# Tackling Curriculum Objectives and Student Needs with Language Learning Stations

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Too often with classroom procedures and activities, the language learner becomes burdened and unresponsive to the lesson. The classroom environment needs to be inclusive by creating opportunities for the learner to explore and expand upon a variety of tasks that are suited to individual learning styles and abilities. Cooperative learning practices such as language learning stations can provide an ideal format for increasing student participation and motivation, while maintaining the objectives of the curriculum.

This article demonstrates how language learning stations can be effectively used to stimulate learners through cooperative learning techniques at the university level. The following case study examined language learning stations in 14 Japanese university EFL classrooms through teacher reflection logs and anonymous student feedback. The study showed that language learning stations with their theme-based approach, non-threatening environment, and relatively easy comprehension made learning accessible regardless of the learner's ability. Using language learning stations provides a sense of renewal, transformation, and unity within the classroom.

室活動を行ない、授業を進めていく過程において、言語学習者はしばしばその負荷に耐え切れなくなり、授業に無反応になる。従って学習者自身が個々の学習スタイルや能力に適した、様々なタスクを探り、それを展開する機会を作り出すことにより、教室環境を包括的にする必要がある。「言語学習ステーション」のような協力学習の実践手法は、クラスカリキュラムの目的を維持しながら、学生の授業への参加とモチベーションを増加させるような理想の形式を提供してくれる。

本論文は、大学レベルにおいて、協力学習の手法により「言語学習ステーション」が学習者に刺激を与えるためにどのように効果的に使用されるかを示したものである。本ケーススタディでは、日本の大学におけるEFL環境の14教室において、教

師の授業記録と学生による無記名のフィードバックを通して、「言語学習ステーショ
ン」を調査した。本研究は、テーマベースアプローチと脅威を伴わない学習環境の
中で、比較的理解が容易な「言語学習ステーション」は、学習者の能力に関わらず
学習をしやすくさせるということを示した。また「言語学習ステーション」を使用するこ
とにより、教室内に刷新、変化、団結の感覚をもたらすことができた。

The classroom is busy with excitement. A group of four students sit in a corner of the classroom with a pizza menu in hand, role-playing a delivery order scenario. Another group is frantically trying to guess the food item that their classmate is describing before the timer runs out. A third set of students are racing to put a scrambled recipe in correct sequence. A fourth set of students are preparing a food survey. As each language learning station winds down, the teacher shouts, "Time! Change!" The pockets of students scattered about the classroom stop their activity and straighten their stations. Three of the group members move clockwise to the next activity. One member remains behind to act as a peer-teacher to the next group before rejoining his/her teammates. The timer is set again, and once more a flurry of activity resumes.

When learning tasks, materials, formats, and styles vary, there is a greater level of learner engagement and experience (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Finding a means to provide learners with stimulating and enjoyable learning experiences is not always easy. No matter how much planning and preparation a teacher commits to, there rarely seems to be enough time to accomplish content in depth or beyond the curriculum objectives. This tends to leave the language learners with little more than basic application, having insufficient opportunity to use or apply new concepts. Striking a balance between student needs and curriculum requirements can be difficult, but it is attainable when teaching formats and classroom activities allow cooperative learning practices to take precedence.

An ideal approach to tackling many of these challenges is to adapt language learning stations which give students the opportunity to exploit and expand upon a variety of content-based tasks. With teacher reflection logs and student feedback, the following case study examines the transformation of 14 Japanese university EFL classes by effectively connecting and engaging learners through this unique cooperative approach.

Viewed as a learner-center approach to teaching, Cooperative Learning (CL) in various disciplines seeks to maximize the use of cooperative activities within small groups by stressing the central role of social interaction in learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Group activities are carefully planned to capitalize on student interaction and contributions. Such cooperation is perceived as not only influential in achieving higher retention, but also enabling critical thinking (Tsay & Brady, 2010).

