The Effect of Critical Thinking Skills on Reading English Novels

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Abstract

This experimental study examined the effect of critical thinking skills on reading English novels and its influence on EFL learners reading proficiency. Sixty Iranian EFL junior undergraduates participated and were randomly divided to two groups of thirty each. For the purpose of this study participants in addition to their text book read and received instructions on the unabridged short novels for one semester. To test the hypothesis, two independent t-tests were conducted to see the difference between the two groups. The results of the study showed that students in group A were more critically oriented than their counterparts in group B. The pedagogical implication of this study suggests that direct instruction in critical thinking has an impact on EFL learners' reading proficiency. The findings of this study revealed that there was a significant improvement in students' attitudes, confidence, and interest especially, in their novel-reading ability.
Keywords: **Critical thinking, Critical literacy, Reading proficiency, English novels, Language awareness**

1. Introduction

Critical thinking is best understood as the ability of thinkers to take charge of their own thinking. Also known as logical thinking, analytical thinking, reasonable thinking, high order thinking, reasoning skills and also scientific thinking, it encompasses the entire process of obtaining, comprehending, analyzing, evaluating, internalizing, and acting upon knowledge and values. Wallerstein, (1983, p. 16) argues that, "Critical thinking begins when people make the connections between their individual lives and social conditions. It ends one step beyond perception owards the action people take to regain control over social structures detrimental to their lives" (as cited in Benesch, 1993, p. 547).

From a philosophical point of view, Kumaravadevilu (2003a) believes that "one of the desirable, though not easily achievable, goals of general education has always been to create autonomous individuals who are willing and able to think independently and act responsibly" (p. 131). And this, according to Elder and Paul (1994) requires learners to develop sound criteria and standards for analyzing and assessing their own thinking and routinely

use those criteria and standards to improve its quality. These definitions usually connect critical thinking to rational judgment. Therefore, Lipman (1991, p.3) defines critical thinking as "healthy skepticism," whereas Norris and Ennis (1989) call it "reasonable and reflective thinking that is focused upon deciding what to believe and do" (as cited in Davidson, 1998, p.121).

1.1. Critical thinking in the EFL classroom

The EFL/ESL situation is a key challenge for teaching in how to engage students with the study of "how texts work" semiotically and linguistically (Luke, Comber & O'Brien, 1996), while at the same time taking up explicitly how texts and their affiliated social institutions work politically to construct and position writers and readers in relations of power and/or lack of knowledge (as cited in Emmit & Wilson, 2005, p. 3).

Farralleli (2009, p. 27) believes that getting students and teachers to reflect critically upon their taken-for-granted assumptions is one of the first steps towards the development of effective and functional critical thinking skills. The active engagement of students according to Crenshaw, Hale and Harper (2011) involves more than having them participate in a particular instructional strategy. They believe that "the art of teaching and learning is found in the dynamic interaction of ideas and methods for thinking about ideas with sensitivity to the context of the classroom culture and content" (p.18).

In the classroom, according to Rezai et al. (2011) "Engaging students actively in critical thinking processes through the effective use of teacher questions, discussions and reflection in a context that supports critical thinking and values inquiry, and teachers' practicing of critical thinking skills and attitudes and explicit explanations of the significance of critical thinking could help students to develop both their critical thinking skills and their associates critical attitudes" (p. 772). Elder and Paul (2003) point out that, an important part of critical thinking education is turning students into active questioners. They concede that it is important for learners to keep asking questions in the learning process, stressing that "to learn well is to question well" (p. 36).

1.2. Purpose of study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of direct instruction in critical thinking skills on undergraduate junior EFL students' reading proficiency and academic achievement. Critical thinking is generally considered a core competence for university students, of whatever discipline, and so it is often included in General Education courses, including classes in English, and is normally required in the first two years of undergraduate studies to develop students' personalities. One of the major problems university students normally face is the lack of critical thinking and self-directed learning skills. This study aims to show that we can guide our learners in the right direction and do what we can to encourage them towards this goal. Tutoring has been shown to be a useful tool to assist students to develop critical thinking skills while engaged in academic learning because this will enable students to engage in purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. It is envisioned that such a study will help students to analyze reading materials and have more in-depth understanding of different cultures. Moreover, the objective is to help students to acquire independence through their critical thinking, and this in turn will help them to reflect upon life and also to form their own opinions from different perspectives.

