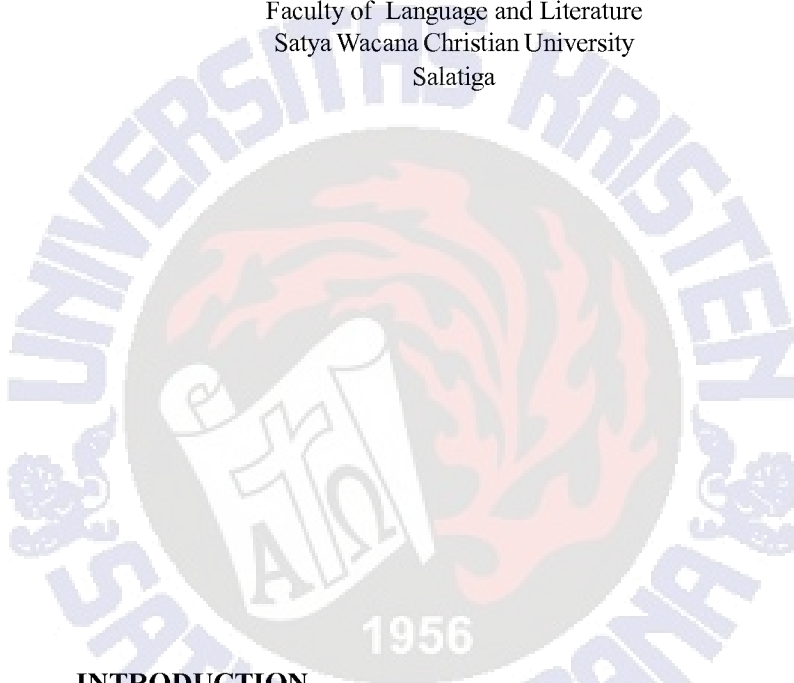


# **ORAL COMMUNICATION OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS IN AN IMMERSION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

**Mita Milasari Putri  
Maria Christina Eko Setyarini**

Faculty of Language and Literature  
Satya Wacana Christian University  
Salatiga



## **INTRODUCTION**

The globalization era has made many parents to be concerned about their children's education. They want to give their children education that will prepare their children to face the future. One thing they do is to send their children to schools where English is used as a medium of instruction. Realizing that English is an international language and is needed to participate globally, they try to introduce English to children as early as possible. Therefore, they send their children to bilingual schools or English-speaking playgroups, kindergarten, elementary schools, etc. where children are immersed in English.

Schools use English to teach all subjects, and they are rightly called immersion schools (Courcy, 2002). These schools require the students to use English at school and the use of Indonesian is minimum with the hope that children will be able to converse in English and to read and write in English. In other words, children will be able to understand and produce English sentences. They believe that the earlier English is learned, the greater their comprehension is and the better their English is, as there will be little interference from the first language. In relation to this, Cook (in Brown, 2007, p. 72) said that bilinguals are not two monolinguals in the same head. Children do not acquire two languages in separate contexts. Put in a situation where English is used by Indonesian teachers, children in such a school learn the language using Indonesian and English through formal instruction. To some extent, they will learn English naturally and build comprehension like the first language. The question is how natural their language will be, keeping in mind that the English language input they get from people around them is limited and may be far from perfect.

Based on the condition mentioned previously, this study was design to investigate how well the fourth graders of an immersion school could use English with their friends. In other words, this study aimed to find out the lengths of utterances, the kinds of language they used, and the errors they made. For this study, two research questions have been formulated.

The objective of this study was to answer the research questions and to propose suggestions based on the findings. This study dealt with fourth graders of an immersion elementary school in Salatiga. The class investigated had sixteen students: 11 males and 5 females. The focus analysis of this study was only on their oral language that they used to communicate with their friends or their teachers. This study was expected to provide useful information to any school which uses immersion programs. Insight gained from this study was expected to help teachers in such a school to deal with their children's English language development.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This section discusses immersion education, children's first language development and errors that appear in foreign language learning.

