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Strategic Reading for English Learners: Principles and Practices

■ Research data consistently indicate that the coordinated use of reading strategies is a critical component of effective reading. This article synthesizes what is known about helping native and nonnative speakers of English become strategic readers. It also provides specific suggestions for delivering strategic instruction in multilingual and multicultural settings. Finally, the article gives concrete examples of authentic, meaning-centered ways to implement instructional strategies.

Introduction

According to recent demographic data, more than 2 million English learners attend K-12 public and private schools in California (CBEDS, 2002). The situation is similar in many other states where changing immigration patterns have greatly increased the number of students whose level of English proficiency and literacy development make it difficult for them to succeed in school. Consequently, the provision of English-language and subject-matter instruction to English learners is one of the most critical challenges confronting teachers and teacher educators.

Further exacerbating the situation is the fact that the functions and nature of literacy in today's society have changed. Literacy is no longer defined simply as the ability to read and write. In addition to being able to communicate in oral and written form, to be considered truly literate one must be able to think critically, reason logically, and use technology. Schools now face pressures to raise standards and increase accountability in ways that address this broader definition of literacy. Unfortunately, there is as yet no conclusive evidence to indicate that these efforts have had any significant impact on the levels of language proficiency and literacy development English learners achieve.

This article emerged from the author's attempts to address what he believes is the single most important educational issue resulting from the changes in school populations and approaches: how to help students from language minority backgrounds develop literacy in English. Specifically, the article:

- Synthesizes what is known about facilitating the development of strategic readers;
- Provides specific suggestions for delivering strategic instruction;
- Gives concrete examples of authentic, meaning-centered ways to implement instructional strategies.

Developing Strategic Readers

Research data consistently indicate that the coordinated use of reading strategies is a critical component of effective reading (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Competent, proficient readers use a wider range of strategies more effectively and more flexibly than do less proficient readers. Proficient readers also know when and how to use a particular strategy and how to orchestrate its use with other strategies (Anderson, 1991). Strategic readers typically exhibit the following characteristics:

1. They are actively involved in the reading.
2. They often have a running dialogue with the text.
3. They visualize scenes and characters.
4. They make predictions about what they are reading.
5. They relate their prior knowledge to the topic they are reading about.
6. They read with a specific purpose in mind.
7. They monitor their comprehension and, when necessary, apply appropriate fix-up strategies.
8. They accept ambiguity and push on; that is, when they come to a part of the text that they do not understand, they go on, confident that they will eventually figure it out or be able to comprehend the overall meaning (Paris, Lipson, and & Wixson, 1983).

Less proficient readers, on the other hand, have a relatively limited range of strategies for learning from text and coping with reading difficulties. These students may have difficulty recognizing the importance of using a strategy, fail to adjust strategy usage according to subject area, and may be unable to monitor their level of understanding (Simpson, 1984). Fortunately, research in strategy instruction provides educators with the information they need to help students with such difficulties.

Definitions of Strategies

Before considering research on the use of strategy instruction to help struggling readers, it is necessary to distinguish between the strategies readers use to construct meaning and the ones teachers use to facilitate learning. Reading strategies are the deliberate, cognitive acts learners use to construct meaning and monitor comprehension (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). Instructional strategies, on the other hand, are the teaching techniques teachers model and use to help students become more independent readers and

learners (Cook, 1989). Although all instructional strategies teachers use to facilitate their students' language and literacy development are designed in some way to make students better readers, some instructional strategies help students become better readers without trying to teach them how to use the strategies independently.

For instance, an "Anticipation Guide" is a series of teacher-generated statements about a topic that students respond to before reading about that topic. A prereading discussion of student responses to the statements elicits preconceived ideas that students have about the topic and encourages students to consider those ideas in relation to the information presented later in the reading. While an effective instructional strategy, an Anticipation Guide is not designed to promote student ownership of the strategy or student control of the reading process.

Other instructional strategies have the potential to become reading strategies because, in addition to being teaching techniques, they have the concomitant purpose of developing student ownership of the strategies. An example is "Questioning the Author," an approach designed to build understanding and engage students in the ideas of the text by modeling how to transform an author's idea into a reader's idea. Thus, instructional strategies become reading strategies when a student can independently select an appropriate one and use it effectively to construct meaning from a text.