CL approaches use a variety of techniques and structures to manage the classroom, such as Learning Together, Teams-Games-Tournaments, Jigsaw Procedure, Team Accelerated Instruction, and Curriculum Packages (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005; Tran, 2010). However, for the context of this paper, Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) shall be viewed as an instructional learner-centered approach, in which small groups of students work together to maximize learning through interdependence, individual accountability, social interaction and group processing of interactive tasks to attain a common goal (Olsen & Kagan, 1992; Oxford, 1997; Johnson, Johnson, & Stane, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The management of classroom interaction is based on Spencer Kagan's Cooperative Learning Structures, which use a variety of generic and content-free structures for class building, communication, mastery, and critical thinking (Kagan, 1989; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005). What separates this model of cooperative learning from being labeled simply as group work is the requirement of interdependence, accountability, social skills, and structure that are incorporated into the operation at multiple stages (Oxford, 1997). These create meaningful input and output that are both highly interactive and supportive to the learning environment (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005) resulting in an overall increase in academic performance (Bejarano, 1987). Hence, the overall objective is to develop critical thinking skills and communicative competence through socially structured interaction.

One concept that uses the cooperative learning approach is language learning stations. These stations have been successfully used in primary school education instruction for years (Strauber, 1981). In general, learners complete a series of tasks centered on a particular theme, subject, or topic in a short period of time

while relying heavily on team-building skills. Each task is designed to appeal to the varying abilities, interests, and styles of the learners. As the activities are completed in a round-robin manner, students have the opportunity to try each station's activity. Such exposure to the subject through various encounters and forms of delivery assists learners to master and retain new material (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005).

Many may perceive learning stations as being best suited for primary education because of the homeroom format, but an American secondary school with French as a foreign language class demonstrates the possibility of stations beyond primary school. Strauber (1981) found language learning stations to be a viable teaching approach that appealed to different abilities and interests, helped correct learning deficiencies, and offered a broader range of study topics for her students. Each station provided the learner with a variety of items such as practices and drills using flashcards, textbook coordinated activities, and re-usable worksheets. Strauber's stations were not used on a weekly basis but rather to review the curriculum or break from routine.

The use of language learning stations as a cooperative learning practice maximizes student collaboration. Research by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) shows that such practices are "superior to most traditional forms of instruction in terms of producing learning gains and student achievements" (p. 27). Group work creates positive interdependence and individual accountability among learners, as members help each other to learn and contribute to the group (Kohonen, 1992). The motivational features of cooperative learning allow for classroom instruction to achieve common learning goals through cooperation.

What is unique about learning stations is how they change classroom dynamics. These stations have the ability to create an anxiety-free class, by ensuring that the classroom is a warm and supportive place for learning. Essentially, the stations promote cooperative learning, which is built on peer collaboration. As Dörnyei (2001) states, "Students in cooperative environments have more positive attitudes towards learning and develop higher self-esteem and self-confidence than in other classroom structures" (p. 100). Learning stations encourage learners to improvise by using whatever language they have

at their disposal to complete the task. By completing sub-tasks, learners not only encounter the target language in a range of different environments but also how it functions in relation to different contexts (Nunan, 2004). The incorporation of varying tasks provides the learner with challenges and intriguing elements to overcome obstacles and solve problems, novelty to explore something unexpected or new, and renewed interest to connect with topics. A variety of techniques and activities as produced with learning stations will undoubtedly help to ensure that the learner is alert and that enthusiasm is high.

## Case Study

The following language learning stations were implemented in 14 required English listening and speaking (LS) classes at a private Japanese university. The eight freshmen and six sophomore classes that participated in the study were streamed into five basic (B), four low intermediate (LI), three intermediate (I), and two advanced (A) levels (Table 1).

Each class consisted of approximately 28 to 32 students with an average of 4.6% female students per class. The students were primarily civilization, literature, political science, economic, law, and physical education majors. These classes met for 90 minutes twice a week over the course of a 15-week period. The classes were taught by two native English teachers, one being the author and the other her colleague who collaborated in designing and implementing the stations. Both teachers have over 18 years teaching experience with eight at the university level in Japan.

