Implicit Beliefs about English Language Competencies

in the Context of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education:

A Comparison of University Students and Lecturers in Namibia

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Abstract

In many African countries, English is the medium of instruction in higher education even though students may not always be entirely familiar with "standard" English. This study aimed at investigating the relevance of English language competencies for teaching and learning from the perspective of students and lecturers. The study was carried out in Namibia and guided by the conceptual framework of implicit theories. Through a self-administered questionnaire, data were collected from a sample of 286 undergraduate students and 34 lecturers. Students and lecturers differed statistically significantly in all their views on the topic under investigation. While most of the lecturers (85.3%) believed that their students would not have good English language competencies, the majority of students (87.8%) rated their English between good and excellent. Most lecturers believed that insufficient English language competencies would cause a variety of problems for students such as having difficulty expressing themselves in English, following lectures, taking good notes during lectures, understanding academic texts, and writing coherent essays; in contrast, the majority of students believed that they had no such problems. The results are discussed with regard to practical implications for teaching and learning in higher education.

Keywords: English language competencies, Higher education, Implicit theories, Namibia, Namibian English

1. Introduction

In many African countries, English is the medium of instruction in higher education. Students are expected to master the English language in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It is taken for granted that lecturers and students speak the same standard/level of English, understand it well, and utilise it correctly as would be the case in countries where English is the first and often only language. In countries with a historically Anglophone colonial background, usually many people are multi-lingual and familiar with the English language; however, local indigenous languages and cultures have influenced the standards of English in such countries (Arua, 2004; Bagwasi, 2006; Graddol, 1997). In this way, various "Englishes" (Kachru & Nelson, 2001) developed that have diverted from the English used by first-language speakers. In multi-lingual contexts, people internalize localised English, often without being aware that their English proficiency differs from "standard" English. Although a need to recognize various "Englishes" has been acknowledged (Jenkins, 2000; McKay, 2002), it has also been emphasized that the acceptance of many standards could endanger the intelligibility of English (Kachru & Nelson, 2001). While local "Englishes" may not cause any shortcomings in everyday conversations, insufficient exposure to "standard" English can negatively affect academic achievements (Callahan, 2005; Cantoni, 2007; Maleki & Zangani, 2007). Significantly, the English utilised in academic textbooks and scientific literature follows "standard" English and students are expected to apply correct English in their academic writings and discussions.

Namibia, where the present study took place, is an example of a country where university students are taught in English even though, for a majority of them, English is a second, third or fourth language. Historically, Namibia has a German and an Afrikaans-speaking colonial background. Until Namibia's independence from South Africa in 1990,

many Namibians had little or no exposure to English (Frydman, 2011; Marsh, Ontero & Shikongo, 2001; Otaala, 2006), particularly not to being taught in English. At Independence, the new government introduced English as the official language. Schools played a major role in familiarising younger generations with English, even though many teachers were not qualified to teach the language or had insufficient English language competencies (Marsh et al., 2001; Wolfaardt, 2004), which limited them in serving as role models for standard English. Over the years, a systematically incorrect use of certain terminology, grammar, and pronunciation developed, influenced by the syntax of German, Afrikaans and local languages such as Oshiwambo, Otjiherero or Damara (Otaala, 2006). At some point, the term "Namlish" was established to pay attention to certain forms of incorrect but typical use of English in Namibia (Otaala, 1998).

Namibian English can be observed in daily conversations, newspaper articles, radio talk shows, and television presentations, which reinforce the manifestation of "Namlish". Furthermore, "Namlish" speakers are found among school teachers and university lecturers who contribute to the reproduction of an incorrect use of English through the younger generations they teach (Otaala, 2006, 1998). For example, lecturers applying Namibian English themselves will not necessarily be able to detect and correct English errors in student assignments and lecturers who are aware of their limited English language competencies may intentionally not pay attention to students' English but focus only on the content of the subject they teach (such as history, geography or biology). Such neglect of students' English may instil in students the (wrong) impression that their English is correct. Consequently, students will not see a need to improve upon their use of the language. Owing to their insufficient English language competencies, however, students may be ill prepared to critically and analytically deal with the scientific concepts they are supposed to study, which may have negative implications for their academic success as well as their professional careers.