Studies indicate that explicit strategy instruction may influence the behavior and achievement of low-achieving students, both English-only and English learners (Brown, El-Dinary, & Pressley, 1997). This finding is noted in the *Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve:*

> Direct teaching and modeling of the strategies and readers' application of the strategies to the text they hear and read increase the ability of students to develop literal and inferential understanding, increase vocabulary, and make connections between parts of a text, between separate texts, and between text and personal experience (1999, p. 25).

Types of Strategic Knowledge

Research findings also provide specific guidance regarding what students need to know about strategies and how teachers can most effectively facilitate students' learning and use of them. In regard to "the what" of strategy instruction, Paris, Lipson, and Wixson have demonstrated that students become more strategic readers and develop greater proficiency when they acquire three types of knowledge (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983):

- Declarative knowledge (what the strategy is);
- Procedural knowledge (how it should be used);
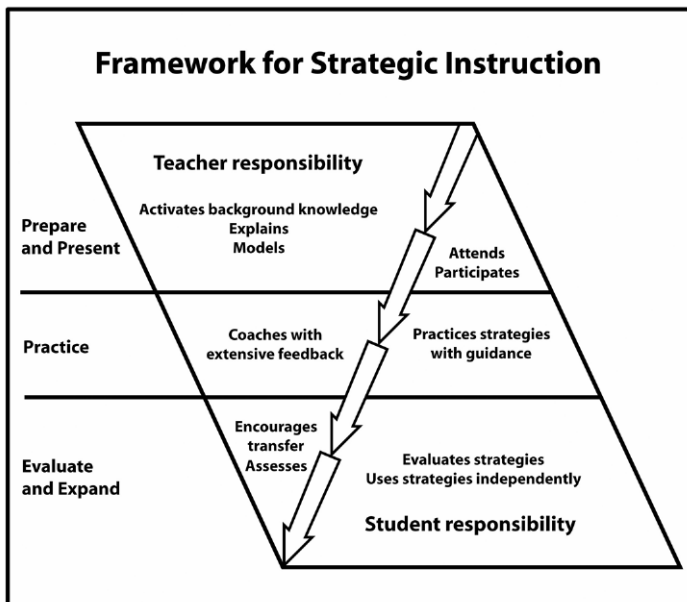- Conditional knowledge (when and why it should be used).

When any one of these types of knowledge is omitted, students are much less likely to use appropriate processing behavior.

For example, a middle-school student may know that SQ3R stands for the reading-study strategy "Survey, Question, Read, Review, Recite." In other words, he or she knows what the strategy is. However, having declarative knowledge about SQ3R does not mean the student will understand how to use SQ3R. That procedural knowledge is usually acquired from direct modeling and guided practice. However, declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge about SQ3R alone cannot guarantee that the student will use the strategy effectively. For that to happen the student must also possess conditional knowledge—an understanding of when and why one would logically use the strategy.

Framework for Strategic Instruction

Guidance regarding "the how" of strategy instruction can be found in the work of a number of researchers. The reliability of their findings is enhanced by the fact that researchers from a variety of disciplines concur on some of the most basic aspects of strategy instruction (Jones, Palincsar, Ogle, & Carr, 1987). Three researchers whose work is among the most relevant to language and literacy development are Michael Pressley, Anna Chamot, and Michael O'Malley. These researchers have made significant contributions to an understanding of the most effective ways to teach students (both English-speaking and English learners) to be strategic and to use strategic knowledge to develop their language and literacy abilities.

Figure 1

Framework for Strategic Instruction

Teacher responsibility

Prepare and Present — Activates background knowledge, Explains, Models — Attends Participates

Practice — Coaches with extensive feedback — Practices strategies with guidance

Evaluate and Expand — Encourages transfer Assesses — Evaluates strategies Uses strategies independently

Student responsibility

The primary focus of their approach is represented in the "Framework for Strategic Instruction" (See Figure 1). Although this model was developed by Chamot and O'Malley in their work with English learners (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994), it shares the same basic characteristics of models that Pressley and others have developed (Brown, El-Dinary, & Pressley, 1997). This model was chosen for inclusion here because of the clear, concise manner in which each step is depicted.