## **Immersion education**

As English is gaining more and more importance in the world, as well as in Indonesia, many schools offer bilingual and immersion programs in English. Immersion itself is an approach to the teaching of language in which students are taught science, history, and math through the target language (Nunan, 1999). Immersion programs are the fastest growing and most effective type of foreign language program currently available in U.S. schools (Fortune et al., 2003). In U.S. people learn English as their mother tongue. However, in Indonesia, bilingual education, in which the students must use the new language 50 percent of the study time (Courcy, 2002) is more popular than immersion programs in which all subjects, except the students' native language subject, are taught in the new language. The goal of the immersion program is for the students to become proficient in the second language and develop cultural awareness while reaching a high level of academic achievement in their target language.

Bostwick (2005, as cited in Sultan, 2010) proposes four principles which make immersion more effective in improving second/foreign language acquisition. The four principles are first, language is acquired most effectively when it is learned in a meaningful social context. For young learners, the school curriculum provides a natural basis for foreign language learning, offering them the opportunity to communicate about what they know and what they want to know, as well as about their feelings and attitudes. Second, important and interesting content provides a motivating context for learning the communicative functions of the new language. Young children are not interested in learning language that serves no meaningful function. Third, first language acquisition, cognition, and social awareness go hand in hand in young children. By integrating language and content, foreign language learning, too, becomes an integral part of a child's social and cognitive development. Lastly, formal and functional characteristics of language change from one context to another. An integrated language and content model in an elementary school setting provides a wide variety of contexts in which to use the foreign language.

### **Mean Length of Utterance.**

One procedure used to show a child's language development is the mean length of utterance (MLU). MLU was originally popularized by Brown (1973 as cited in Parker & Brorson, 2005.) as a measure of grammatical development (Thorne, 2004). Initially, in 1973, Brown proposed a method for computing utterance length which is known as mean length of utterance in morphemes (MLUm). MLUm is computed by dividing the total number of morphemes in an utterance by the total number of utterances (Parker & Brorson, 2005). The use of MLUm as a measure of language growth is based on Brown's work showing that most advances in language development result in increases in length, that is, the addition of words or other linguistic elements to utterances. Brown (1973, p. 54, as cited in Parker & Brorson, 2005) regarded MLUm as an excellent simple index of grammatical development. Brown (1973) and Devilliers and Devilliers (1973, as cited in Parker & Brorson, 2005) documented that MLUm in the English language was correlated with the development of morphological and syntactic skills in young children.

Nice (1925 as cited in Parker & Brorson 2005) introduced mean length of response (MLR) to demonstrate the predictable patterns of child language development. MLR measured utterance length by dividing the total number of words by the number of utterances. Then, the term evolved into mean length of utterance in words (MLUw). Although the term MLR changed to MLUw, it still measured utterance length by dividing the total number of words by the number of utterances. Many research results in Dutch, Irish, and Icelandic languages have found correlations of 0.98-0.99 between MLUm and MLUw (Arlman-Rupp et al., 1976; Hickey, 1991; Thordardottir & Weismer, 1998 as cited in Parker & Brorson 2005). This means that MLUm and MLUw are almost perfectly correlated. Furthermore, Parker and Brorson, who compared mean length of utterance in morphemes (MLUm) and mean length of utterance in words (MLUw), found MLUw and MLUm scores of 40 language transcripts from typically-developing, English-speaking children between the ages of 3;0 and 3;10 were almost perfectly correlated. This finding suggests that MLUw can be used as

effectively as MLU as a measurement of a child's language development. These strong correlations have led some researchers to believe that MLUw may be a better and more reliable measure for calculating utterance length and a more sensitive measure of a child's language development and complexity (Parker & Brorson, 2005). Thordardottir and Weismer, (1998, as cited in Parker & Brorson, 2005) agreed, that MLU counted in words is easier, faster, and more reliable. It can be more reliable because MLUw can be used in any language which has different morpheme.

Nowadays, child language researchers and speech-language pathologists use mean length of utterance in words (MLUw) as a measurement of a child's gross language development. MLU is a frequently-used measure of expressive language ability within both clinical and research settings (Thorne, 2004). Relating MLU and stages of language development, Brown (1973, as cited in Parker & Brorson, 2005) posited five stages of linguistic development:

- a. Stage 1 is characterized by an MLU of 1.75,
- b. Stage 2 is characterized by an MLU of 2.25;
- c. Stage 3 is characterized by an MLU of 2.75;
- d. Stage 4 is characterized by an MLU of 3.5;
- e. And Stage 5 is characterized by an MLU of 4.0.