The present study aimed at investigating how, in the context of teaching and learning, lecturers at the University of Namibia perceive their students' English language competencies and how students themselves perceive their own English language competencies.

The study was conceptualized within the framework of "implicit theories", sometimes also referred to as naïve theories, which are "theories" that contain people's personal views, perceptions, and beliefs about the world (Clark & Yinger, 1979; Leondari & Gialamas, 2002; Seng, Keung & Cheng, 2008). Implicit or naïve theories are not supported by scientific research. Usually, implicit theories are unempirical, incomplete, context specific, and idiosyncratic but relatively stable and resistant to change (Clark, 2005; Mitchell, 1994; Pozo & Gómez Crespo, 2005). People tend to believe more in their personal theories than in scientifically supported theories; peoples' implicit theories help to understand and explain why they behave in certain ways (Leroy, Bressoux, Sarrazin, & Trouilloud, 2007).

Based on the assumption that "what teachers do is affected by what they think" (Clark & Yinger, 1979, p. 231), implicit theories have been investigated in the field of education and the study of teaching. According to Clark and Peterson (1986), "the purpose of research on teachers' implicit theories is to make explicit and visible the frames of reference through which individual teachers perceive and process information" (p.287). Kagan (1992) concluded that "the more one reads studies of teacher beliefs, the more strongly one suspects that this piebald form of personal knowledge lies at the very heart of teaching" (p.85). Research revealed that teachers develop and hold their own implicit theories about teaching and learning, which supply them with a foundation for their everyday teaching in the classroom (e.g. Clark, 2005; Cooney, Shealy, & Arvold, 1998; Henderson, 2010; Leroy et al., 2007; Zembylas, 2005). Findings also confirmed that what teachers think and believe influences not only their teaching practice but also the educational experience of students (Beach, 1994; Berry 2006; Henderson, 2010; Leroy et al., 2007).

While there is research about implicit theories regarding language teaching, their focus is on instruction (Borg, 1998, 2003; DeBaryshe, Binder & Buell , 2000; Murphy, 2000; Zacharias, 2003). Little if any research has explored university lecturers' implicit theories about the significance of students' English language competencies for teaching and learning. There is also a lack of research that compares teachers' and students' implicit theories about the same topic. While students' learning depends, inter alia, on teachers' and students' individual beliefs (Berry, 2006), learning could also depend on whether or not teachers' and students' beliefs match. For example, one may assume that if lecturers assess their students' English language competencies as insufficient and believe that such insufficiency negatively affects students' learning, they may want to accommodate students' language deficits in their teaching approach (for example, by speaking slowly and correcting English mistakes in student essays). If students also assess their English language competencies as insufficient, they may respond well to a lecturer's accommodating approach and benefit from it. However, if students do not view their English language competencies as insufficient, the lecturer's approach will clash with students' expectations towards the lecturer; this could have a

de-motivating effect on both the lecturer and the students and compromise the learning experience as students may not appreciate the lecturer's efforts.

There are a number of studies about implicit theories of students; however, their focus is on students' beliefs regarding their intellectual ability and the role that such beliefs play in students' academic achievements and classroom behaviour (Doron, Stephan, Boiche, & Le Scanff, 2009; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Gonida, Kiosseoglou &Leondari, 2006; Molden & Dweck, 2000; Ommundsen, Haugen & Lund, 2005). Little if any research has examined university students' beliefs regarding their English language competencies and their significance for academic learning. Taking the development of English in the Namibian context with its presumably "Namlish" component into account, the objective for the present study was to examine university lecturers' beliefs about   their students' English language competencies as well as students' beliefs about their own English language competencies, and whether lecturers' and students' beliefs were corresponding with each other.

2. Method

2.1 Research Approach

  The nature of the study was exploratory and descriptive within the quantitative research paradigm, using a cross-sectional survey method. Prior to the study, and considering the lack of research on implicit beliefs about English language competencies in the Namibian context, two non-directive focus group discussions (one with students and one with lecturers) were held to gain insight into what students and lecturers thought about the relevance of English language competencies to teaching and learning at university. The information obtained from the discussions was utilised for the formulation of statements for a questionnaire, which was developed for the purpose of this study.

