

The Effect of Task Complexity on Iranian Pre-intermediate EFL Learners' Incidental Learning of Grammatical Collocations through Reading

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Abstract—The aim of this research was to examine the effect of task complexity instruction on EFL pre-intermediate learner's incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading. To do so, the test of general English proficiency, OPT, was administered to 140 participants to homogenize subjects. Based on the mean score ($X = 34.5$) and standard deviation of students' scores ($SD = 2.8$), 90 subjects were selected, those scoring between half a standard deviation above and half a standard deviation below. They were assigned in three classes with 30 students in each. Each of these classes was randomly assigned to one of the three tasks (fill in the blank, sentence writing, and translation sentences). Then the pretest, based on fifty fill in the blank questions was administered. After ten treatment sessions, the post-test which was the same as pretest was given to the participants to measure their knowledge of grammatical collocations in the tasks. Paired samples t-test, one-way ANOVA, and post-hoc tests were used to calculate for the productive and receptive knowledge of the students. The findings showed that there is significant main effect for all three groups. The result of this experiment is discussed in light of the involvement load hypothesis.

Index Terms—task complexity, involvement load hypotheses, incidental learning, grammatical collocation

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning words of any language are the main part of almost every language teaching program and having communication is the central aim of teaching the second language. The researchers have begun to find a useful way of teaching with the goal of communication in recent years. The importance of vocabulary is in a way that the linguistic Wilkins (1972) summed up in the famous sentence. As Wilkins (1972) stated, "While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111). Hatch (1983) in a similar notion claims, "when our first goal is communication, when we have little of the new language at our command, it is the lexicon that is crucial... the words... will make basic communication possible" (as cited in Gass, 1988).

One of the main parts of researchers' effort is finding an effective and useful way of teaching words, especially, grammatical collocations by tasks and also it is important to know which task is more effective for learners to be remaining in their mind. The learner's inability to produce structures by using new words, especially grammatical collocations is a frequent problem in EFL classes. Teachers are usually dealing with this problem at all levels of teaching. The learners prefer to keep silent instead of using these grammatical collocations during their class time or they refuse to use these word partners. Therefore, the teachers should increase the students' ability to use these grammatical collocations to increase their fluency and accuracy. If the students are not able to use new vocabularies, they won't be able to communicate with each other. Thus, the whole task of teaching will be unsuccessful and useless because there will be no communication. It is also a need to attempt to remove this problem in educational institutions inside Iran. Iranian learners have less opportunity to use English because they don't have enough exposure to foreign language. To overcome this problem, teachers need to find new ways and techniques that promote learners to write native-like and to speak fluently by using grammatical collocations in order to communicate and this is the main goal of learning a language.

The goal of any language learning is to use proper vocabulary in the sentences for transferring the meaning. To do so, many researchers (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Bygate, 2001; Laufer, 2003; Rahimpour, 2007; Guara-Tavares, 2008; Sharifi Haratmeh, 2012) are seeking a way to remove this problem by using tasks. Therefore, the current study tries to find the possible effect of task-complexity-based instruction of incidental vocabulary on Iranian learners' vocabulary learning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Task Complexity and Involvement Load Hypothesis

Nowadays, one part of researchers' attention is focused on task-based instruction. The aim of using Task-based Language Learning (TBLL) also called as Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) or Task-based Instruction (TBI) is the use of real and actual language by using meaningful tasks. We have meaningful learning in task based as McCarthy (1990) believed that a word learned in a meaningful text is the best way to be retained in the mind. The first person who worked on the expansion of task-based learning (TBL) was N. Prabhu (1987) pointing that if the learner's mind is focused on the task instead of the language itself, they may learn more usefully.

