

Exploring factors of EFL learners' identity formation and language investment: A Recommendation in the new normal era

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ABSTRACT

Learners' identity is dynamic that constructs or is constructed by environments and language. It also deals with learning attitudes and beliefs affected by intrinsic and extrinsic factors. EFL learners faced challenges during the pandemic as the online environment has significant differences from face-to-face learning, which impacts their identity. This current study investigated those factors in EFL learners' identity formation and language investment. Two postgraduate English students were selected as participants for some reason. This study was conducted during the pandemic using a narrative inquiry-based case study to reveal their perspectives about themselves through stories. The data were collected from interviews and reflective essays about their significant moments in learning English. The data were categorized into three major themes: learning English in primary, secondary, and tertiary educations. After that, the data were analyzed and interpreted using several intrinsic and extrinsic factors of EFL learners' identity formation and language investment frameworks. The findings show that intrinsic and extrinsic factors were identified to contribute to their identity formation. In detail, the participants had positive attitudes and habits in learning English, although they still had an anxiety problem due to being foreigners. It can be inferred from language investment factors as they perceived cognitive awareness, dealt with difficult affordances, performed learners' agency, and realized their practiced and imagined communities. Several recommendations are proposed for EFL learners to face challenges in the new normal through their attitude and habits in learning English: first, they need to understand themselves by recognizing their intrinsic and extrinsic factors in learning English; and second, they need to acknowledge their cognitive awareness, affordances, learners' agency, and practiced and imagined community. Besides, environmental supports and encouragement from teachers, relatives, and the government as extrinsic factors are also equally crucial to implement experiential learning.

Keywords: EFL Learners' Identity Formation; Language Investment; Narrative Inquiry-based Case Study; The New Normal Era

INTRODUCTION

To make successful learning, learners must understand their identities for implementing experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2009) if the main focus is a process, not on goal achievement. Learning identity refers to people who acknowledge themselves as learners and trust their personal experiences and ability. Furthermore, identity describes how people comprehend themselves and connect to the constructed world across time and space (Norton, 1997). Hence, identity is not static (Fernsten, 2008), and it is hard to define, and the conceptualization of learner identity is even more complex (Choi, 2018). As people expand their knowledge, their identities will be expanded (Lie, 2017) and vice versa. Learner identities can also

be negotiated, transformed, and influenced through sociolinguistic and political landscapes (Wirza, 2018). Their formations can contradict established values and norms (Lie, 2017) of their diverse backgrounds (Choi, 2018). Notably, their previous linguistic identities play a role (Gee, 2001 in Wirza, 2018) in their worlds and language philosophies as a social and political struggle (Shor, 1992 in Fernsten, 2008).

ESL and EFL learners bring their previous linguistic and cultural repertoires from diverse backgrounds into the classroom, which both have distinctive natures and diverse reasons for learning English (Tarhan, 2015). According to Lie (2017), English has become a language of prestige in some countries as English is assumed to have political power, privilege, and social prestige, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia. On the other reason, internet-based communications such as chat applications, social media, podcasts, video conferences, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) increase English dominance. Hence English is promoted as a modern language communication. In Indonesia, young generations experience a massive Western influence through popular English culture and sociocultural icons such as music and movies.

Moreover, during the pandemic, the use of internet-based communications is increasing overpass a year. Learning has no boundaries since its materials are internet-based. Learning English becomes more challenging even in higher education, especially during the pandemic. Based on research findings (Ariani & Tawali, 2021; Erarslan, 2021; Hosni & Dhahlil, 2021), several challenges faced by EFL learners in higher education during the pandemic are identified, such as learning materials, dealing with overload assignments, technical issues, and limited internet access, and online identity. In the Indonesian context, those problems impact EFL learners mentally and physically (Fathoni et al., 2021), like increasing their anxiety at the beginning of the pandemic (Hapsari, 2021), decreasing their external motivation (Subakthiasih & Putri, 2020), and effecting their cognitive engagement (Yundayani et al., 2021).