2.2 Data Collection

Applying convenience sampling, the questionnaire was distributed among 415 undergraduate students and 53 lecturers from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Namibia. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. In total, 293 students and 34 lecturers responded, giving a response rate of 70.6% for students and 64.1% for lecturers respectively. Seven student questionnaires were excluded from data analysis because they were largely incomplete. The final student sample remained at 286 students.

2.3 Research Participants

Eighty-six of the participating students (30.4%) were 18 to 20 years old, 153 students (54.1%) belonged to the age group 21 to 25 years, 23 students (8.1%) belonged to the age group 26 to 30 years, and 21 students (7.3%) were 30 years and above. A majority of 177 student participants (62.5%) was female while 106 students (37.5%) were male. Most student participants (N=178; 65.2%) were studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree and 95 students (34.8%) had enrolled in a Bachelor of Education programme for part of which they were attending courses in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Thirteen (13) students did not reveal their degree programme. Seventy-five students (26.4%) were in their first year of study, 79 (27.8%) in their second year, 93 (32.7%) in their third year, and 37 (13.0%) in their fourth year. English was not the mother tongue of any of the participating students.

Four (11.8%) of the participating lecturers were 25 to 30 years old, five lecturers (14.7%) belonged to the age group 31 to 40 years, fourteen lecturers (41.2%) belonged to the age group 41 to 50 years, and eleven lecturers (32.4%) were 51 years and above. Fifteen lecturers (44.1%) were female and nineteen (55.9%) were male. Only seven lecturers (20.6%) had English as their mother tongue. Five lecturers (14.7%) had been teaching at university level for less than two years, seven (20.6%) had taught for up to five years, six (17.6%) up to ten years, and 16 (47.1%) for more than ten years.

2.4 Measurement

Through a self-administered questionnaire, both lecturers and students were asked to assess their own English competencies on a self-rating scale ranging from "excellent" to "very good", "good", "fair", and "poor". Using the same rating scale, lecturers were asked to also rate their students' English language competencies. The main variables measured participants' beliefs regarding a possible impact of English language competencies on students' (i) behaviour in class, (ii) study skills, and (iii) expectations towards lecturers. The variables were operationalised through statements resulting from the focus group discussions. For lecturers, the statements started with the phrases "*Owing to students' English competencies, ...*" or "*Owing to their English competencies, ...*" and were followed by relevant content (e.g., *"... I have to say the same thing in several ways"; "... students find it difficult to understand academic texts"*). The same statements were presented to the participating students, however, with slight

modifications in the phrasing (e.g., *"Owing to my English competence, I want the lecturer to say the same thing in several ways", "… I find it difficult to understand academic texts")*. All statements were presented with a five-point Likert rating scale (ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"). Demographic and personal background variables measured age, gender, English as mother tongue, years of teaching at university level (for lecturers), year of study (for students), and degree programme enrolment (for students).

2.5 Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed with SPSS (version 19). Chi-square tests were performed to determine whether lecturers and students differed statistically in their beliefs. To avoid expected frequencies below 5, the responses "strongly agree" and "agree" were summarized under the category "agree'" and the responses "strongly disagree" and "disagree" were summarized under the category "disagree". The responses to the various statements were also correlated with the self-ratings of English language competencies applying Spearman's *rho*. Statistical significance was tested applying the 5% significance level ($p = 0.05$).

3. Results

The results revealed that both lecturers and students had a positive self-perception regarding their own English language competencies. Of the participating lecturers, 26.5% rated their English as excellent, 47.1% as very good, and 26.5% as good. Of the students, 12.9% rated their English as excellent, 30.1% as very good, 44.8% as good, 10.5% as fair, and only 1.7% as poor. In contrast to students' self-assessment, 85.3% of the lecturers were of the opinion that their students did not have good English language competencies. Similarly, 97.1% of the lecturers believed that their students found it difficult to express themselves in English while 73.4% of the students disagreed with this notion.