According to Behar-Horenstein and Niu (2011) the benefits are that "critical thinking helps students evaluate the arguments of others and their own and to resolve conflicts, and come to well-

reasoned resolutions to complex problems" (p. 25). In this study we have focused on the benefits of using novels as authentic texts to develop student-centered learning, since novels provide plot, characters , the context of settings all of which contribute to the engagement of the reader, regardless of specific proficiency levels, grammatical charts or writing exercises (Garies et al., 2009). Extensive reading not only motivates students but also increases their reading confidence. Literature lends itself to the integration of reading education and the development of other language skills.

The primary purpose of this study is to contribute to the development of a 'student's' perspective, which is, teaching the student to develop a particular attitude and to activate the student's knowledge through recall/review what is known about the topic. This study suggests that the language of the real world is richer, more varied, more authentic—and occupies more of the learner's waking hours—than that of the classroom.

In most educational systems, according to Paul (1990), students gain lower order learning which is associative, and rote memorization resulting in misunderstanding, prejudice, and discouragement in which students develop techniques for short term memorization and performance. These techniques block the students' thinking seriously about what they learn. The focus is on the integration of the language learner and the language learning context. We need to train learners to acquire information not only just within the learning context but also outside. Yet, as many researchers and teachers argue much of the teaching that goes on does little or nothing to shape the way in which the learner exploits this resource outside the school walls. But one cannot help noticing that all these activities are directed towards ensuring that language learners function more effectively in the instructional context. The goal is to ensure

better learning during the time that individuals are attending a course. According to Kumaravadivelu (2003a) "in a rapidly changing world where instant and informed decision making is a prerequisite for successful functioning, helping learners become autonomous is one way of maximizing their chances for being successful" (p. 131).

1.3. Research question

This study was designed to answer the following research question:

Is there a significant difference in reading proficiency between students in group A and group B following direct, explicit instruction in critical thinking skills?

2. Literature Review

Critical thinking skills require self-correction, monitoring to judge the reasonableness of thinking, and reflexivity. Behar-Horenstein and Niu (2011) believe that critical thinking is regarded as intellectually engaged, skillful and responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment. It quite definitely requires the application of assumptions, knowledge, competence and the ability to challenge one's own thinking

Glaser (1942), a psychologist, defined critical thinking as an attitude and logical application of skills in problem-solving contexts. Ennis (1962) defines the construct as a logical process and product-oriented phenomena, while characterizing it as the correct assessment of statements. Current conceptualizations suggest that critical thinking is a process of purposeful reflection that requires logic (Brookfield, 1987; Ennis, 1989; Paul, 1992; Sternberg, 1986, as cited in Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011). Critical thinking skills require self-correction, monitoring to judge the reasonableness of thinking, and reflexivity. When using critical thinking skills, individuals are capable of stepping back

and reflecting on the quality of that thinking. The idea of how the language will be used might influence one's perception and way of thinking has always been intriguing to scholars in philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and language learning.

2.1. Reading comprehension as a language acquisition skill

Effective teaching of reading comprehension necessitates an understanding and analysis of its nature and components, including both text and reader variables. Reading which is also interpreted as a passive skill is an important activity in any language class. It is a source of information and a pleasurable activity, and is also a means for extending one`s knowledge of language. The goal of reading is to read for meaning or recreate the writer`s meaning. By definition, reading involves comprehension. When readers are not comprehended, they are not reading. Since reading by definition signifies comprehension, the phrase 'reading processes' implies an active cognitive system operating on printed material to arrive at an understanding of the message.

Chastain (1988) claims that reading is sometimes erroneously called a passive skill because the reader does not produce messages in the same sense as a speaker or writer; reading nevertheless requires mental processing for communication to occur. Reading is a receptive skill in that the reader is receiving a message from a writer. Also referred to as a decoding skill, the terminology implies the idea of language as a code, one which must be deciphered to arrive at the meaning of the message.