Learners' identity is dynamic (Norton, 1997; 2006) that constructs or is constructed by environments (Fernsten, 2008). Identity is not only learners' physical things but also personality attributes and life experiences (Wenger, 2000) as a part of diverse culture and society (Ai & Wang, 2017; Choi, 2018), including language backgrounds (Gee, 2001 in Wirza, 2018) that contribute to their habits and values in learning EFL (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). In line with that, it is highlighted that EFL learners faced challenges during the pandemic as the shift from face-to-face learning to an online environment impacts learners' identity. This current study was conducted to explore factors contributing to EFL learners' identity formation and language investment of two postgraduate students. Furthermore, the findings are expected to give significant recommendations for EFL learners and their environmental surroundings, including their relatives, schools, and the government, to handle challenges in the new normal era. Using a narrative inquiry-based study provides this study with in-depth and rich data collection and analysis.

1.1. Defining Learners' Identity Formation

Norton (1997) explains identity as how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future. Ai and Wang (2017) describe space as associated with someone's state within its particular culture, ideology, and history. Wenger (2000, in Anwaruddin, 2012) believes that instead of a concrete thing or a label, such as a title, an ethnic category, or a personality attribute, the term of identity refers to a lived experience of belonging or not belonging. It consists of multi-layers of physical attributes, life experiences, connections, and membership of diverse communities. Hence, it can be changed and constantly negotiated (Anwaruddin, 2012), affecting and affected by environments (Fernsten, 2008) that also may be in tension or conflict (Barnett & Antenucci, 2006; Teng, 2012).

Kolb and Kolb (2009) define learning identity as people who see themselves as learners seeking and engaging life experiences with a learning attitude and belief in their ability to learn as the

primary purpose of experiential learning in ELT based on Carl Rogers and Paulo Friere. Further, Lawson (2014) explains Learners' identity as how individuals feel about themselves and the extent to which they describe themselves as a learner that is affected by many intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as personal motivation, a sense of belonging, support, and encouragement from others and previous experiences of education (Hewitt, Hall, & Mills, 2010 in Lawson, 2014). As learners understand themselves, they develop attitudes and habits that can be contradictory (Lie, 2017; Whitaker, 2019) within their diverse backgrounds (Choi, 2018). Notably, their previous linguistic identities play a role in their worlds (Gee, 2001 in Wirza, 2018) and language philosophies as a social and political struggle (Shor, 1992 in Fernsten, 2008).

1.2. The link between language and identity formation

Language and identity embed each other as a process of cultural acquisition and play an essential role in identity negotiation and reconstruction (Ai & Wang, 2017; Teng, 2018). Learning a language means becoming a member of communities by using language. However, the link between identity and language is not that easy to comprehend because its functions as markers of national and ethnic identities and symbolic capital for social control (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2004, in Tarhan, 2015). Norton (2006) identified five characteristics based on sociocultural theory: (a) identity is dynamic and constantly changing across time and place; (b) identity is complex, contradictory, and multifaceted, and rejects any simplistic notions of identity; (c) identity constructs and is constructed by language; (d) identity construction must be understood concerning more extensive social processes, marked by relations of power that can be either coercive or collaborative; (e) identity theory should be and is usually linked with classroom practice.

Learners are physically exposed to the new cultural and linguistic community and gradually learn new cultural norms and experiences as identity negotiation, renegotiation, and transformation throughout their language learning trajectory (Choi, 2018). Identity negotiation occurs in communication practices when individuals perceive themselves and others (Ai & Wang, 2017), then reconstruct their identities. Block (2007, 2009 in Tarhan, 2015) explains that all learners do not follow the same route in identity negotiation and reconstruction due to different contexts and reasons of learning. Also, identity transformation happens to people when they use a particular language, and that language can change people's behaviors, perceptions, and preferred ways of expressing themselves (Lie, 2017).

1.3. Learners' identity formation in EFL

Learners' identity formation in EFL differs from ESL in two ways (Block, 2007, 2009; Tarhan, 2015). Both are different in context learner practices and their reasons for learning. Compared to ESL, which takes place in natural learning surrounded by fluent English speakers, EFL learners' practices are merely formal classroom settings. EFL does not play a significant role for learners in a particular country, while ESL learners use English to survive and live. Being a foreigner brings significant impacts on the way learners use the language. Taylor (2010, in Tarhan, 2015) states that expressing self in a foreign language could be a curse, showing vulnerability in people's eyes and showing learners' mistakes. On another side, it can be a blessing for identity exploration.