The aim of these required courses was to build a solid foundation for practical English ability. Students needed to understand the main points of short and clear discourse and practice simple exchanges and expressions on familiar everyday topics. Over the course of the semester, six units of the required textbook were taught. A regular 90-minute class varied in consistency of warm-up exercises, scaffolding, and supplementary activities in addition to the textbook. Typically, three lessons were required to complete each textbook unit. Upon completion of a unit, a 90-minute class focusing on the unit's theme was carried out using the language learning station format. These common ESL themes included dates and

Table 1
*Participants Grouped by Class, Level and Year*

| Freshman Class No. | Level | Class and Year | Male | Female | Student Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1A | B | LS1 | 27 | 6 | 33 |
| 1B | B | LS1 | 27 | 5 | 32 |
| 1C | B | LS1 | 31 | 2 | 33 |
| 1D | LI | LS1 | 24 | 5 | 29 |
| 1E | LI | LS1 | 27 | 4 | 31 |
| 1F | I | LS1 | 22 | 8 | 30 |
| 1G | I | LS1 | 19 | 9 | 28 |
| 1H | A | LS1 | 20 | 10 | 30 |
| | | | **197** | **49** | **246** |

| Sophomore Class No. | Level | Class and Year | Male | Female | Student Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2I | B | LS2 | 25 | 6 | 31 |
| 2J | B | LS2 | 30 | 2 | 32 |
| 2K | LI | LS2 | 27 | 5 | 32 |
| 2L | LI | LS2 | 24 | 4 | 28 |
| 2M | I | LS2 | 20 | 12 | 32 |
| 2N | A | LS2 | 16 | 15 | 31 |
| | | | **142** | **44** | **186** |
| | **Total Participants** | | **339** | **93** | **432** |

numbers, shopping, directions, family, and past and future events. At that time, the stations were for review, as well as to provide additional application for the course content.

Each station lesson contained four to six stations that were each completed in the 15- to 20-minute allocated time in a round-robin fashion (Figure 1). With each activity taking relatively the same amount of time to complete, consistent flow between the stations was maintained. An additional three minutes were allocated to changing stations and student-led peer instruction. At each station change, one group member would opt to stay behind briefly to demonstrate and explain the station activity. The peer-teacher then rejoined their own group at the next station. Additionally, each station was designed for four students

Group 1  ★  members  ☉  peer-teacher
Group 2  ◯  members  □  peer-teacher
Group 3  ■  members  ❖  peer-teacher
Group 4  ◆  members  ✪  peer-teacher

*Note: For larger classes the stations were replicated with 2 or more sets. This diagram only shows 4 stations, but additional stations may be added.
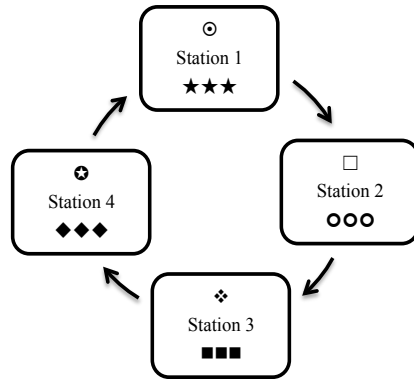


*Figure 1.* Layout and rotation of language learning stations

to participate at one time supporting effective teamwork. This also allowed members to partner within a group if the task required. The teacher's role after planning, set-up, and initial instruction of each station was mainly as an observer or facilitator, providing assistance when called upon.

# Functions of Language Learning Stations

The stations primarily consisted of vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, writing, and culture activities. Due to limited resources and time constraints, it was not always possible for learners to complete all six stations in one lesson, but because the stations were topic-based, it did not hinder their learning experience or outcomes. For each unit the format of these activities maintained similar structural or instructive elements. Many of the game-like activities could be played between paired group members or groups completing the same task at a different station.

## Vocabulary

The vocabulary station generally used various card games or crossword puzzles that emphasized strategies. Card games included the Japanese game of "karuta," the equivalent of English "slap." With 20 or more of the unit's vocabulary cards laid out on the table, players would take turns giving clues from the provided definition cards which the others had to identify quickly for points. Other

popular activities included a game called "Name 3," in which students were given a set of category cards such as "Name 3 Tropical Fruits" or "Name 3 Kitchen Tools." With a timer set at about six seconds, students raced to see who could list three of those items. Crossword puzzles were another useful medium in which two versions of the crossword were provided at the station. Groups would divide into pairs and provide each other with clues to solve the puzzle.