It is important to point to the key issue of task, such as task complexity. Ellis (2003) believed that the inherent characteristics of the tasks are the nature of the input, the task conditions, and the outcome. Robinson (2001: 29) named these three factors as task complexity (pp. 220-21). But Ellis (2003) expressed five factors as the level of task complexity: 1. input medium, 2. code complexity, 3. cognitive complexity, 4. context dependency, and 5. familiarity of information. Input medium specified that pictorial or written input can be got easier or faster than the oral input. Code complexity means that lexico-grammatical complexity of the task cause it more complex and more difficult. Cognitive complexity means the "cognitive demands of processing the informational content". The fourth factor of task complexity is context dependency and means that textual input along with visual information is generally easier to process than information without such support. Finally, the term familiarity of information refers to the learners' background knowledge (pp. 222-23).

Nowadays, the perspective of teaching has changed to task based approaches. Different tasks can affect different dimension of learning words. Hulstijn and Laufer took traditional and commonly accepted components of effective tasks (noticing, attention, elaboration, and motivation) and proposed a new formula for vocabulary instruction. Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) proposed Involvement Load Hypothesis (ILH). This hypothesis includes both cognitive and motivational factors. ILH consists of three components—need, search, and evaluation—with different degrees of importance. It can be mentioned that they constructed "task-induced involvement". It should also be noted that this hypothesis attempts to draw attention only to vocabulary learning per se in a foreign or second language. This hypothesis revealed that tasks with different involvement load will lead to different incidental acquisition. They claimed that the presence or absence of each of the three components will affect the word processing and also the combination of three factors, called involvement load, will support the degree of learners' engagement in cognitive processing.

The researchers argue that different involvement load will affect different vocabulary acquisition processing. Hulstijn and Laufer described these levels with the term *index*. When the component is not present, the index level is zero (0), the moderate level is rated at index one (1), and the strong level is index two (2). The total of the three components is the amount of the task-induced involvement load. Researchers and teachers can employ the three components and factors in their research or teaching situation more easily than they could with the depth of processing model. Involvement includes need, which is a motivational factor. They suggested two degrees of prominence for need: *moderate* and *strong*. If it is imposed by an external agent such as the need to use a word in a sentence, it is moderate (index 1) and if it is self-imposed by learners, it is strong (index 2) such as the need to use dictionary to write a composition.

Search and evaluation are cognitive factors of involvement. Search exists when learners attempt to find the meaning or the form of an unfamiliar word. Both are common in vocabulary learning situations when learners encounter unfamiliar words or want to express concepts, but they do not know the needed word form. Search can be categorized into levels like the need component. When learners do not have to search for either the meaning or the form of a target word, search does not exist (index 0). This occurs when both the meaning and the form are already provided in the activity. When language learners find the meaning of a word they do not know, for instance, when students encounter an unknown target word in a reading passage and they look up the word in a dictionary and find the meaning, the involvement load is moderate (index 1) and when the search for a word form occurs the involvement is strong (index 2). For example, when Iranian students enrolled in a beginning English language course need to know how to greet someone in the morning and they look up the needed expression in a phrasebook, or ask their teachers.

Evaluation involves decision to choose appropriate word in its context. When learners do not make such decisions, they are not engaged in evaluation (index 0). Sometimes, language learners do not need to think of word choice. An example is when copying a sentence. When learners want to choose a proper word by comparing all word meaning in a dictionary against the specific context, it is referred to as moderate (index 1). When learners are deciding on additional words that can be used with the target word in the learner's original sentence or text, it is referred to as strong evaluation index (index 2). In other words, when language learners have to decide on the appropriate target word in the provided context, they perform moderate evaluation. This is seen when language learners choose a word from several choices to fill in a blank in a sentence. When they have to write an essay, they are involved in a strong evaluation because they must use the words in a context they have created.