Those distinctions lead to English in world Englishes and English International language concepts (Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Matsuda, 2003; Tarhan, 2015; Yeh, 2013). Based on the Kacruvian approach, the ownership English is divided into three circles: inner, outer, and expanding. Countries using English in all sectors are included in the inner circle, for instance, the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, others. If English is used in countries for surviving and living beside their origin language, they use English as a second language in the outer circle. The last expanding circle is for countries where English is the only educational or formal setting for getting jobs (Jenkins, 2006). That is why the words 'es' in world Englishes indicate a variety of English. On the other hand, English International theories claim

that English as a language has factions to communicate and connect people worldwide without seeing their upbringing language and countries.

Indonesia is a multicultural country with numerous cultures and heritage languages (Lie, 2017). Looking at the world Englishes approach, Indonesia is recognized as expanding because mastering English is not a primary need. Indonesians learn it only in educational settings and use it in formal settings. Moreover, the Ministry of Education and Culture reduced English hours in the 2013 Indonesian curriculum in senior high school and vocational schools to maximize the national language. This policy minimizes learners to learn English even in formal educations. If they can learn English intensively, they should take a private course or pay more through private institutions. Lowenberg (1991, in Lie, 2017) proposes that English should be regarded as an additional language or the official second language rather than merely a foreign language in Indonesia because diverse language identities such as heritage language, English, and multilingual identities (Barnett & Antenucci, 2006) contribute to learners' identity formation, especially English.

1.4. Language Investment

Learners' identity formations cannot be separated from the notion of investment coined by Norton (1997: 2013). The term investment refers to the relationship constructed socially and historically between English as learners' target language and their desire to learn and practice it (Ai & Wang, 2017; Teng, 2018) or ongoing formations of learners' identity and future desire. Teng (2018) explains that learners deal with powers and inequality in which they have reasons to invest in the target language to acquire symbolic resources such as language, education, friendship, or material resources such as capital goods, money, others. These backgrounds determine learners' commitment to learning English.

There are some influencing factors of language investment in EFL learning based on Teng's research findings (2018). First, Learners' cognitive awareness or ideology is a belief system imposed upon the reality that influences learners' identity options which can be in forms of self-reflection, goals, and independence (Teng, 2018:54). Second, EFL affordances deal with situations or facilities that negatively and positively impact learners learning English. Third, learners' agency refers to actions in the process of learning that cooperate with emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990 cited in Teng, 2018). The last, practiced community and the imagined community, refer to learners' conceptions about the language they learn and the reality of using it.

METHODS

Studies in learners' identity have been extensively conducted using the narrative inquiry method since it offers more in-depth and richer data, particularly in investigating learner's identity formation (Ai & Wang, 2017; Anwaruddin, 2012; Barnett & Antenucci, 2006; Choi, 2018; Fernsten, 2008; Hatam & Sa'd, 2017; Lawson, 2014; Lie, 2017; Tarhan, 2015; Teng, 2018; Wirza, 2018). Thus, I conducted this study using a narrative inquiry-based case study since this method is practical to investigate participants' perspectives about themselves through stories (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), a story is how people make sense of experiences, communicate with others, and understand the world. The data narrative study can be oral, written, or visual (Pavlenko, 2007, in Teng, 2018). Hence, I designed the data collections of this study were from participants' interviews and reflective essays that relate to learning English experiences. At the same time, I employed narrative analysis and analysis of narrative that was proposed by Barkhuizen and Alice (2014).