Table 1. Lecturers' and students' perceptions of language competencies and behaviour in class

"Owing to their English competence, students ..."/ "Owing to my English competence, I …"		Lecturers N %		Students N %		Pearson Chi-square
"…do not follow lectures"	Agree	30	88.2	33	11.5	$\chi^2 = 116.408$
	Not sure	4	11.8	38	13.3	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	215	75.2	$p = 0.000$
"… do not take good notes during lectures"	Agree	27	79.4	54	18.9	$\chi^2 = 81.305$
	Not sure	7	20.6	14	4.9	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	218	76.2	$p = 0.000$
"… do not participate in class discussions"	Agree	32	94.1	46	16.1	$\chi^2 = 102.839$
	Not sure	2	5.9	14	4.9	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	226	79.0	$p = 0.000$
"… do ask a lot of questions after class"	Agree	31	91.2	101	35.3	$\chi^2 = 42.270$
	Not sure	3	8.8	23	8.0	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	162	56.7	$p = 0.000$

Table 1 shows that the participating lecturers and students differed significantly in all of their beliefs regarding the impact of English language competencies on students' behaviour in class. A high percentage of the participating lecturers believed that, owing to insufficient language competencies, students would not follow lectures (88.2%), not take good notes during lectures (79.4%), not participate in class (94.1%), and ask many questions after class (91.2%). In contrast, the majority of the student participants disagreed with the relevant statements.

Table 2. Lecturers' and students' perceptions of language competencies and studying skills

"Owing to their English competence, students ..."/ "Owing to my English competence, I …"		Lecturers N %		Students N %		Pearson Chi-square
"… find it difficult to understand academic texts"	Agree	30	88.2	82	28.7	$\chi^2 = 53.600$
	Not sure	4	11.8	20	7.0	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	184	64.3	p = 0.000
"… find it difficult to analyse academic texts"	Agree	33	97.1	85	29.7	$\chi^2 = 59.565$
	Not sure	1	2.9	24	8.4	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	177	61.9	p = 0.000
"… find it difficult to study on their/my own"	Agree	26	76.4	35	12.2	$\chi^2 = 118.303$
	Not sure	8	23.5	9	3.2	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	242	84.6	p = 0.000
"… cannot write coherent essays"	Agree	34	100.0	69	24.1	$\chi^2 = 80.147$
	Not sure	0	0.0	24	8.4	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	193	67.5	p = 0.000
"… copy from other students' work"	Agree	25	73.5	36	12.6	$\chi^2 = 110.472$
	Not sure	9	26.5	12	4.2	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	238	83.2	p = 0.000
"… copy from textbooks"	Agree	33	97.1	104	36.4	$\chi^2 = 46.285$
	Not sure	1	2.9	16	5.6	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	166	58.0	p = 0.000

Lecturers and students also differed statistically significantly in their beliefs regarding study skills (see Table 2). While the majority of participating lecturers believed that owing to their language competencies students would find it difficult to understand (88.2%) or analyse (97.1%) academic texts and to study on their own (76.4%), most student participants reported that they did not find it difficult to understand (64.3%) or analyse (61.9%) academic texts or to study on their own (84.6%). Interestingly, all lecturers (100%) agreed that students could not write coherent essays, while 67.5% of the students disagreed with this assertion. Most lecturers believed that owing to insufficient English language competencies, students would copy from other students' work (73.3%) and plagiarise from textbooks (97.1%); such beliefs were not supported by the responses of the participating students.

Table 3. Lecturers' and students' perceptions of language competencies and expectations towards lecturers

"Owing to students' English language competencies, ..."/ "Owing to my English language competencies, …"		Lecturers N %		Students N %		Pearson Chi-square
"… I have to speak very slowly / I want the lecturer to speak very slowly"	Agree	31	91.2	90	31.5	$\chi^2 = 50.107$
	Not sure	3	8.8	18	6.3	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	178	62.2	p = 0.000
"… I have to say the same things in several ways / I want the lecturers to say the same thing in several ways"	Agree	33	97.1	133	46.5	$\chi^2 = 31.543$
	Not sure	1	2.9	20	7.0	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	133	46.5	p = 0.000
"… I have to give more support than I would normally do / I want the lecturer to give more support"	Agree	32	94.1	156	54.6	$\chi^2 = 21.533$
	Not sure	2	5.9	17	5.9	df = 2
	Disagree	0	0.0	113	39.5	p = 0.000
"… I cannot fully cover the course content / I want the lecturers to cover less course content"	Agree	7	20.6	67	23.4	$\chi^2 = 1.827$
	Not sure	1	2.9	26	9.1	df = 2
	Disagree	26	76.5	193	67.5	p = 0.401