2.2. Critical thinking and reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is assumed to be the ability to construct meaning and thinking before, during and after reading through integrating reader's background knowledge with the information presented by the author in the context. A variety of reading materials are available on a wide range of topics at different levels of linguistic difficulty; students choose what they want to read. They learn to read unassisted, and view reading as its own reward, providing benefits such as pleasure or new knowledge. Moreover, many students often read at a faster pace because they can choose materials of interest to them at an appropriate level of difficulty; and teachers become model readers, guiding the students rather than teaching them explicitly (Day & Bamford, 2002).

The L2 learner is constantly exposed to different types of texts which require them to be able to use reading as well as thinking skills simultaneously. In order to understand the text and facilitate the complex interaction between the text, setting, reader, and reader background the L2 reader has to be a critical thinker. In other words, they have to learn to value their own thinking, to compare their thinking and interpretations with others, to reexamine or reject the parts of the process in which they will learn to value not only their thinking and interpretations but also will compare them with others when it is necessary (Colin, 1993).

Much has been made in reading research in the past years of a possible dichotomy between two reading approaches. These two approaches are bottom-up (data-driven processing) and top-down (conceptually-driven processing) processes. As Alderson (2005) states, "bottom-up approaches are serial model where the readers begin with the printed words, recognize graphic stimuli, decode them to sounds, recognize words and decode meaning" (p.16). The second process in reading comprehension is called top-down process which derived its psychological influences from the Gestalt or holistic view of learning known as psychological theory. In top down theories, what the readers bring to text in terms of background knowledge and experience will

determine comprehension, not merely the text or words or letters (Goodman, 1986 as cited in Lally, 1998). In top-down processing a global meaning of text is obtained through clues in the text and also the readers` schematic knowledge (Berardo, 2006). This model of reading focuses on what the readers bring to the process. The readers sample the text for information then contrast it with their world knowledge; this will help them to make sense of what is written. Here, the focus is on the readers as they interact with the text. To fully understand a text and having this process facilitated, language learners need to master reading skill as a complex problem-solving activity.

2.3. Reading as an interactive process

Reading is also considered as an interactive process between the reader and the text. One of the recent approaches to reading in EFL/ESL is the 'Interactive Model', proposed by Eskey and Grabe (1988). In this model we have two types of interaction. One is 'interaction between the reader and the text', and the other is the 'interaction between *lower* and *higher* levels' of reading process. *Higher level* skills require more cognitive effort including reading between the lines to find the implicit information and understanding the writer's point of view and making interpretations. *Lower level* skills, are known as identification skills such as, recognizing words and sentences necessary for decoding and extracting explicit information. Fluent reading results from the simultaneous interaction and operation of these two skills. The fundamental concept is that the reader reconstructs the information available in the text based in part on the knowledge gained from the text and in part from the prior knowledge of the reader.

As an interactive process, reading acts as a conversation between the reader and the writer, so both bottom-up and top-down processes are necessary: top-down process is necessary for predicting meaning and bottom-up for checking it (Berardo, 2006). Readers rely on their prior knowledge and world experience when trying to comprehend a text. The organized knowledge that is accessed during reading is referred to as schema (plural schemata). Readers make use of their schema when they can relate what they already know about a topic, to facts and ideas appearing in a text. The richer the schema is for a given topic the better the reader will understand the topic. Studies developed in the field of reading reveal that reading is a more complex process in which the reader combines the textual information with his/her background knowledge and skills to recreate the writer's intended meaning. Perfetti (1984) defines reading as "thinking guided through print".

Understanding of a text is constrained by the perceptions of the topic. The reading process, therefore, involves identification of the text genre, formal structure and topic, all of which activate schemata and allow readers to comprehend the text. According to Glabe (1991, as cited in Phakiti, 2006) there are two levels of interactiveness in reading. The first is the reader's interaction with the text as an effort to construct meaning. In this interaction, the readers use both knowledge from the text and background knowledge that they have about the text. The second level is interactiveness that involves multiple simultaneous component skills ranging from automatic to strategic, like recognizing words rapidly and keeping them active in the working memory. The readers also analyze the structure of sentences to assemble the meaning and building a main idea of the text.