Two basic elements that are common to all the models referenced above are:

- Students must be explicitly taught how to use the strategies teachers want them to acquire.
- The instructional process gradually evolves from one that is teacher-directed to one that is student-directed.

In other words, a gradual release of responsibility occurs once the teacher has explained and modeled the strategy. As instruction continues and the teacher's role is more akin to that of a coach, teacher and student responsibilities are more equal. Eventually, the students assume primary responsibility for practicing the strategies and trying to apply them in new situations. The "Four-Step Modeling Process" (Hanson, personal communication, November 22, 2002) described below and depicted in Figure 2 on the next page indicates how the evolution from teacher-directed to student-directed can occur.

- Step 1: The teacher models the skill or process while the students watch and listen. The teacher talks through his/her thought process while demonstrating.
- Step 2: The teacher "develops amnesia" so students must teach the skill or process back to the teacher. The teacher provides questions and prompts to ensure all key points are reviewed.
- Step 3: Students now have their first chance to attempt the skill or process. The teacher helps, coaches, supports, and prompts as appropriate. In this step, if appropriate, responsibility for performance can move from whole group to small group to individual.
- Step 4: Students are responsible for performing the task on their own.

Note: Since the teacher is closely monitoring student progress, he/she is able to move back and forth among the steps as appropriate to student needs.

Delivering Strategic Instruction

Ideally, the students' strategic abilities and teachers' instructional approaches described above should begin to develop as a part of the learning-to-read process in the primary grades. However, even when this happens, teachers in grades 4-12 need to understand how to deliver strategic instruction. Fortunately, in the past 25 years, a proliferation of research has been related to various aspects of this process. Educators concerned with strategic

Figure 2
The Four-Step Modeling Process

"Watch me, I'll do it."

"You help me do it."

"I'll help you do it."

"Now, you do it."
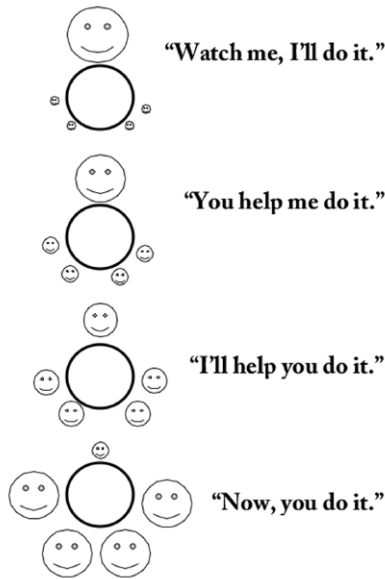
teaching for strategic learning now have a strong empirical and pedagogical base to guide them in their efforts.

Early literacy initiatives, such as the *English–Language Arts Content Standards* (1998) and the *Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools* (1999), were designed to create a shared vision of what California students are expected to attain in the language arts and what the school community can do to ensure that the vision is realized. However, recent data indicate that many students are not yet realizing the vision (McQuillan, 1998). In some schools and school districts, the number of students reading below grade level far exceeds the number reading at or above grade level (*Learning to Read, Reading to Learn*, 1996). If educators are to meet this challenge successfully, it is necessary to identify the:

• Range of reading abilities within a school;
• Percentage of students reading above and below grade level;
• Nature of the reading difficulties students face.

Various assessment procedures and instruments, both formal and informal, are available and can be used to obtain these data (Farr & Pritchard, 1994). Assessments will vary with the age, language proficiency, and reading ability of students as well as the academic content, instructional context, and goals of the class. Teachers may need to rely on specially trained professionals

for the correct use of the assessment tools needed for planning both group and individualized instruction. Although a description of assessment procedures and instruments is beyond the scope of this paper, knowledge of reader strengths and needs forms the instructional base of teachers committed to supporting the development of their students' language and literacy abilities.

Range of Reading Abilities

Regardless of the specific instruments or procedures used, one fact consistently emerges from the research data: Students, particularly those in grades 4-12, exhibit a wide range of reading abilities (Campbell et al., 1996). This range can be grouped into three broad levels of achievement:

- Students reading at or above grade level;
- Students reading below grade level;
- Beginning readers who are reading significantly below grade level.