Two participants were involved, I took a role as the first participant besides the researcher. The second participant was my classmate in the English postgraduate program as data comparison. Henceforth, participant 1 refers to me in the data transcription, and participant 2 is my classmate. I selected her as a participant because, based on my class observation in online learning during the pandemic, her engagement and participation were passive, but she was always aware

of what she should do in all assignments of every subject. When I tried to approach her, she told me that she still has anxiety problems in speaking English, which is the same problem that I faced during the pandemic. I have been learning via zoom meeting since the first time I got accepted into my postgraduate program. These learning experiences make me easier to feel exhausted, overwhelmed, and pressured because I have to complete many assignments, and I barely know my classmates and lecturers to discuss my difficulties. Even though it was in virtual mode when my lecturer asked me to deliver my idea, I could handle my anxiety. It got terrible when technical issues. For example, my audio was not audible. This learning experience is in line with the findings of some research (Ariani & Tawali, 2021; Erarslan, 2021; Hosni & Dhahlil, 2021) that during the pandemic, higher education students faced challenges in terms of learning materials, dealing with overload assignments, technical issues, and limited internet access, and online identity which affected them mentally and physically (Fathoni et al., 2021).

I wrote reflective essays of my significant moments as an English learner from primary schools to higher educations. I use significant learning experiences for the narrative story because I need to study my identity as an English learner. Hence, I can figure out my learning attitudes and habits. At the same time, I arranged several questions for my classmate based on Patton's classifications (2015) to get her significant moments in learning English. I conducted a semi-structured interview using open-ended questions as explained by Merriam & Tisdell (2015) that is helpful to discover participants' perspectives defining the world in unique ways. I used Indonesian as the native language for conducting an interview. Filep (2009) stated that it is helpful to maximize the data exploration and connectedness of her English learning experiences. I conducted the interview using Zoom meeting, and it was recorded. Further, the data were transcribed using Google voice typing and categorized into three major themes: significant learning experiences in primary, secondary, and higher education. The data from reflective essays and interviews were analyzed and interpreted (Lichtman, 2006) using intrinsic and extrinsic factors of EFL learners' identity formation and influencing factors of language investment theories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research problems, I differ the discussion into two topics.

1. EFL learners' Identity formations

My classmate and I have the exact reasons for choosing English as a disciplinary subject in our higher educations. We were interested in English because of cultural exposure introduced by one of our family members to western movies and music, as mentioned in the excerpt below:

Participant 1: I did not have any ability to understand English, but I felt that English did not make me afraid. My older brother always played western music every evening on the radio tape.

Participant 2: For the first time, I learned English in the fourth grade of elementary school. I often listened to my brother playing western music, and I liked English more.

This phenomenon is explained by Lie (2017) as the massive Western influence of popular sociocultural icons. Also, our environments (Fernsten, 2008) influence our cognitive awareness (Teng, 2018) to learn English in support and encouragement. Further, it can be seen from the excerpt below that my friend and I were eager to learn English since we got impressive learning experiences in our primary school. I got teacher recognition, while my friend achieved an excellent grade. It proves that support, encouragement, and learning experiences are extrinsic factors (Hewitt, Hall, & Mills, 2010, in Lawson, 2014) that trigger us to learn English further in formal education.

Participant 1: I was eager to be familiar with English because I had already gotten recognition from my teachers and friends.

Participant 2: At that time, also I liked English even though most of my friends did not like it because they assumed English was difficult. I felt enjoyable learning English since I got the highest score on a test.

On the other hand, choosing English for our disciplinary comes from our motivation, curiosity, and interests because it is shown in the following excerpt that we realize mastering English will open opportunities for us widely. I thought English would be beneficial for my future career, considering only a few people in my village could speak even understand English. My friend also assumed that English could bridge her to participate in the global world. These data are intrinsic factors (Hewitt, Hall, and Mills, 2010, as cited in Lawson, 2014).

Participant 1: Then, it seemed cool to speak English as most people could not do that if they did not take an English private course or study. Also, people who can speak English are needed anywhere.

Participant 2: When I took English as my major, I expected to become a translator and interpreter exploring overseas and participating in international issues.