2.4. Reading proficiency and critical language awareness

Wallace (1992) maintains that the purpose of critical language awareness is to make language itself the object of critical scrutiny –both language as social practice and

language as social process, evidenced in the reading and writing of texts. In the course of learning about these social practices and processes learners are made aware of how language might be differently shaped to meet needs beyond those which are closest and most familiar to them. Practically speaking, in the classroom, this involves the provision of a wide range of text genres, frameworks for analysis and opportunities for talk around texts (as cited in Wallace, 2002). This means being aware of the placing and meaning of texts in a range of setting beyond the classroom. The text is necessarily recontextualized within the classroom and takes on cultural meaning by being brought into a pedagogic setting by students or teachers. Indeed the point of critical language study is to read texts in different ways, other than everyday readings (Wallace, 2002). Language is not only the means to be used to represent our understanding of the world around us, but it is also the agent that molds and shapes our conceptions in a way that finally results in a congruent cultural understanding and behaviors among its speakers (Khatib & Bahrami, 2012).

In terms of language teaching, using provocative and inferential questions to ameliorate students' critical thinking in the teaching of reading and writing is not uncommon. According to Locke and Cleary (2011), "all texts, using a range of linguistic devices, seek to position readers to view the world in a particular way. No reader is innocent either. Each brings to the act of reading a set of discursive lens, each of which will interact with the discursive designs of a text in a particular way, ranging from submission to resistance" (p.121).

3. Methodology
3.1. Participants
Eighty-eight adult female EFL university undergraduates served as subjects for this study. Since English was their major the students were all taking a course in Simple Prose. The only criterion for the assignment of subjects to the two groups was their major field (English Translation) and the above-mentioned course they were taking.

3.2. Instruments
At first, all the participants were given a Nelson Proficiency test. Based on the scoring standards of the NPT, those students whose scores fell between the mean and one standard deviation above the mean were selected for this study. 60 students were found eligible. Therefore, in each group there were about 30 students divided to two groups of A and B. Group A was the experimental group and Group B the control group. In addition to the main text, the two unabridged versions of Thomas hardy's novels, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" and "The Mayor of Casterbridge" were prescribed as texts for self-study illustrate how different genres of reading materials can be used to enhance the students' holistic outlook through English reading and writing.

3.3. Procedure
In the course for 'Simple Prose' students are familiarized with a number of text genres, and for this study two short stories one, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" and "The Mayor of Casterbridge" by Thomas Hardy was prescribed for both the groups. Both of the novels introduced to the students were unabridged versions. Students in Group A (experimental group) had undergone treatment regarding the critical analysis of texts through critical thinking. But students in Group B (control group) did not have any treatment.

Since the instructor wanted to base the course on the students' situation and understanding of the course (Shor, 1992), the students in (group A) were invited to pose questions about the readings which could help them to critically analyze aspects of texts such as ideas expressed or reported by the author and the way the passage had

been written. Students were literally taught '*how*' to think instead of the normal procedure of '*what*' to think. Students in both groups A and B were studying the main text "Patterns: A Short Prose Reader" by Mary Conlin Lou, for 'Simple Prose'. The whole spring semester was devoted to teaching the lessons whereby the students were given instructions and directions to comprehend the text they were studying. As Halvorsen (2005) suggests, "choosing topics appropriate to the interests of the students is essential. Most experienced teachers recognize that the more you know about the backgrounds and interests of your students the more appropriate and engaging your classes will become" (p.2).

Students in the experimental group not only read the different text genres they were also asked to annotate and discuss their ideas in the form of short 'Building-up vocabulary' exercises. Here students had to make very explicit connections to the gaps that may exist in the text. The students were not only encouraged to read critically but also to write down their ideas with the aim of expanding their vocabulary too. Each student was encouraged to choose one of the topics covered that week which proved to be more interesting to him/her, approach it in any way s/he preferred, and write a reflection on it. No particular order was followed for teaching the lessons. As already mentioned different topics based on different genres like, narration, description, exposition, argumentative etc., were selected and before each session started a briefing was given regarding the techniques used by the writer. In addition, notes on what is simple prose, style, techniques of writing and the elements of short story that was prepared by the instructor was given to the students as a self-study material for their final exams at the end of the semester. When critical thinking is internalized it can be applied to many other aspects of life (Barnett, 1997).