## Speaking

At the speaking station a questionnaire or board game related to the unit's content was commonly used. Students asked their group members a series of questions and provided their own follow-up questions. This station was often used for role-playing activities, in which students acted out various scenarios such as in a restaurant or shop.

## Listening

Running dictation games were a popular activity, in which pairs would race to complete a fill-in-the-blank worksheet. The answers being placed at a considerable distance meant that one partner had to memorize and relay information to their partner to record. A specific listening activity for a unit on personal descriptions required one student to describe a celebrity from a photograph, while other group members sketched the description and guessed the identity.

## Reading

Typically found at the reading station were two short stories on the same topic, such as "Christmas in England" and "Christmas in Australia." Divided into pairs, students would each silently read a story. After reading, partners would ask each other questions about the different story they read. Another common activity was "broken story," where pairs would work together to put in correct order the sentence cards that made the story or dialogue.

## Writing

At the writing station, groups used the unit's vocabulary to write interesting stories or create a board game by filling in a template. These student stories and board games were collected to be read or played in the following class.

## Culture

Occasionally, cultural activities were included in the lesson. These included taking notes or answering a series of questions while watching a video clip. One activity asked groups to guess or identify the contents and country of origin of various delicacies, such as haggis and poutine, through a series of photographs.

# Research Methods

Two measures were used to assess the effectiveness of stations. The first was a series of teacher reflection logs kept by both teachers. In the logs, the Listening and Speaking 1 (LS1) and Listening and Speaking 2 (LS2) class levels have been identified as "B" for basic, "LI" for lower-intermediate, "I" for intermediate, and "A" for advanced. In writing and maintaining the logs, both teachers were primarily guided by a set of questions:

- How effective were the materials and activities?
- Which station was the most/least successful?
- Did anything amusing, unusual, or problematic occur?
- What changes do you think should be made?
- Were students' needs met?
- What did/didn't the students respond well to?

These logs were written immediately following the observed class and were later shared and discussed by both teachers to determine the effectiveness of the stations.

The second measure was taken from student evaluation forms at the end of each semester. Students were asked to voluntarily and anonymously provide open-ended comments in either English or Japanese specifically related to the language learning station lessons. The Japanese comments were translated together by the author and a Japanese colleague. The comments were divided into four categories: classroom atmosphere, effectiveness of peer-teaching, rating of materials and activities, and overall perception. The author chose this type of evaluation method, as she wanted students to articulate their own thoughts and ideas about the language stations.

# Teacher Observations and Reflections

As a whole, traditional classroom settings where instruction and completion of one activity are conducted simultaneously tend to take a greater portion of class time and do not necessarily ensure that all students are engaged. Both teachers found that traditional instruction and procedures such as Present, Practice and Produce (PPP) were "choppy" with lengthy and misunderstood instructions that often needed clarification or repetition. As a result, weaker students would often fall behind or not receive the attention they needed.

> LS2-B / Class 2I / Teacher: CC / 5.3.2012
> It took 10 minutes to explain "Family Matching." Some students still didn't seem to understand. Had to stop the activity mid-way and explain again. Too much idle chatting with the group in the back. Must change student seating.

The teachers found that the station format gave the teachers the opportunity to divide their time more efficiently by assisting individual students and smaller groups, especially if a particular station needed further assistance. Moreover, the demands of an individual did not become the focal point of the whole class.

> LS2-B / Class 2I / Teacher: CC / 6.28.2012
> [Student] was focused and got a lot of support from his group. Pairing [student] with [student] in the same group worked well. I sat with the group at the first station and did the activity with them. Gave me the opportunity to chat with them one-on-one.

Stations gave the teachers a chance to know and converse with their students on an individual basis. Effectively using class time with pre-established stations allowed the relatively large classes to take on a small class feel.

The teachers found that by selecting activities that were familiar or relatively easy to grasp with commonly cited vocabulary, language forms, and procedures, confusion could be avoided. As a result there were fewer instances noted of students consulting their smart phones or electronic dictionaries in class. This enabled the lesson to focus on the activities by allowing students to practice and use their newly acquired and existing knowledge in a non-threatening

environment. With the progression of each unit over the 15-week semester, students showed more confidence and a greater sense of learner autonomy.

