fellow students and I am not familiar with in-depth critical understanding of the study material because we are used doing skip reading and scanning the material rather than reading it precisely in India (Sani)*

> *First time, I had difficulty in understanding the meaning of critical thinking, but I was able to get easily adapt this particular academic skill after spending a few weeks in EAP II course (Prisha)*

More interestingly, this particular cohort has had less consultation time with their lecturers or teachers during the course. Three (75%) interview participants indicated that they did no have sufficient consultation time in the EAP II program because their previous experiences in the Indian education environment. This resulted in substantial hesitation to contact lecturers or teachers in Australia. The very strong, authoritative behaviour of most Indian academics towards these participants seems to have made them somewhat uneasy in approaching Australian academics while undertaking their courses. Only one (25%) interview participant answered that she is now accustomed to having consultation time with her lecturers according to her academic needs and supports. They each noted:

> *I think it is mainly based on our Indian culture. Most academics in my culture would prefer that students ask questions during the class because they cannot manage such a large number of students one by one or face-to-face consultations like Australia (Sani).*

> *Yes, I agree, due to a large number of students in India, we are only allowed to ask questions only 5-10 minutes during the break time in the lecture or we are supported by fellow students (Pranj).*

> *Yeah, I think professors in India would treat us very highly authoritative way. Professors are professors. Can you understand what I am saying? Yah, this is the reason why we would not have any help as friendly as Australian academics (Prisha).*

In a similar light, the in-depth interview asked whether Indian students are able to debate academic issues logically in sequence or not. In response to 'Can' questions in the survey, approximately half (52%) of the participants indicated that they felt it was difficult for them to adjust to this particular Australian academic mode. Two (50%) interview participants did not comment on this question, but one (25%) interviewee described that Indian students are not likely to synchronise every single idea as one logical idea during the class discussions. On the other hand, one (25%) interviewee responded that Indian students are able to participate in class discussions with logical and sensible order. They responded:

> *I don't think Indian students can debate academic issues in logical and sensible order because we have an idea one by one, but it is difficult to synchronise those ideas as one in this way (Sani).*

> *Some difficulties, but I think we can debate issues logically during the class, and many of my Indian fellow students seem very talkative in the class (Prisha).*

Cross-cultural differences and adjustment to Australian academic skills

The following three in-depth interview questions hereafter are closely related to this particular cohort's problems with cross-cultural differences and their adjustment to Australian academic skills. First of all, this in-depth interview asked a question about Indian students' thoughts on their experiences and differences as to whether or not they were caused by a situation wherein they are moving from a hierarchical society (India) to an egalitarian-based society (Australia). In this respect, three (75%) interview participants agreed that moving from a hierarchical society to egalitarian society made them feel apparent cultural differences and it took them a fair amount of time to adjust by themselves to this particular cultural norm. One (25%) interviewee, otherwise, responded that it was not a great difference and was comparatively easy to adapt to a new learning environment. They stated:

Yes, definitely it is good to respect each other, everyone is equal with their status here in Australia, but I have never experienced this kind of circumstances in India, so I would ask for myself to clarify the situation if it is possible or not (Sani).

I agree, it seems that all people here are same, especially it was a bit difficult for me to adjust not to call 'sir' or 'professor' in front of their first names (Pranj)

It seems that the Australians are all equal and it is really good, we Indians still have a cast system, it means someone is higher or lower status in the society. Yah, this is the main difference that I have ever experienced (Prisha)

Similarly, the interviewees were also asked a question about whether or not they think moving from a family-centred (collectivist) to an individual ability-centred (individualist) society is the most different/difficult cultural challenge they have ever experienced.. According to the survey responses, they were uncertain or not clear enough to make their own decision on this point. However, all four (100%) interviewees strongly agreed that they did feel apparent cross-cultural differences primarily based on moving from family-oriented to individual-oriented society while encountering a new culture. In addition:

Yah, here in Australia, I have to do everything by myself, no one can help me and I cannot depend on others if I have a problem (Sani).

Yes Yes Yes, vast difference. It is likely that Australians are more independent than Indians and India is more conservative to look after their children (Pranj).

In India, we used to live three generations together, but here Australians seem to be more independent, this is obvious cultural difference that I need to adjust (Prisha).

Obviously, moving from family focus society to individual focus society is challenging for me to study here (Anika).

Finally, the interviewees were asked about why Indian students feel 'preparing assignments' is the most difficult activity in adapting to the Australian academic mode. With regard to this survey outcome, all four (100%) interview participants strongly agreed that Indian students have the most difficulty in preparing their assignments. As seen below, it appears that the term 'plagiarism' itself was a very new concept to Indian students. This could be a key factor as to why this cohort is struggling with assignment preparation. They said:

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Yes, definitely… because of 'plagiarism', In India normally someone who is clever or intelligent in the class then his or her work can be copied from other students, in a word, Indian students are not used doing their own assignment (Sani).