Students in Group A were asked to assess their performance in their writings and timely feedback from the instructor was provided mainly to motivate the students to voice their personal opinions and analyze writers' ideas in a critical manner. However, when necessary, the instructor also made a few comments on the linguistic aspects of the reflections. It should be noted that one cannot take it for granted that perceptions of a group of learners necessarily reflect the whole reality, especially given the fact that not all students shared the same understanding of the dynamics of the course.

Students in Group B did not undergo any treatment; therefore they dealt with the prescribed texts just as a text used for reading comprehension. They were not taught how to annotate or discuss or question any idea regarding the texts. After nearly seven weeks of direct instruction, a test was conducted for both the groups. The first novel that was tested was "Tess of the D'Urbervilles." The students had to answer the questions constructed for the text in 120 minutes. The final results obtained from the two groups were compared by conducting an independent t-test. Two raters (Assistant Professors in English literature) other than the instructor evaluated the tests.

After the first test was conducted with a break of nearly seven weeks in between participants from the two groups were administered the second test. This time they answered the questions within the same time limit of 120 minutes. The only difference was that this time the questions that were posed for the novel "The Mayor of Casterbridge" were slightly different. The difference was in the sense we aimed to follow the rules prescribed by the California Critical Thinking Skills. In other words students were exposed to short extracts of a few lines and they had to analyze, understand, guess the speaker, make

inferences, and finally give an explanation. The aim was to see to what extent development of critical thinking skills had been successful. The result of the second study was obtained by conducting an independent t-test.

4. Results

In order to answer the research question, an independent sample t-test was performed to compare the scores of the two groups A and B. The ratings of two raters and the instructor herself were taken into consideration. The results of the posttest (Table 1 and Table 2) successfully revealed that it is possible to activate students' critical thinking to deduce, analyze, comprehend and transfer ideas from the source domain to the target domain.

Table 1. *Results of the posttest—comparison of the means between the experimental and control groups after the treatment (Descriptive Statistics)*

Group Statistics

GROUP		N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error Mean
SCORE	A	30	14.8833	2.44749	.44685
	B	30	13.2333	2.13845	.39043

Results of independent T-test
Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95%Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
SCORE Equal variance assumed Equal variance not assumed	.532	.469	2.781 2.781	58 56.974	.007 .007	1.6500 1.6500	.59339 .59339	.46221 .46175	2.83779 2.83825

Table 2. *Results of second test: Independent Samples Test*

	Levene's Test for equality of variances		t-test for Equality of means					95% Confidence of Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.565	.455	5.510	58	.000	3.31833	.60226		
			5.510	56.839	.000	3.31833	.60226	2.11278	4.52388
Equal Variances not assumed								2.11226	4.52441

The results of the first independent samples t-test (Table 1) revealed that there was a significant difference in the scores for the two groups. In relation to the mean score differences, the results showed that the scores for group A (M=16.2, SD= 2.15) outperformed group B (M=12.8, SD=2.49). There was a significant difference in scores for the experimental and control groups [t (58) =2.781, p=0.007]. The magnitude of the differences in the means was almost large (eta squared= 0.11). Since the observed t value was higher than t-critical, the null hypothesis was safely rejected. The results of the two groups—experimental and control groups—revealed that instructed critical thinking skills have a significant effect not only in reading but also in the writing of the EFL learners.

The results of the second posttest (Table 2) successfully revealed that it is possible to activate students' cognition to deduce, comprehend and transfer ideas from the source domain to the target domain. The results of the experiment showed the observed t-value turned out to be p= 5.51 in the t-distribution table. The critical t-value for our selected level was 3.346 that is lower than the t-observed, which is 5.510, and the df was 58. Since the value of t-observed was higher than t-critical, the null hypothesis was safely rejected.