### **Strategies**

In learning, strategies are needed in order to improve the development of the learning. Oxford (2003) stated that the word strategy means steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war. In relation with learning, according to Scarcella and Oxford (1992, p.63, as cited in Oxford, 2003) strategies are defined as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques, such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task, used by students to enhance their own learning. These strategies become a useful when the learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style.

For most people, the main goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate. Thus, we need communication strategy in order to communicate properly. A communication strategy is an individual's attempt in order to find a

way to fill the gap between their communication effort and immediate available linguistic resources (Maleki, 2007 as cited in Maleki 2010). Then Faerch and Kasper (1983 as cited in Maleki 2010) also define communication strategy as a potentially conscious plan which is used by an individual to solve a problem to reach a specific communication purposes. Then according to Littlewood (1984) communicative strategy is a coping way with the situations students faced problem in speaking, and have to try to find an alternative way of getting the meaning across.

### **Error**

In addition to the length of utterance, the language development of a child involves the production of errors. This holds true for first language development, but it is also true for foreign language learning. In the immersion program for little children, a unique situation occurs: the little child is developing its first language, which is still erroneous; while, at the same time, the child is hoped to develop the foreign language, which may also involve errors. Thus, it seems that errors are inevitable in the language of the child that is taking an immersion program.

According to Littlewood (2005), until the late of 1960s, most people probably regarded errors as a faulty version of the target language. He stated that if a learner is taking part in a formal instruction, some error will be a direct result of misunderstanding caused by faulty teaching or materials. This perspective became stronger with the term of interference. This term means existing habits prevent correct speech from becoming established; errors are signs of learning failure, and, as such as, they should not be tolerated.

However, Nunan (1999) argued that an error is a piece of speech or writing that is recognizably different in some way from native speakers usage. Errors can occur at the level of discourse, grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. Therefore an error is not merely a fault in learning. Moreover, he stated that the new approach to the child first language development encourages a change, so a child's speech is no longer seen as just a faulty version of the adult's; it is recognized as having its own underlying system which can be

described in its own terms. He added that errors are also the clearest evidence for the learner's developing system.

In relation to foreign language learning, Littlewood (2005) mentions three major processes that affect the language learning. They are as follows:

- a. Transfer of rules from the mother tongue
- b. Generalization and overgeneralization of second language rules
- c. Redundancy reduction by omitting elements.

From these three processes, he proposes three kinds of errors. They are transfer errors, overgeneralization errors and simplification errors.

#### *Transfer Errors*

According to Littlewood (2005), transfer and generalization are not distinct processes. Both result from the fact that the learner uses what he or she already knows about the language, in order to make sense of a new experience. So, the difference lies in what knowledge is being generalized or transfer. In the case of overgeneralization, it is his or her previous knowledge of the second language that the learner uses. In the case of transfer, the learner uses his or her previous mother tongue experience as a means of organizing the second language data.

Taylor (as cited in Littlewood, 2005) found transfer errors to be more frequent with beginners than with intermediate students. It is because the beginners have less previous second language knowledge to draw on in making hypotheses about rules, and might be expected to make correspondingly more use of his first knowledge. In relation to this, Corder (1978, as cited in Littlewood, 2005) argues that the first language provides a rather rich and specific set of hypotheses which the learner can use. However, after some period of time, the second language learner is likely to feel that everything he learns is different from his mother tongue.

#### *Overgeneralization Errors*

Generalization is a fundamental learning strategy in all domains, not only in language (Littlewood, 2005). He stated that in order to make sense of the world, we allocate items to categories.

On the basis of these categories, we construct rules which predict how the different items will behave. However, very often our predictions are wrong. Littlewood proposed two reasons why it is happen, first, for some reason, the rule does not apply to this particular item, even though we have allocated the item to the appropriate category. So, we must learn an exception to the general rule. Second, the item belongs to a different category, which is covered by another rule. We must, therefore, either reallocate the item to a different category which we know or we must construct a new category and rule.