The results in Table 3 show that what lecturers believed they had to do in order to accommodate students' insufficient English language competencies was not in line with what students expected lecturers to do. While almost all lecturers believed that owing to students' insufficient English language competencies they had to speak very slowly (91.2%), say the same thing in several ways (97.1%), and give more support than they would normally do (94.3%), students' responses towards these statements differed statistically significantly (see Table 3). However, as compared to the responses regarding behaviour in class and study skills, there were more students who agreed with what their lecturers believed; i.e., 31.5% of the students agreed that they wanted the lecturer to speak very slowly, 46.5% reported that they did want the lecturer to say the same thing in several ways, and 54.6% of the students indicated that they wanted the lecturer to give them more support. While 76.5% of the lecturers reported that they could not fully cover the course content, only 23.4% of the students indicated that they would want the lecturer to cover less course content. When asked whether owing to students' English language competencies, they had to lower their standards of teaching, 47% of the lecturers agreed while 50% of the lecturers disagreed with this statement (students were not presented with this statement).

A more detailed analysis revealed that lecturers' self-rating of their English language competencies was not associated with any of their beliefs with one exception: as compared to lecturers who assessed their English as "excellent" or "very good", lecturers who assessed their English as "good" were more likely to be 'not sure' as to whether students found it difficult to study on their own (*rho* = 0.572, *p* = 0.000).

Table 4. Associations between students' self-ratings of English language competencies and behaviour in class, study skills, and expectations towards lecturers

"Owing to my English competence, I …"	Students' self-rating of English language competencies
"… do not follow lectures"	not significant
"… do not take good notes during lectures"	*rho* = -0.162; *p* = 0.011
"… do not participate in class discussions"	*rho* = -0.260; *p* = 0.000
"… do ask a lot of questions after class"	not significant
"… find it difficult to understand academic texts"	*rho* = -0.386; *p* = 0.000
"… find it difficult to analyse academic texts"	*rho* = -0.425; *p* = 0.000
"… find it difficult to study on my own"	*rho* = -0.238; *p* = 0.000
"… cannot write coherent essays"	*rho* = -0.403; *p* = 0.000
"… copy from other students' work"	*rho* = -0.204; *p* = 0.001
"… copy from textbooks"	*rho* = -0.297; *p* = 0.000
"… want the lecturers to speak very slowly"	*rho* = -0.198; *p* = 0.001
"… want the lecturers to say the same thing in several ways"	*rho* = -0.253; *p* = 0.000
"… want the lecturers to give more support"	*rho* = -0.328; *p* = 0.000
"… want the lecturers to cover less course content"	*rho* = -0.204; *p* = 0.001

With regard to students, the analysis revealed that the lower students assessed their English language competencies the more likely they were to agree that their English language competencies had an impact on their behaviour in class, study skills, and expectations towards their lecturers (see Table 4). While the associations were statistically significant, the correlation coefficients, however, indicated weak to moderate associations.

4. Discussion

This study aimed at investigating and comparing university students' and lecturers' beliefs about English language competency and its relevance for teaching and learning. The results revealed that students and lecturers had opposing beliefs about the topic under investigation. While most lecturers' believed that students would not have good English language competencies, a majority of students appeared to be confident about their English as they believed that their English was good to excellent. The majority of the lecturers believed that insufficient English language competencies would cause a variety of problems for students such as having difficulty in expressing themselves in English, following lectures, taking good notes from lectures, understanding academic texts, and writing coherent essays; in contrast, the majority of students believed that they had no such problems.