These groups exist at nearly every school. What varies from school to school is the percentage of students in each group. The challenge is obviously greater when the percentage of students reading below grade level is high. An important factor in understanding how this range of abilities develops (and usually increases as students progress through school) is the relationship between learning to read and reading to learn. According to de Beaugrande:

> Learning to read subsumes all settings in which written texts are processed with the dominant (though not exclusive) goal of rehearsing, improving, or organizing the processes themselves. Reading to learn, on the other hand, subsumes all settings in which texts are processed with the dominant (though not exclusive) goal of acquiring knowledge about the topic domain underlying the text in use (1984, p. 163).

In other words, learning to read refers to learning the process of reading, mastering and developing control over the strategies that are needed in school and throughout life. Reading to learn refers to applying the process, using those strategies for the primary purpose of gaining information and understanding the message conveyed in the text.

It is important to note that learning to read is sometimes defined too narrowly as "the capacity to interpret the written symbols for oral language" (*Learning to Read, Reading to Learn,* 1996, p. 7). This narrow definition leads to criticism of the learning-to-read/reading-to-learn dichotomy by people who believe that instruction in reading to learn can and should begin as soon as possible in the primary grades. However, if one accepts de Beaugrande's definitions, it becomes clear that learning to read and reading to learn are not mutually exclusive and therefore can be developed concurrently from the outset.

Whichever of these perspectives one embraces, a consensus exists that a strong reading foundation needs to be established in kindergarten through
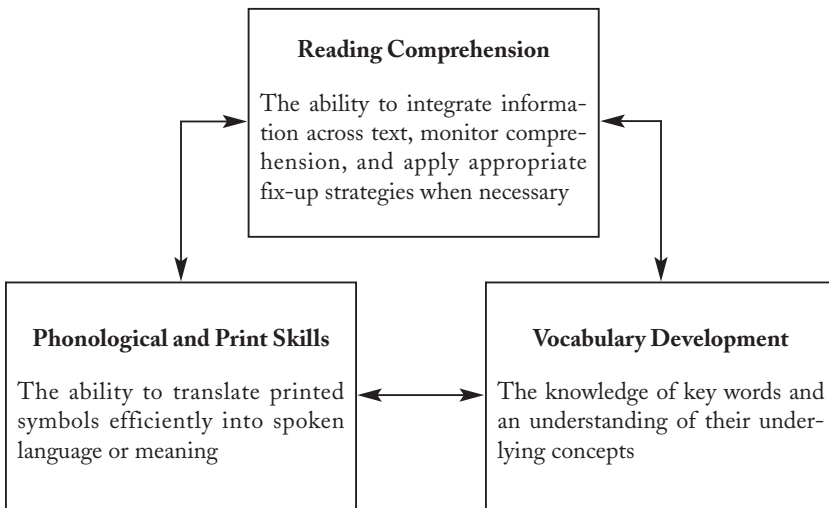
Grade 3. When students enter Grade 4, teacher expectations and curriculum demands rise. From Grade 4, students are increasingly assigned tasks such as reading a chapter in a textbook and answering questions about the content. They are expected to apply their knowledge about the reading process more frequently and more independently to materials such as social studies books, math word problems, and science experiments.

Teacher expectations and curriculum demands continue to increase as students progress from one grade level to the next. Unfortunately, when students have not developed their learning-to-read foundation in kindergarten through Grade 3, they will in all likelihood be unable to fulfill these reading-to-learn expectations in Grades 4 through 12 (*Reading/Language Arts Framework,* 1999). Thus, a conceptual framework for literacy development must be in place so that educators can understand the areas in which readers develop strengths and weaknesses as they progress along the learning-to-read/reading-to-learn continuum and become more strategic readers.

Conceptual Framework for Literacy Development

The "Conceptual Framework for Literacy Development" (see Figure 3) depicts three components of reading ability: phonological and print skills, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension (Barr, Sadow, & Blachowicz, 1990).