Thus, according to Littlewood, in either case, our initial error was due to overgeneralization of the rule which caused a wrong prediction, for example, learner of English has learnt a rule for forming plurals. This lets him predict that a noun can be made plural by adding 's'. However, when he says We saw two mouses, he has overgeneralized the rule, since mouse is one of the exceptions (Littlewood, 2005, p. 23) . In a similar way, until he learns that come and go lie outside the scope of general rule for forming the past tense, he is likely to produce over generalized forms such as comed and goed.

### *Simplification error*

We can conclude that overgeneralization and transfer errors can be both seen as expressions of the same underlying strategy of applying previous knowledge to the second language learning task. A part from those, Littlewood (2005) proposed a kind of simplification strategy, which we see in children's telegraphic speech. The omission of inflections and other morphemes seems to be due to limitation in capacity than to the construction of rules. This kind of simplification is sometimes called, redundancy reduction, because it eliminates many items which are redundant to conveying the intended message. For example, a child may omit the verb inflection and the article: Dady want chair. This sentence does not prevent the meaning from being understood. This redundancy reduction makes production easier but may, of course, make comprehension difficult or even impossible at times.



Simplification is the strategy people of limited language ability use when they have to communicate using the language. They may resort to their first language and juxtapose the target language words and their native language words together, producing a form that seems to have no grammar. There fore, when this strategy is used, broken English results, reminding us of Pidgin language.

## **THE STUDY**

This was a qualitative study, aimed to describe the language used by some elementary children studying in a school that had an immersion program. The data were collected directly through observations from an immersion elementary school in Salatiga. Thus, this study used primary data.

Sixteen 11 to 12 year old students, 11 males and 5 females, of the fourth grade of an immersion elementary school were the subjects of this study. In their school, English was used as a medium of instruction although the teachers were Indonesian. These children used English for most subjects, except Indonesian. Besides, they were required to speak English with one another.

Observations were made to collect the data. Three observations with the duration of 90 minutes each were made (on August, 19, 20, and 30, 2010). Some class activities during each observation were video recorded using a digital camera.

After all of the data were collected, they were descriptively analyzed. The recording was transcribed into a written form the following weeks. In order to indentify the utterance of the students, the recording was played back many times. The students' language proficiency was counted by dividing the total number of word and the total number of utterances. Then, the data were put into stages in order to identify their proficiency in a table form.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### **Student's Interaction and Functions of the Language**

The analysis showed that these children could, to some extent, use English to interact or communicate spontaneously with one another and with the teacher. Table 1. showed that the children could interact spontaneously in English with one another and with the

teacher for many purposes such as responding to the teacher's command, explaining their situations, answering questions, initiating a conversation. This indicated that the children had formed the habit to converse in English, not for drilling, but for real life communication. The conversation was smooth as long as what they talked about was just about their ordinary life or school related matters that were common and encountered repeatedly in their lives. These findings indicated that, somehow, in the children's mind, mental representations of the English language especially those related to their daily lives have been established.

### **Mean Length of Utterance**

A closer look at the children's length of utterance could make one feel concerned. Many of the children's utterances were short. In other words, the children's lengths of utterances were a little limited. Using Brown's (1973, as cited in Parker & Bronson, 2005) 5 stages of linguistic development 1,75 refers to one word each utterance, the 2,75 refers to two words each utterance and so on. These numbers are the means of the total number of the words and the total number of the utterances. In table 2 the MLU was calculated by dividing the total number words by the total number of utterances. These stages are highly correlated with at the very early language development of preschool years of normal children (Conant et al., 1987, as cited in Parker & Bronson, 2005). It means the higher stages they achieve, the more MLU they have. If they can achieve a high MLU, it means they develop their language appropriately. Table 2 presents the children's MLUs in this study.