Perhaps the greatest overall changes were observed in the B level classes, where many students initially appeared less motivated and somewhat resentful towards English learning. Both teachers struggled to maintain student interest during regular lessons when the textbook was the main focus. This greatly changed with the stations, not only because of the cooperative approach, but because students appeared to find the materials engaging, comprehensible, and geared to their interests. Plus the sheer variety of activities produced for one unit guaranteed that there was something within the lesson that would appeal to all members.

> LS1-B / Class 1B / Teacher: CC/ 5.23.2013
> I changed the cards in the "describe a person" activity to athletes – lots of interest. Need to add more Japanese athletes. The simplified "sports dictation" activity was much better for the basic.

In addition, the competitive nature of some activities enhanced motivation and generated a greater reliance on teamwork.

> LS1-A / Class 1H / Teacher: KW/ 12.9.2013
> The "running dictation" and "karuta" were competitive. Had two different stations play against each other. Was a little loud, but lots of smiling faces - lot of energy today.

Being busy and engaged was important for students. Group pressure, time constraints, and constant movement created less cause for boredom or disinterest. Furthermore, many students were caught eavesdropping on the excitement at the next station, giving them a preview of what they could look forward to.

One of the most important aspects of the station format was that the students became the instructors, as they relayed the activity's rules and objectives to the next group with each station change. From both teachers' perspectives, the explanation provided by the peer-teacher student was clear and relatable to their classmates' needs. However, it was evident that low-level students often resorted

to using Japanese, while intermediate and advanced learners gave the majority of instruction in English.

LS1-B / Class 1C / Teacher: KW/ 6.10.2013

Instruction was mostly in Japanese with a few select words in English. [Students] did a great job demonstrating the activity and even stayed with the group to answer questions.

LS2-LI / Class 2L / Teacher: KW/ 11.28.2013

I was busy helping [student] with a problem. A group had a question [about the activity], but before I could get to them other students had stepped in to help out.

LS2-I / Class 2M / Teacher: CC/ 12.2.2013

Interesting to watch [student] try and get away with Japanese instructions. The group insisted on English. He was a caught off guard, but managed. The group applauded him. He had the greatest smile on his face afterwards. Confidence boost.

As Dörnyei (2001) agrees, students are resourceful as peer-teachers to convey new materials to their peers. Additionally, students could draw upon their existing knowledge, which provided the more knowledgeable students with a valuable role to play (Kowalski, 2004). Many students exhibited a sense of leadership as they wholeheartedly took on their teaching duties.

## Student Comments and Reflections

An interesting point is that the stations created unforeseen changes to the classroom dynamics. For the most part, students became not only better acquainted but also friends early on in the semester. As one student commented, "I got to make many friends from different departments. At first, I didn't know anybody. Now I have many friends." Another student expressed similar sentiments, "Each class my group was different. This class has a good feeling." Although many students expressed self-doubt when it came to their English abilities, they found consolation with their fellow classmates. As one stated,

"My classmates helped me a lot. I am not very good in English, but my group helped me. I'm thankful for my friends." Cohesive learning groups are a means for learners to feel a sense of belonging, which is paramount for learners to feel safe and supported (Dörnyei, 2001).

What became apparent was the overwhelming praise for language learning stations with student comments from "fun", "enjoyed", and "interesting" to "I could do many things. It was exciting." One student even went as far to state, "I forgot I was studying."  Among the praise there was also negative feedback, especially in regards to time constraints, such as "My group couldn't finish the activity," or "There wasn't enough time." The comment made by one student, "fast", stands out, but it is difficult to interpret whether the student meant that the class time passed quickly, or the pace of the lesson was too fast. Since the stations were a review of the three previous lessons, clearly students needed to be reminded that the lessons were not being graded and that it was not necessary to complete all stations.  Possibly some of the activities might have required or asked too much from students who were not able to process the language fast enough.