Figure 3
Conceptual Framework for Literacy Development

Reading Comprehension

The ability to integrate information across text, monitor comprehension, and apply appropriate fix-up strategies when necessary

Phonological and Print Skills

The ability to translate printed symbols efficiently into spoken language or meaning

Vocabulary Development

The knowledge of key words and an understanding of their underlying concepts

Phonological and print skills refers to the ability to translate printed symbols efficiently into spoken language or meaning. This component includes distinguishing phonemes within words, decoding, analyzing word structure,

using context clues, being fluent, and being able to instantly recognize high-frequency words. Virtually all teachers have had students who do not read because they lack one or more of these skills. At the same time, virtually all teachers have also had students who read aloud fluently but who are unable to retell or answer questions regarding what they have read. These students are not lacking phonological and print skills, at least in relation to the materials being read. Their difficulty lies in one or both of the other components of the Conceptual Framework.

Vocabulary development is the knowledge of key words and their underlying concepts. Unfortunately, some teachers fail to distinguish between memorizing a definition and understanding a concept. This failure is manifested in classrooms where students are routinely engaged in the following: getting a list of decontextualized words on Monday; looking them up in a dictionary, recording them in a notebook, committing to memory the definitions of those words; and then being tested on the words and definitions on Friday. Although students may do well on those tests, they usually start forgetting the definitions before leaving class on Friday. Why? Because they never really understood the words and definitions at a conceptual level. They had simply committed the definitions to their short-term memories. They had not linked the word to the concept that the word represents—e.g., the word "c-a-t" to the concept of the furry, four-legged animal that purrs and meows. Unless vocabulary instruction results in the linkage of the word to the concept, it cannot be meaningful or successful. Thus, the true measure of the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction is not the students' vocabulary test scores, but the extent to which the students have taken ownership of the concepts.

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to integrate information across one or more texts, monitor comprehension, and apply appropriate strategies when necessary. According to Barr et al., this framework "is applicable to all levels of skill, from initial reading acquisition to mature reading proficiency. That is, it is useful for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of a beginning reader as well as of a college student" (Barr, Sadow, & Blachowicz, 1990, p. 9). Thus, decisions on reading instruction for all student groups should be based on assessments of students' abilities in each of the components of reading.

Implementing Instructional Strategies

Given the specialized nature of the reading components and the curriculum demands of the various subject areas, even well-trained and highly motivated teachers need specific models of how to implement instructional strategies with English learners who are still developing their strategic reading abilities. What follows is an example of one instructional strategy for each component of the Conceptual Framework for Literacy Development.

Reading Comprehension—Think Aloud. The think-aloud strategy is an approach in which teachers verbalize their own thought processes while reading orally to students. In this way teachers model for students the cogni-

tive and metacognitive processes that good readers use to construct meaning and monitor comprehension. The goals of this strategy are to:

- Give students the opportunity to see the kinds of strategies a skilled reader uses to construct meaning and cope with comprehension problems.
- Develop students' ability to monitor their reading and take corrective action when needed.
- Provide an opportunity for students to experience effective reading and problem-solving and to transfer these strategies to their independent reading.

When preparing to implement this strategy, teachers should:

- Select a passage that contains points of difficulty, ambiguities, or unknown words in preparation for oral reading.
- Preview the passage and imagine that they are reading it for the first time as one of your good readers would.
- Use a copy of the passage to make note of the comments and questions to model for students.

The actual implementation of this strategy requires teachers to:

- Read the passage aloud, telling students to follow along silently and listen to how they construct meaning and think through trouble spots. The following are examples of the thought processes a teacher might model for students:
  1. Make predictions. (Show how to develop hypotheses.)
  2. Describe any pictures forming in your head while reading. (Show how to develop images during reading.)
  3. Share an analogy. (Show how to link prior knowledge with new information in the reading selection.)
  4. Verbalize a confusing point. (Show how to monitor ongoing comprehension and become aware of problems.)
  5. Demonstrate fix-up strategies. (Show how to address comprehension problems by using corrective strategies.)
- Select a logical stopping point, and have students use some of those strategies during a silent reading of the passage.
- Model several experiences, and then have students work with partners to practice "think alouds" by taking turns in reading orally and sharing thoughts. For struggling readers, move from carefully developed materials with obvious problems to school materials of various types and lengths.