Table 1. Students' Language Functions

Data	Explanation	Function
<p>T: Let us pray...                      S1: Who's pray?                      S2: Abed.</p>	<p>When the teacher asked the children to pray, one child spontaneously asked who should pray, and another child nominated Abed. Everything was done in English, and there seemed no hesitation.</p>	<p>Interact spontaneously in English with one another</p>
<p>T: Ok, thank you, alright, ok you have passed all of your test, right?                      S: Mister, actually I forget. I got one hundred, ninety something or eighty something.</p>	<p>The child could spontaneously and properly respond to what the teacher said in English, explaining his situation.</p>	<p>Responding to the teacher's command</p>
<p>T: A final test for semester two. You have done it, so you can get these mark. This is our God blessing. So, what do you do?                      S1: Thanks, give thanks.                      S2: Thank you</p>	<p>The children could answer the teacher's question about what to do when they got God's blessings.                      Student 1 could produce the right collocation give thanks.</p>	<p>Answering questions</p>

Table 1. Students' Language Functions (Continuation)

Data	Explanation	Function
T: Ok, start from Audrey, how many subject that you have got, may be higher than one hundred.	The child could respond to what the teacher said spontaneously in the target language.	Correcting a logical mistake
S: There is no higher than one hundred	The student could even correct a logical mistake in the teacher's utterance.	Initiating a conversation
S: Mister, I think I'd like to move the Bible to the shelf	The child could initiate a conversation by asking permission to move the Bible in a real life situation not part of the drill.	Correcting their own mistake
S1: Sixty four. One fifty. Ninety eight.	The child could even correct a mistake she had made.	
T: OK, Jenifer?		
S2: Eighty.		
S1: Oh yes, Mister, Mister, ninety nine, not ninety eight.		

Table 2. Mean Length of Utterance

No	Subject Stage	Numbers of Words	Numbers of Utterances	MLUw	Stage
1	C	307	47	6,53	Beyond stage V
2	B	162	25	6,48	Beyond stage V
3	A	227	39	5,82	Beyond stage V
4	E	147	26	5,65	Beyond stage V
5	P	58	11	5,27	Beyond stage V
6	K	52	11	4,72	V
7	O	70	15	4,66	V
8	M	104	24	4,33	V

Table 2. Mean Length of Utterance (Continuation)

No	Subject Stage	Numbers of Words	Numbers of Utterances	MLUw	Stage
9	N	116	30	3,86	IV
10	F	50	13	3,84	IV
11	I	42	11	3,81	IV
12	L	28	8	3,50	IV
13	J	40	12	3,33	III
14	H	62	19	3,26	III
15	G	35	13	2,69	II
16	D	17	8	2,12	I

From the table, we can see that one student reached Stage I (MLU = 2.12) and another was at Stage II (MLU = 2.69). Two students were already at Stage 3 (MLUs = 3.26 and 3.33, respectively). At Stage III the data showed that there are two students who achieved this stage. Four other students reached Stage IV (MLUs = 3.50, 3.81, 3.84, and 3.86, respectively). However, only one student was at Stage V, with the MLU of 4.33. The remaining 7 students were beyond Stage V, with the MLUs of 4.66, 4.72, 5.27, 5.65, 5.82, 6.48, and 6.53). Finally, from all Mean Lengths of utterances that the children had, the average was 4.64. It means that in this class, on the average, the children's utterances were 4.64 words long. The children's mean length of utterance should raise concern because at these ages, they should be able to produce longer sentences.

### **Children's Strategies**

The next thing to be investigated was the strategies the children use to produce English utterances.

#### *Imitation*

One apparent strategy was imitation. Some children still tended to imitate the teacher or their friends.

S1 : Why if one Zebra, the Zebra and "s" zebra?

S2 : Cause one unit.

S1 : Because a herd is more than one. One zebra

T : A herd is more than one zebra. And then? But Allen ask, this is zebras, why? this is with "is" right? Why?

S3 : One group,

S1 : One group...right?

#### *Simplification*

Besides, the children also used the simplification strategy. They simplified their utterances when communicating with one another. Although they produced the simplified forms, they could still understand one another.

Table 3. Simplification

The Data	Correction	Explanation
T : Let us pray...	Who should pray?	The child simplified the utterance by juxtaposing who's and pray.
S1: Who's pray?	Who will pray?	
S2: Abed	How many one hundreds	Simplified the word order did you get? and question <i>from kamu mendapat berapa</i> one hundred
S: Van, you get how many one hundred?	did you get?	



In some utterances they liked to simplify the tense system by overgeneralizing the simple present tense form for various other tenses. Here is an example:

S: I forget because I bring it home. I just get ninety eight.

The correct sentence should be “I forgot because I brought it home. I just got ninety eight.” In fact, the tenses the children used were limited, mainly simple present tense, a few simple past, and very few present perfect tense whose form is still wrong.