Moreover, looking at the reasons sparking our motivations, it is aligned with what Lie mentioned (2017) that English is assumed as a prestigious language, particularly for the middle class, to make people quickly get access to educations or jobs. Learning English is a part of our future desire to apply for jobs and enroll in schools; we have to have a standardized English test (Ai & Wang, 2017; Teng, 2018). In my perspective, it relates to the notion of World Englishes that English has the power to determine the culture, economy, politics, and society of countries (Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Matsuda, 2003). The desires that we want to achieve in the future strengthen our motivation are aligned with the definition of language investment (Ai & Wang, 2017; Norton, 2013; Teng, 2018) as ongoing learners' identity formations. Also, it is suitable with Teng (2018) and Norton (2006) that we as EFL learners deal with powers and inequality. This situation gives us reasons to invest in the target language to acquire symbolic resources such as language, education, friendship, or material resources such as capital goods, money, others.

Although we learned English from primary schools and chose it as a specific program in undergraduate and graduate degrees, both of us still have anxiety problems because of the lack of exposure and being non-native speakers of English. Our environments, such as family and friends, do not provide a natural setting to use English. We use English for formal or educational purposes (Tarhan, 2015) and getting jobs (Jenkins, 2006). When we speak in English, we are afraid of making ungrammatical structures or missing pronunciation; thus, people are judgmental about us because speaking in English reveals our vulnerability as EFL learners (Taylor, 2010, in Tarhan, 2015). At the same time, English contributes to our identity exploration, such as knowing updated information worldwide and cultural diversity. I agree with Barnett and Antenucci (2006) and Teng (2012) that this tension always occurs when we learn and express our feelings in English.

Participant 1: Most of my friends felt what I felt in the early semester, being insecure, lost, and alone.

Participant 2: In speaking, I realize that I am not fluent enough. Therefore I want to learn more about it. Although I chose English, I still lack it compared to my classmates. As hard as I learned English, I found myself not knowing anything.

Although we still had anxiety due to being a foreigner in speaking English, my classmate and I felt about ourselves to the extent to which we describe ourselves as a learner that was affected by many intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Hewitt, Hall, & Mills, 2010 in Lawson, 2014). Both intrinsic factors such as motivation, curiosity, and interests and extrinsic factors like the massive Western influence of popular sociocultural icons, environmental support, and encouragement, English is assumed as a prestigious language, and language as an investment are identified to contribute to our identity formations. Therefore, I conclude that identity constructs and is constructed by language, and it is also linked to classroom practice (Norton, 2006). As we learn English, we are exposed to the new cultural and linguistic community and gradually learn new cultural norms and experiences (Choi, 2018) that not only do contribute to our identity formations but also further negotiate our identities in a way we communicate and perceive with others (Ai & Wang, 2017),

then we reconstruct them. Eventually, ever since our behaviors, perceptions, and ways of expression changed, we transformed our identities (Lie, 2017).

2. Factors in Language Investment

I could reflect on the learning process that I have been through from my primary school to higher education to knowing my language gap and providing solutions to overcome it by myself. On the other hand, my friend reveals her belief that learning English should come from an inner voice to face challenges.

Participant 1: I think that what matters is not only about English capacity, but also it deals with mentality. As long as I believe in myself, making mistakes will be a meaningful experience in the end. Thus, I decided to know and have many friends by joining the English department organization and following several organizations. It impacted me a lot in terms of confidence.

Participant 2: I like English; therefore, when I have difficulties, I can face them.

Based on except above, both my classmate and I often self-reflect to recognize our weaknesses in learning English and then overcome them. Also, each of us realized that we have purposes that should be achieved in learning English. It is aligned with learners' cognitive awareness or ideology as the first factor of language investment defined by Teng (2018:54) as a belief system imposed upon the reality that influences learners' identity options which can be in self-reflection, goals, and independence.

Teng (2018:54) also mentioned EFL affordances in language investment. It deals with situations or facilities that negatively and positively impact learners learning English. My classmate and I have the same experiences being taught by teachers or lecturers in which their methods of teaching could boost and decrease our motivation to learn English. This factor happens to us, as described in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: I did not get what she taught because she mostly asked students to read the text, remember the words, sing songs, and do daily tasks.

Participant 2: I think it depends on the methods used by lecturers or teachers. The learning process will last long when the methods are impressive as Prof. Emi did.