One may assume that when lecturers and students differ entirely in their beliefs, their interaction is likely to be negatively affected and their expectations towards each other are likely not to be met. Berry (2006) emphasized that "learning is located not only in the heads of individual students, but also in the various conversations and activities of which they are a part" (p.11). In this study, most of the lecturers believed that, owing to students' insufficient English language competencies, they would have to speak very slowly, explain the same thing in several ways, and cover less content. However, most of the students reported that they had not wanted their lecturers to speak very slowly, explain the same thing in several ways or cover less content. The question arises as to whether lecturers were aware of the discrepancies between their and their students' beliefs. Palmer (1998) emphasised that it is important to know what students believe because otherwise one "cannot teach them well" (p.308). When lecturers are not aware that their students believe that their English language competencies are fine, their instructional decisions may not match with students' expectations towards their lectures, as was illustrated through the results of this study.

Lecturers may not even be aware of their own beliefs. Clark (2005) noted that teachers have difficulty in articulating their implicit theories. As a result they "may never fully realize the impact that they have upon their perception, interpretation, and judgment of their practices" (Henderson, 2010, p. 109). The same may be assumed for students. Lecturers and students may not be aware of their own and each others' beliefs and expectations, and as a result their interpretation of each other's behaviour may lead to misinterpretation. The result of this study, that most students perceived their lecturers' efforts as not needed, could negatively interfere with teaching and learning.

However, even when lecturers and students are aware of the discrepancies in their beliefs, the question remains open as to whether they would be willing and able to revise their beliefs. As mentioned above, implicit beliefs last long and are quite stable and resistant to change (Berry, 2006; Pozo & Gómez Crespo, 2005).

In this study, the assessment of students' English language competencies was subjective in their self-rating. Taking the multi-lingual context of Namibia into consideration and assuming that the "Namlish" had taken its toll on the young generations' English language competencies without many of them being aware of it (Otaala, 1998), they may not see a need to improve their English or question whether their use of English could lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and wrong judgements. It is, however, noteworthy that those students who assessed their English as fair to poor were significantly more likely to believe that their behaviour in class (for example, not participating in class discussions) and study skills (for example, not understanding and analysing texts) were negatively affected by their English language competencies; they were also more likely to expect their lecturers to accommodate their language insufficiencies in their teaching (for example, to speak slowly). Such findings suggest that when students are aware of weaknesses in their English language competencies they are more likely to be appreciative of lecturers' efforts to accommodate their language competencies; perhaps such students may also be more willing to make efforts to improve their own English language competencies.

It was a limitation of this study that the assessment of students' English language competencies was based only on subjective measurement; the study would have benefitted if an objective measurement had also been utilised to determine whether students' and lecturers' beliefs concurred with their actual English language competencies. It was further a limitation of this study that it did not examine whether lecturers and students were aware of their opposing beliefs. Nevertheless, the findings of this exploratory study may stimulate further research about implicit beliefs regarding English language competencies and their significance for teaching and learning in higher education.

5. Conclusion

Language competencies are important for teaching and learning in higher education as they determine how well students will be able to understand and critically analyse knowledge pertaining to their subject. The results of the study suggest that university lecturers and students differ significantly in their implicit beliefs about students' English language competencies. Such discrepancy could hamper academic achievements in higher education. Owing to their beliefs, lecturers may underestimate students' language competencies and, therefore, lower their expectations while students may overestimate their language competencies and, therefore, see no need for improving their language skills, all of which is likely to negatively affect academic standards. In the long run, opposing beliefs among lecturers and students may compromise students' learning experience as well as their academic and professional success.

Further research is recommended to explore where students' and lecturers' beliefs come from, for example, whether they are part of their implicit theories of learning or whether they are culturally motivated. Research is also needed to determine under what circumstances students and lecturers are willing to question their beliefs. In addition, research is recommended to examine what kind of teaching and learning approaches may enable students to assess their English language competencies realistically and to prepare and motivate them for improving their English language

competencies so that success in their academic pursuits may be assured. Based on the outcomes of such research, specifically designed programmes for academic development in higher education are recommended to sensitise lecturers and students for their possibly misconceived beliefs and their impact on teaching and learning. Such programmes would also have to target the question as to what lecturers could do to achieve awareness for their own and their students' beliefs.

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