B. Grammatical Collocation

Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that "a lexical approach in language teaching holds that the building blocks of language learning and communication are not grammar, functions, notions, or some other unit of planning and teaching, but Lexis, that is words and word combinations" (p. 132). Many researchers such as Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) have found that lexical chunks, including collocations, are the important word combination in any language

learning. Nattinger (1980) and Schmitt and McCarthy (2005) claimed that if vocabulary learning be taught in lexical phrases from the beginning, learners' care will be centralized on lexical combination, through collocations. One of the main properties of using collocations is to be fluent as native speakers and second language learners. Many scholars defined collocation in many ways. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 87) define collocation as "the way in which words are used together regularly." Benson et al. (1986) classified the grammatical collocations into eight groups and Lewis (2000) classified the grammatical collocations in more types.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was to examine the effect of task-complexity instruction on EFL pre-intermediate learner's incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading. The present study seeks to answer the following research question:

Does task-complexity-based instruction affect EFL pre-intermediate learner's incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading?

A. Participants

The participants of the current study were 90 male and female learners from pre-intermediate level in Jahad-Daneshgahi institute in Amol, in north of Iran. The participants were largely young adult learners with an age range of 19 to 25. All the participants are native speakers of Persian. After giving general English proficiency test to 140 participants, 90 students were chosen and took part in three groups, 32% were females and 68% were males. Nonetheless, compared to these three groups, a higher proportion of males attended Task 3.

There were three classes in this institute which took part in this study. Each of these classes was randomly assigned to one of the three tasks. The number of students in each class was 30 students. Regarding space, time, and facilities, the conditions of the three classes were approximately the same. The data were collected during their regularly scheduled class periods.

TABLE I
CHARACTERISTICS AND SIZES OF THE SAMPLE

Institute	Classes	Number	Tasks
Jahad-Daneshgahi institute	Class 1	30	Task 1: Fill in Blanks
	Class 2	30	Task 2: Sentence writing
	Class 3	30	Task 3: Translation sentences

B. The Instruments

Pilot test: To homogenize the participants; 150 samples of tests were selected from the internet, retrieved on October 15, 2013, from www.Englishpage.com and www.grammar-quizzes.com, which was suitable for pre-intermediate level of learners. The difficult or ambiguous sample tests were discarded. Fifty grammatical collocations items, adjective+preposition and verb+ preposition, were selected. This pilot test was consisted of fifty items. For about 50 minutes, the participants answered these questions. It is worth mentioning that there is not any time limitation for answering the questions.

The key instruments in this study were tasks. The explanation of these three tasks is as follow:

Task 1: "Fill-in". It was a reading exercise with fill in task. The task was to read the text, find the proper preposition from the text and then write the proper preposition. The grammatical collocations which are used consisted of adjective+preposition and verb+preposition. These grammatical collocations were in the content of the text.

Task 2: "Sentence writing". It was a reading exercise with sentence writing. The structure of this task was different from task 1. Learners read the text then they found the proper preposition and then made a meaningful sentence by using these grammatical collocations in the sentences. Actually, these grammatical collections were adjective+preposition or verb+ preposition which were in the content of the text. During sentence writing students were asked to use dictionary to look up the meaning of grammatical collocations.

Task 3: "Translation sentences L1-L2". This task was chosen from Laufer and Girsai (2008). Students were provided with the same text in tasks 1 and 2. The task was to read the sentences, use dictionary to look up the meaning of grammatical collocations, write translation of sentences into L1.

In order to evaluate the issue, the involvement load of the tasks and the involvement index are provided in the following table:

TABLE II
THE INVOLVEMENT LOADS FOR THE THREE TASKS IN THE PRESENT STUDY

Task	Involvement Factors			Involvement Index
	Need	Search	Evaluation	
1. Writing Sentences	1	1	2	4
2. Fill in Blanks	1	0	1	2
3. Translation sentences	1	1	1	3