5. Discussions

The results of this study give us the evidence that EFL students are capable of handling their own learning provided they are given the means to do so. Comprehension is a constructive process, personalized by the ideas and thoughts of the individual readers. And ideas and thoughts cannot be taught; they can only be taught through personal connection. It was seen that improving the first can contribute to the improvement of the latter. The review of the literature (Bradford, 1987; Tsui, 2008; The Foundation for Critical Thinking,

n.d.) revealed that higher education, in particular, is now placing an overwhelming emphasis upon exposing matriculates to the concept of critical thinking and challenging them to develop those skills and dispositions necessary for improving the quality of their lives as individuals and members of a global community" (as cited in Crenshaw et al., 2011).

The statistical analysis of the two groups shows the significant difference that exists between them. Students in Group A had undergone special treatment regarding text analysis and oral discussions of different types of literary genres. The difference found in the test results regarding the analysis of the two novels showed that critical thinking as a learning strategy had a significant effect on the students' performance. According to Allegretti and Frederick (1995) "educators agree that it is essential that students develop such skills while engaged in academic learning because they enable students to engage in purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. Using critical thinking helps students evaluate the arguments of others and their own, resolve conflicts, and come to well-reasoned resolutions to complex problems" (as cited in Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011).

At the end of the study the retrospective verbal protocols administered as open-ended questions on how the participants felt about the tasks revealed that they were able to benefit from the reading materials and develop critical reading and writing abilities. After class interviews were used to help interpret the findings of the statistical analysis.

6. Pedagogical implications

Iranian students are not educated as critical thinkers in their first language educational system; therefore, providing them with an appropriate context to foster critical thinking dispositions in foreign language setting is of crucial importance. As

students do not display the elements of critical thinking or learner autonomy in language skills, it will be helpful to find out whether teaching these skills could help the students improve their reading proficiency.

This study will provide experts in the field of language teaching with information about the relationship between critical thinking and learners' performance on reading texts. A plural frame, which accepts a diversity of approaches, is the key to read against texts and reinterpret them: reading critically is the first step to reading the world critically. No doubt, the demands made by the society today necessitate the incorporation of critical thinking skills in the curriculum. The results of this study reveal that using language and knowing the meaning will not lead the learners to be proficient. Instead they need to display creative and critical thinking skills through the language to express and support their ideas creatively and critically. Giving students a critical thinking opportunity, for example, allowing them the time to pause, reflect on, analyze and discuss an issue in a context that supports and values critical thinking, is indeed the key to critical thinking education. Since teachers' beliefs and knowledge can guide instructional practices, it is essential to familiarize teachers with proposed curriculum objectives and innovative teaching and learning practices in order to help teachers implement them effectively (Waters & Vilches, 2001).

Davidson (1998) believes "critical thinking appears to be something more universally relevant than just a social practice. If some cultures differ in their present ability to appropriate the tools of critical thinking, it is probably only a difference in the degree to which critical thinking is tolerated in certain spheres of life"(p. 122).

7. Conclusion

Although we have focused here on aspects of classroom or pedagogical practice, critical pedagogy, according to Crookes and Lehner (1998) "should be seen as a social and educational process rather than just as a pedagogical method. It is more concerned about how language can effect personal and social change than it is with 'how to teach language' more effectively or in ways that simply encourage critical thinking on the part of teacher and students" (p. 327). With the help of their teachers and their peers, language learners can exploit some of these opportunities by identifying their learning strategies and styles to know their strengths and weaknesses.

Touching upon both the cognitive as well as affective domain the results of this study show that students can incorporate some of those strategies and styles employed by successful language learners. They can also learn to evaluate their language performance to see how well they have achieved their learning objective(s) and this can be achieved by monitoring their language learning progress by reaching out for opportunities for additional language reception or production beyond what they get in the classroom. By seeking their teachers' intervention to get adequate feedback on areas of difficulty and to solve problems they can also learn by collaborating with other learners and take advantage of opportunities to communicate with competent speakers of the language.

Last but not the least it must be added that this was a small scale study. There are some limitations and shortcomings which have to be attributed to different learning settings and learning opportunities. Instruction in critical thinking has been shown to improve this ability within students, but this has generally been accomplished in a discipline or course specific fashion. However, research has demonstrated that students can be taught critical thinking outside a specific discipline. Further, students can transfer skills in critical thinking across disciplines.

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