Perhaps the greatest criticism from students was directed at peer-teaching. For the majority of students, this was their first experience with peer-teaching. Many students, particularly those at the intermediate and advanced level rose to the challenge of peer-teaching. One intermediate student remarked, "My classmates said I was good at explaining. That made me happy." Unfortunately, many seemed at a loss of how to explain an activity or expressed a sense of self-doubt in their own abilities. As one student summed up, "It was difficult to explain the activity to the class. I tried my best to use English, but sometimes I couldn't. I used Japanese." Other learners expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of instruction by peers with such statements as, "I didn't always understand what the [peer-teacher] said. I didn't know what to do sometimes." The author can only speculate that the mixed reviews in regards to peer-teaching might have been due to its novelty, student ability, and even cultural bias.

# Overcoming Obstacles

The logs and comments were instrumental in assisting the teachers develop and improve the format and activities of the stations. Upon reflection the teachers would modify or replace existing activities in preparation for the following semester.

## Preparation

Perhaps the most daunting task for any teacher who takes on the station format is preparation. Strauber (1981) shares these grievances that teacher preparation and planning is greatly increased with stations, but in many respects existing supplementary materials can be adapted and re-used to fit the station format. Additionally, learning stations allowed resources and materials to be shared and reused, effectively limiting the need for copies. But the most important element when planning a lesson was to ensure that each activity could be completed in the same amount of time. Any break in consistency could create boredom, loss of interest, or unfinished objectives. Although the initial establishment of materials is intimidating, there is little doubt that the effort that an educator puts into their lesson greatly affects the level of motivation and involvement of the learner (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

## Administering

Both teachers remarked that the initial introduction of the stations was exhausting. The students at first did not seem to fully grasp their roles or adequately explain the activity to the next group. As a result, stations were not started simultaneously, and the initial instruction period took too long.

> LS1-B / Class 1A / Teacher: CC/ 5.24.2012
> Some groups took longer than 5 minutes to change. Ended up giving instructions myself twice. A group did not take their worksheets with them when changing. Need to make sure nothing is left behind.

Since many low-level students struggled when performing peer-teacher duties, the teachers suggested that the peer-teachers demonstrate the activity. The students were also informed that if they felt uncomfortable giving instructions in English, Japanese was acceptable. Additionally, to maintain a consistent flow

and to quickly resolve any problems or shortcomings, it was necessary for the teachers to continually wander among the stations and be readily available when called upon. Fortunately, these initial bumps were a non-issue by the second unit when stations were well underway. As the format became an accepted learning practice, students were quickly able to grasp the concept and procedures.

Time factors were an obstacle not only for the creation of the activities but also the learner. Many students were under the misconception that if they were not able to complete all learning stations within the 90-minute lesson that they were at a disadvantage. After the initial introduction of each course unit, the teachers were able to identify those problem activities or lessons. For those units the teachers proposed limiting the number of stations to three and extending the time limit when possible. Additionally, a bonus activity was made available to those groups that finished early. The bonus activity could easily be completed independently as homework, if necessary.

## Assessing

Activities that are used at each station need to be properly assessed in order for students to succeed. Are the activities engaging, challenging, age appropriate, or too difficult? All are possibilities to why an activity may not be popular with the learner (Bassano, 1986). One notable obstacle is that students need to be focused and self-reliant to accomplish the work. As Strauber (1981) notes, one solution is to assign "the most interesting station" to "potentially difficult students" (p. 35) as a way for them to become accustomed to learning stations. Being aware of students' past classroom experiences and language learning assumptions can be useful in assisting students in overcoming their anxiety (Bassano, 1986).

# Conclusion

The outcomes of the case study suggest that the level of enthusiasm, cooperation, and autonomy that the stations provided were advantageous, if not liberating. With the variety of techniques and activities produced, the learners are alert, and enthusiasm is high with a renewed sense of motivation and interest. However, the author feels that additional research is still necessary to fully understand how to better adapt and proceed with peer-teaching practices. The unique

characteristics of language learning stations ultimately allowed students to learn by doing through peer collaboration, peer-teaching, and peer cooperation. As a language teacher, it is essential to constantly examine and reexamine lessons to find an original and authentic way to create and present tasks. For the author that unique way is language learning stations. The initial establishment of stations can be challenging, but by designing straightforward content-based tasks, foreseeing potential problems, and giving students a chance to accept and adopt the new procedure, language learning stations can be adaptable to most classrooms. The stations as a cooperative learning practice are a means for student needs and curriculum objectives to be achieved with relatively little compromise.

## Acknowledgements

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