C. Procedures

At first to homogenize the learners, the test of general English proficiency, Oxford Placement Test, OPT, was administered to 140 participants. Based on the mean score ($X = 34.5$) and standard deviation of students' scores ($SD = 2.8$), 90 subjects were selected, those scoring between half a standard deviation above and half a standard deviation below. Then fifty samples of fill in the blank tests were selected from the internet which was suitable for pre-intermediate level of participants as explained above. These tests were administered as pretest and later as a posttest. They were randomly assigned to three experimental groups (with 30 participants in each group). Each of these classes was randomly assigned to one of the three tasks (fill in the blank, sentence writing, and translation sentences). These tasks were consisted of a reading text followed by five questions. The ending questions were different in each task. Using proper preposition was the main goal of these tasks. After ten treatment sessions, a post-test which was the same as the pre-test was administered. The time interval between pre-test and post-test was five weeks. The method of scoring for pre-test and post-test was in such a way that every item received a point from 0.5 to zero. Incorrect fill in the sentence or no fill in received no points or 0; correct fill in sentence received the maximum point or 0.5. Finally, the results of the pretest and posttest were compared to come up with a reasonable view with regard to the possible improvements in learners' performance resulting from the treatment applied.

In order to test the research hypothesis, the data were analyzed using SPSS version 21. An alpha level of 0.05 was set for all statistical tests. Paired samples t-test, one-way ANOVA, and post-hoc tests were used to calculate for the productive and receptive knowledge of the effect of task complexity on learning grammatical collocations in EFL pre-intermediate learners and to investigate the results of these tests. Means and standard deviations were calculated and compared.

IV. RESULTS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

At first, the test of general English proficiency, OPT was administered to 140 EFL participants in Jihad-Daneshgahi institute to test their general English proficiency and to select the subjects. The descriptive statistics of participants' scores is presented in table 1.

TABLE III
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF OPT TEST

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
OPT	140	27	42	34.38	2.890
Valid N (listwise)	140				

Table 1 shows the results of the OPT test. The mean score equals 34.3 and the standard deviation of students' scores equals 2.8. These values show that those subjects were selected that had scores between half a standard deviation above and half standard deviation below the mean.

TABLE IV
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE THREE GROUPS ON PRETEST

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Fill in the blank	30	13.4667	2.45979	.44909	12.5482	14.3852	10.00	19.00
Sentence writing	30	13.8333	2.26035	.41268	12.9893	14.6774	10.00	18.00
Translation sentences	30	13.8000	2.72156	.49689	12.7838	14.8162	9.00	19.00
Total	90	13.7000	2.46526	.25986	13.1837	14.2163	9.00	19.00

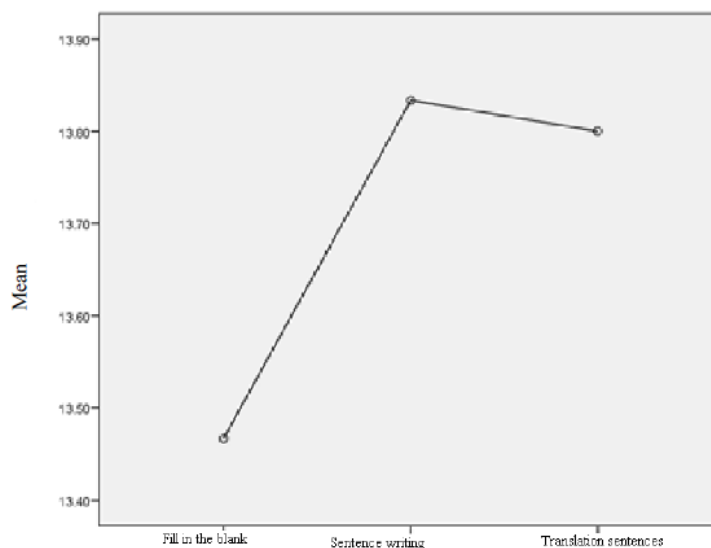
According to table 2, the mean of Experimental group 1 (Fill in) equals 13.46, the mean of Experimental group 2 (Sentence writing) equals 13.83, and the mean of Experimental group 3 is 13.80. These values show that the mean of three groups are not statistically different at the pretest before the instruction (Mean=13.70).

In order to check whether the variances in the scores are the same for each of the three groups, Leven's test for homogeneity of the variances was run. The results are illustrated in Table 3.