Another factor is learners' agency which refers to actions in learning that cooperate with emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990 cited in Teng, 2018). In my case, I felt that I was not confident enough to speak in English because of being selected in an advanced class, but I tried to survive and fight. Meanwhile, my friend kept being positive when she realized herself having an introverted personality, which is contradictory to being a language learner. This phenomenon regards learning attitude that learners believe in themselves in learning English (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

Participant 1: I tried to survive and fight. I assumed that the main problem was because I lacked English ability. Therefore, I maximized my time relearning what I got, and I studied before the class to increase my confidence.

Participant 2: I am an introverted person, so it is not easy for me to get along with others. I should encourage myself to speak up and face new things. It also happened the first time I spoke native English.

The last factor that must be considered is the practiced community and the imagined community that refer to learners' conceptions about the language they learn and the reality of using it (Teng, 2018:54). Being selected in an advanced class, I expected all my classmates to be motivated to learn English. They also felt insecure as I felt. It made me realize that good English learners do not guarantee having a good mentality. Although my friend likes to learn English, she does not maximize opportunities to use English as much as possible. Both of us want to be fluent in speaking, but we do not use it frequently in any chances. It happened to my classmate. Even though she likes English, she rarely uses it unless for watching movies and learning.

Participant 1: Most of my friends felt what I felt in the early semester, being insecure, lost, and alone. Somehow through sharing stories with them, it motivated me.

Participant 2: I chose English because I like it, but I only use it to watch movies and learn.

My friend and I become what we are now as English learners because those factors influence us to learn and understand ourselves. Sometimes, I notice that I can explore myself when I get new vocabulary and exposure when learning English. I believe it is what Lie (2017) stated that as people expand their knowledge, their identities will be expanded and vice versa. To conclude, my classmate and I have positive attitudes and habits. It can be inferred from language investment factors that: we perceived cognitive awareness, dealt with difficult affordances, performed learners' agency, and realized our practiced and imagined communities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Learners' identity generally refers to concrete things or abstract concepts (Wenger, 2000, in Anwaruddin, 2012). Concrete things can be a label, such as a title, an ethnic category, or personality attributes. Meanwhile, identity concepts refer to a lived experience of belonging or not belonging. This study focused on the participants' significant learning experiences in English to investigate their identity formation as EFL learners. Further, they acknowledged themselves as learners that face challenges and opportunities in learning English as a foreign language in diverse cultural, social, environmental contexts. The findings present that the participants maintained intrinsic factors such as motivation, curiosity, and interests and extrinsic factors like the massive Western influence of popular sociocultural icons, environmental support and encouragement, English as a prestigious language, and language as an investment. It means that the participants negotiated and reconstructed their identity (Ai & Wang, 2017; Teng, 2018) through the English language they learned (Block, 2007, 2009; Tarhan, 2015). At the same time, English as a foreign language influences their attitudes and habits in learning due to distinctions of world Englishes and English International language concepts (Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Matsuda, 2003; Tarhan, 2015; Yeh, 2013). However, the participants developed positive attitudes and habits despite their speaking anxiety even during the pandemic. It can be seen from how they perceived cognitive awareness, dealt with difficult affordances, performed learners' agency, and realized our practiced and imagined communities.

In regards to the pandemic situation, due to the shift from traditional learning to an online environment, several challenges were faced by them such as learning materials, dealing with overload assignments, technical issues and limited internet access, and online identity (Ariani & Tawali, 2021; Erarslan, 2021; Hosni & Dhahlil, 2021). Those problems impact EFL learners mentally and physically affected (Fathoni et al., 2021), like increasing their anxiety at the beginning of the pandemic (Hapsari, 2021), decreasing their external motivation (Subaktiasih & Putri, 2020), and affecting their cognitive engagement (Yundayani et al., 2021). The findings of this study are expected to give significant recommendations for EFL learners in the new normal era. First, they need to understand themselves by recognizing their intrinsic and extrinsic factors in learning English. Second, they should acknowledge their cognitive awareness, affordances, learners' agency, and practiced and imagined community. Besides, environmental supports and encouragement from teachers, relatives, and the government as extrinsic factors are also equally crucial to achieve successful learning and implement experiential learning proposed in ELT based on Carl Rogers and Paulo Friere (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

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