### *Language Transfer*

Though the children were exposed to English at school and had to use English, their Indonesian still affected their English utterances, thus transfer errors were inevitable. In transfer error, the learners use their previous mother tongue experiences as a means of organizing the second language data. These experiences can be in a form of grammar and vocabulary (Littlewood, 2005).

In this study, the children used their mother tongue experiences to organize the English language sentences. In many cases, they used the Indonesian pattern and translated certain words into English. As a result, they produced English sentences with Indonesian patterns.

The children’s expressions showed that they had got grammar, but they seemed to rely more on the Indonesian grammar, and just changed or translated the words they needed into English.

### *Hypothesis testing (overgeneralization)*

The students in this study were creative, producing their own expressions which sometimes had no meaning, but which, the children could understand. This is in line with what Littlewood (2005) stated that some errors a child makes is part of the creative construction process.

Table 4. Language Transfer

The Data	Correction	Explanation
<p>S2 : Mazmur how many?                      T : yang, one hundred and twenty eight.                      S1 : wah wat me, I get one hundred and forty nine</p>	<p>What verse in Psalm?</p>	<p>The student could not hear the teacher's explanation about the bible so he tried to ask about it</p>
<p>S : No have leg</p>	<p>He has no legs/he does not have legs.</p>	<p>The children were learning about handicap people. The teacher showed a picture of handicap person who does not have legs.</p>
<p>S1: because it is.. can me?                      S2: me, me,</p>	<p>Can I do it? Can I explain it?                      Can I answer the question?</p>	<p>The student tried to explain a grammar rule in the board but she could not explain it in English. As a result she corrected directly without expressing in a form of words.</p>

Table 5. Hypothesis testing (overgeneralization)

The Data	Correction	Explanation
<p>T : therefore, you are all better right?                      S : better or badder?</p>	<p>Worse</p>	<p>Overgeneralize the-er form of comparison</p>
<p>T : give thanks and pray for it. Because teachers have given us? Help                      S1 : a smart.                      T : ok, blessing. So what will you do?                      S2 : Helpness.Helpness.</p>	<p>Help</p>	<p>This excerpt was uttered when the teacher asked about the student's opinion of God's guidance is their test. The teacher asked about what God already gave to them in the test. Some of the students said Blessing. It is right, since the teacher ask about what God has given to the students. So, the answer will in a form of a noun. However, there is one student who uttered helpness. Considering the background situation of the utterances, we can analyze that the subject knew a rule. If we put ness at the end of the word, it can be classified into a noun. He also knew that help is a verb, then he overgeneralize it by changing <i>help</i> into <i>helpness</i>.</p>

## CONCLUSION

This study has been conducted to investigate the language used by children of an immersion school where English is used as a means of communication. The analyses showed that years of being exposed to English, interacting in English, using English as a medium of communication in class have somehow helped to establish English mental representations in the brain that allowed them to interact spontaneously for every day school-related matters, especially, the ones done repeatedly in class. The children could respond to the teacher spontaneously, asking questions, giving suggestions, etc. This indicated that the children could understand what the teacher said and expressed their ideas. Besides, the children could explain their situations like forgetting something in response to the teacher's questions.

This indicated that the children have formed the habit to converse using English for real life communication. In relation to Research Question 2, the mean length of utterance was small. The mean was 4.64, which meant that on the average the children produce 4.65-word utterances. This was the mean length of utterances of 2-3 year-old-native speakers of English's children or a little older. To acquire their English language, these children used some strategies such as imitation, simplification, including simplification of the tenses.

Further studies are needed in order to solve the problem faced by students of immersion schools. Since Fortune (2003) stated that language learning is influenced by many factors, including students' personality and motivation, teacher expectations, parental support, program leadership, and support at the school and district level, the involvements of above stakeholders could help students learn the target language successfully.

Besides, teachers should make sure they use good English since one strategy the students have is imitation. They should help the children develop longer sentences with more complex grammar and help the children use tenses, etc. flexibly. In relation with the limitation of this study, further studies in which Indonesian language is separated from English are needed. Secondly, the data of this study can be useful for further research in second language to see

the variety of language the children produce in the course of their development.

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