TABLE V
HOMOGENEITY OF VARIANCE TEST OF PRETEST SCORES FOR THE THREE GROUPS

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.541	2	87	.584

As indicated in table 5, the sig. value is greater than .05 (Sig. > .05), then there is not a significant difference among the mean score on dependent variable for the three groups. Figure 1 provides the means plot as an easy way to compare the mean scores for the different groups.



Three types of tasks

Figure 1. The means plots for the three groups in the pre-test

Figure 1 presents the means of three pretests in three tasks (Fill in the blank, Sentence writing, and Translation sentences) on pretest. The horizontal line stands for three tasks. The vertical line also stands for the mean score of each task. According to these results, students got the highest mean scores in sentence writing task and also they got higher mean scores in translation sentences than those in Fill in blank. The mean scores of three tasks are represented below respectively:

$$13.83 > 13.80 > 13.46.$$

TABLE VI
COMPARISON OF AVERAGE GROUPS (EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 1, EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 2, AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 3)

ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1586.067	2	793.033	142.540	.000
Within Groups	484.033	87	5.564		
Total	2070.100	89			

According to the information presented in table 6 the sig = 0.000 and F = 142. It means that there are significant differences. So the Null hypothesis (task-complexity-based instruction does not affect FEL pre-intermediate learner’s incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading.) is rejected and H1 is accepted with the utmost confidence.

TABLE VII
SCHEFFE POST HOC COMPARISONS FOR THE THREE EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS ON POSTTEST

Dependent Variable: posttest score							
	(I) Task complexity	(J) Task complexity	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Scheffe	Fill in the blank	Sentence writing	-6.96667*	.60902	.000	-8.4834	-5.4499
		Translation sentences	3.06667*	.60902	.000	1.5499	4.5834
	Sentence writing	Fill in the blank	6.96667*	.60902	.000	5.4499	8.4834
		Translation sentences	10.03333*	.60902	.000	8.5166	11.5501
	Translation sentences	Fill in the blank	-3.06667*	.60902	.000	-4.5834	-1.5499
		Sentence writing	-10.03333*	.60902	.000	-11.5501	-8.5166

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As it can be seen, the mean difference of 10.03 between the sentence writing group and translation sentences group was significant at the 0.05 level. The mean difference of 3.06 between fill in the blank group and translation sentences group was significant at the 0.05 level and also the mean difference of 6.96 between fill in the blank group and sentence writing group was significant at the 0.05 level. Then this table illustrates that there is a significant difference between three groups. These results reject null hypothesis and confirm that task-complexity-based instruction affect EFL pre-intermediate learner’s incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading.

TABLE VIII
HOMOGENEOUS SUBSET FOR THE THREE EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS ON POSTTEST

	Task complexity	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05		
			1	2	3
Duncan ^a	Translation sentences	30	12.2000		
	Fill in the blank	30		15.2667	
	Sentence writing	30			22.2333
	Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000
Scheffe ^a	Translation sentences	30	12.2000		
	Fill in the blank	30		15.2667	
	Sentence writing	30			22.2333
	Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.
a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 30.000.

According to table8, the mean of Experimental group 1 (Fill in the blank) equals 15.26, the mean of Experimental group 2 (Sentence writing) equals 22.23, and the mean of Experimental group 3 (Translation sentences) is 12.20. As indicated in the table, two groups, sentence writing group and fill in the blank group affect EFL learner’s incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading. Figure 2 present the means plot for the better schematic representation.