Vocabulary Development—Rating Vocabulary. In this activity students rate their knowledge of words before they read, after they read, and after they

discuss the words. Most appropriately used at the beginning of a lesson or unit, this strategy encourages students to think metacognitively about their conceptual background for each word being introduced. The goals of this strategy are to:

- Before reading, help students determine whether words in a reading selection are familiar or unfamiliar.
- Encourage students to think about words they encounter in print and to respond strategically to those that are unfamiliar.

When preparing to implement this strategy, teachers should:

- Identify and, if necessary, assign priorities to the most important words in a lesson or unit.
- Develop a Rating Vocabulary activity sheet that lists the target words in a column on the left, and then create three other columns that follow the format described below.

The actual implementation of this strategy requires teachers to:

- Give students a copy of the Rating Vocabulary activity sheet and explain that they will think about the words at three different points: before reading, after reading, and after discussing the words. For students unable to read, the column headings could be before listening, after listening, and after discussing.
- Explain the rating criteria: A plus sign (+) indicates students are sure they know the meaning of the word; a minus sign (-) indicates they are sure they do not know the meaning of the word; and a question mark (?) indicates they are uncertain about the meaning of the word.
- Read the words aloud to the whole class or have the students read the words silently. Pause after each word and have the students rate the words on the activity sheet in the second column ("Before Reading").
- Have the students read the selection silently. When they have finished reading, students rate the words again in the "After Reading" column.
- Break students into small groups in which they share their ratings by discussing what each word means, which words they knew before reading, and which words they figured out while reading.
- Have students complete the last column of the activity sheet. Write on the board or on a transparency any words that a group still does not understand.
- Elicit from students the strategies they used to determine the meaning of words that were initially unknown.

Print Skills—Cloze Procedure. The cloze procedure is a reading activity that uses selected passages of text in which words have been systematically deleted. Readers must fill in the blanks left in the text. Words can be deleted

in ways that require readers to employ specific reading strategies or context clues. The goals of this strategy are to:

- Practice context clues to successfully determine the missing words in a passage.
- Develop an understanding of why context is important.

When preparing to implement this strategy, teachers should:

- Depending on the purpose of the activity, prepare the text as follows:
  1. Letters and letter clusters should be deleted to encourage the use of graphophonic clues (i.e., those derived from letter-sound relationships).
  2. Function words, such as conjunctions, prepositions, and pronouns, help students focus on syntactic clues.
  3. Content words, such as nouns and verbs, require the use of semantic clues.
- Delete every fifth word or the type of word on which you have chosen to focus (leaving the first sentence intact so that readers can develop a sense of the context of the passage).
- Choose passages of appropriate length. Generally, a passage of 200 to 300 words is appropriate because it is long enough to get a sense of the readers' typical processing behavior. However, a 100- to 200-word passage is adequate for younger students or for students using the cloze procedure for the first time.
- Monitor the level of passage difficulty. For most students, passages written at their instructional level provide the appropriate level of difficulty. However, English learners may find the task more difficult than native speakers of English because familiarity with English language patterns may affect one's ability to fill in the blanks correctly.

The actual implementation of this strategy requires teachers to:

- Demonstrate on a practice passage how to use context clues.
- Ask students to complete the entire passage by using the context clues in the passage and their knowledge of the topic, text structure, and word order in English.
- Have students compare their responses after completing the cloze procedure and encourage other students to discuss the context clues they used to make their guess.
- Reveal the words that were deleted and give students time to compare their answers with the original choices.

Conclusion

The preceding examples of instructional strategies—as well as many others—are as applicable to reading for native speakers of English as they are for

English learners. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of researchers who have investigated L1 and L2 reading processing behavior and found the following:

- Native-language knowledge transfers to English reading: There is a positive relationship between English reading ability and native language reading ability.
- Cognitive reading processes of English learners are substantively the same as those of English speakers, although English learners often do things less frequently, more slowly, and less effectively when reading in English than in their native language.
- Much of what has been learned about English speakers learning to read in English applies to English learners learning to read in their native languages as well as in English (Fitzgerald, 1995).

The applicability of all instructional strategies must be determined in context and be adjusted to the particular needs of students. Therefore, the solution to the language and literacy development challenges that English learners face cannot be found in a specific set of instructional materials but depends instead on teachers capable of delivering strategic instruction and developing strategic readers.

Author

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