Yes, here is a 'plagiarism' system, in India there is no like 'plagiarism' (Pranj)

Firstly, no 'plagiarism' in India. Yah, students can copy other students' work, contents from google and internet, but Australian academics expect that students need to work done by them (Prisha).

It is very difficult for me because we do not have any assignment and we only have exams, so we are not familiar with 'plagiarism' here in Australia (Anika).

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to key findings and implications of this study, the following points are recommended. These provide all teachers, lecturers and other stakeholders who give service for this particular cohort with effective ways of better understanding of their unique cultural characteristics, language problems and issues necessary to promote appropriate teaching strategies.

The University needs to provide regular meet up sessions with native Australian students during the course:

- Pre-orientation sessions focussing particularly on critical thinking, plagiarism, group discussions and referencing skills should be organised for one or two days, at least, prior to commencing their course;
- Assignment preparation should be addressed and demonstrated with the assistance of volunteer students who have completed the enabling program as part of pre-orientation sessions;
- A role play session of consultation with academics and asking questions should be included in the pre-orientation program;
- The general relationship between academics and students in Australian tertiary learning environment should be taught and assimilated (for instance, observing a formal university class);

- Australian academic culture and its attributes should be more emphasised during the pre-orientation program.

It is imperative that enabling educators that are involved with not only this particular cohort, but also other international students, need to instigate the suggested pedagogical strategies above. It is also highly recommendable to continue profiling and updating their information on learning and teaching in Australian universities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of this study suggest that Indian international students' find challenges in not only the English language, but also largely in cross-cultural differences they face. It can be acknowledged that trying to adapt to a new learning culture such as the Australian system poses a unique challenge for this cohort. Without the right support and guidance, they find it difficult to assimilate well into Australian academic norms.

It seems that this particular cohort has difficulties in listening to native speakers of English and developing an in-depth critical understanding of the study materials. Occasionally, this cohort has difficulties in understanding other international students' speaking during the class, but it is likely that this is mainly influenced by a lack of communication experience and interaction with native speakers of English within the Indian education system. Interestingly, this cohort identified to speaking English since primary school. Cumulatively, they had been taught English for 9.7 years. This implies that the implementation teaching material and learning pedagogy's play a pivotal role in this ironical phenomenon. In addition, this particular cohort estimated and regarded themselves to be very proficient at the English language at the time of conducting the survey. Apart from their own confidence in the level of their language proficiency, this cohort does not appear to actively be involved in consulting with their teachers and lecturers. It also shows that they are not familiar with group work either. More importantly however, they appear to have some difficulties in debating academic issues logically and in a sequential in order during class.

In relation to the Australian academic mode, this cohort does not seem to have any severe difficulties. They were however uncertain in choosing their answers to the following two

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particular aspects. Firstly, the cross-cultural differences they experience having moved from a hierarchical to an egalitarian-based society. Secondly, the transition from a family-oriented society one that is reliant more on individual ability. In regards to self-assessment of their Australian academic skills, the result showed that the Indian students were very confident, but lacked in ascertaining their level of competency in critical thinking and referencing skills. One of the most distinctive findings was the cohort's difficulty in preparing assignments. On a whole, this may be due to a lack of experience in academic assignment submission and referencing systems in their home county. For this reason, plagiarism avoidance in academic submissions and acknowledging appropriate referencing systems are amongst the most imperative tasks for these novice learners in the Australian academic context.

According to all in-depth interview participants' responses, they believe that academic English language skills and cross-cultural adjustment skills they gained from the EAP program are highly beneficial for both their current and future study in Australia. They emphasised the importance of interacting with academics, familiarising themselves with a group work environment and carrying out academic assignments in accordance to the Australian teaching standard. In regards to this point, they also suggested that Indian students who seek Australian higher education programs for their study destination should be ready to follow all Australian academic conventions and rules. Furthermore, they felt that more suitable English language preparation to embarking upon their academic journey in Australia is a necessity in order to be successful in the new learning environment.

It is clear that objectifying the outcomes of this study is difficult due to the comparatively small number of participants. This study however can recommend more specific investigations on English language difficulties and cultural differences that Indian students encounter in Australian university programs. Enabling educators who are involved in teaching Indian students and other involved stakeholders are highly encouraged to provide through means of pedagogical strategies in order to help such students. Both the EAP and formal program providers should make it a priority to review this basic study in order to enhance the linguistic and cultural adjustments of this cohort. This study can also be associated with other international students who are trying to cope with Australian academic contexts. Above all, preliminary sessions for this cohort focusing primarily on plagiarism avoidance and referencing prior to commencement of their study is highly recommended.

It is obvious that all educators who are involved in providing any service in the Australian international education sector need to strive for a fuller understanding of Indian students' educational and cultural backgrounds. With such customer service perspective, there is a need to maintain an ongoing service development for these students in order to provide education of the highest quality.

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