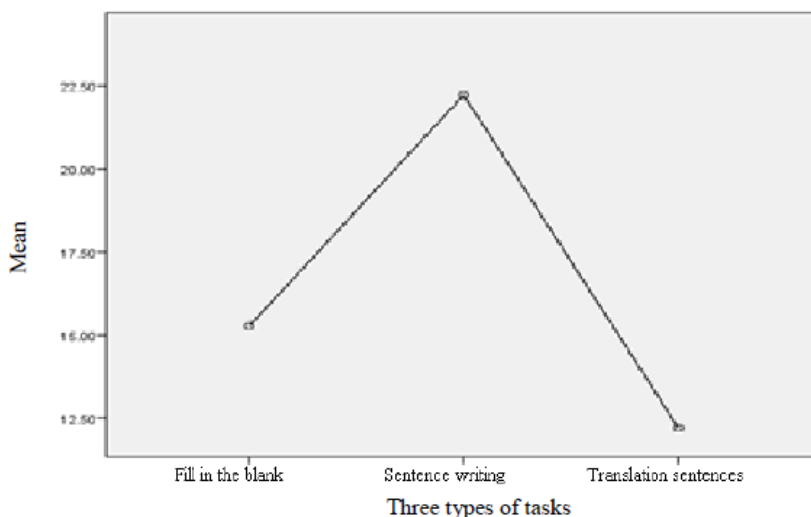


Figure 2. The mean plots for the three groups in the post-test

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

After collecting the data from pre-test and posttest and comparing the means and standard deviations, it was found that all of the mean differences are statistically significant. The data above illustrate that there is a significant difference between three groups. These results reject the first null hypothesis and confirm that task-complexity-based affect EFL pre-intermediate learner’s incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading. Table8 indicates the results of Duncan homogenous subset. According to this table, the mean of Experimental group 1 (Fill in the blank) equals 15.26, the mean of Experimental group 2 (Sentence writing) equals 22.23, and the mean of Experimental group 3 (Translation sentences) is 12.20. As indicated in the table, two groups, sentence writing group and fill in the blank group affect EFL learner’s incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading.

In comparison with the mean of these three groups on pretest (the mean of Group 1 = 13.46, the mean of Group 2 = 13.83, and the mean of Group 3 = 13.80), differences between three groups are statistically significant. These results reject the first null hypothesis and confirm that task complexity affect learner’s learning. The summary of this Experiment are provided in table 9:

TABLE IX
THE COMPARISON OF THREE TASKS ON PRETEST AND POSTTEST

Task	Mean	
	Pretest	Posttest
Fill in the blank	13.46	15.26
Sentence writing	13.83	22.23
Translation sentences	13.80	12.20

As indicated in table 6, it was found that, compared to the three groups, sentence writing task and fill in the blank task made significant improvement in using proper preposition for adjectives and verbs through reading. Therefore, it can be submitted that the treatment for sentence writing in which the degree of task complexity according to Involvement Load Hypothesis was four and the treatment for fill in the blank in which the degree of task complexity as Hulstijn and Laufer believed in ILH was two. It has indicated that sentence writing task and fill in the blank task were the most effective in learning grammatical collocations (adj + prep and v + prep). By taking a look at Figure 2, it can be stated that there is a decline of the students' performances in translation sentences (involvement load = 3) on posttest. As indicated in this figure, the students got the highest mean scores in sentence writing task (involvement load = 4) on posttest. It shows the improvement of sentence writing task in comparison of the other groups.

This study had some limitations. First, all participants were pre-intermediate level of proficiency in English. This study can also be replicated with students varied in different level of proficiency. Second, two kinds of grammatical collocations (adj+prep. and v+prep.) were assessed. Therefore, findings cannot be extrapolated to other types of grammatical collocations. Further studies can be implemented with other types of grammatical collocations. And finally, no interviews were made with the learners. Through interviews, the researcher could have obtained more information about the learners' attitudes to the tasks and the reasons for why these grammatical collocations being remembered.

In this research the effect of task complexity instruction on EFL pre-intermediate learner's incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading was investigated. This study involves certain suggestions for further research, as detailed below.

1. The present study did not examine the participants' opinions about their experience of learning vocabulary through using the tasks. This study was based on learning grammatical collocation through a reading - based task. It would be worthwhile for another study to examine learning grammatical collocation through speaking and listening-based tasks.

2. This research investigated the effect of task complexity on Iranian pre-intermediate FEL learners' incidental learning of grammatical collocations through reading. It is proposed that the future studies organize on intentional learning to make comparisons to find which learning is more effective.

3. And also all participants were pre-intermediate level of proficiency in English. This study can also be replicated with students who vary in their levels of proficiency.

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