

The Diverse Aims of Second Language Teaching: Implications for New Zealand Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses complex issues surrounding second language teaching and learning and relates them to the introduction of second language teaching in New Zealand primary schools. After considering the recent trend in many countries to introduce second languages to increasingly younger learners, a review is made of dominant paradigms of second language teaching: grammar-translation, the direct method, audiolingualism, the natural approach, and communicative language teaching. Each of these provides valuable insights for teaching aims and methodology, but no one approach or method by itself can meet the perceived needs of all language learners. A range of possible goals is suggested in terms of various competencies: linguistic, communicative, and intercultural. Factors constraining the effective introduction of second language teaching in New Zealand primary schools are briefly outlined and explained. The paper concludes with the need to decide appropriate educational goals at a local level, according to the selection of target language/s and in the light of the opportunities and constraints of each specific context of learning.

KEYWORDS: second language teaching; young learners; primary schools; New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

There has been a resurgence of professional and academic interest in the systematic introduction of second language teaching (SLT) in the primary sector following the perceived success of the \$4.8 million Second Language Learning Project (Peddie, 2003). This has been manifest in the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Stocktake Report, which recommends that within the next five years all schools should provide SLT in Years 7-10 (Ministry of Education, 2002, recommendation 19). In this respect, this country is following a trend across the world for the early introduction of second language teaching since the mid-1960s, when, for example, French began to be widely taught in primary schools in England (and then largely abandoned). In 1989, thirteen countries in the European Union considered teaching English in the primary school a national priority, and many large-scale projects were carried out (Brewster & Ellis, 2002, p.2). Decisions have since been made in more and more countries to introduce a second language to ever younger children; for example, the following countries introduced SLT

to pupils starting school at the age of 6 or 7 years: Norway (English) in 1997, Bulgaria (German) in 1998, and the German state of Baden-Württemberg (English or French) in 2004. The Ministries of Education in Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and the People's Republic of China have all recently decided that English should be taught in primary schools. All this is despite the fact that there has been no significant empirical evidence to refute the findings from early longitudinal studies (Burstall, 1970; Burstall, Jamieson, Cohen & Hargreaves, 1974) that the introduction of French in English primary schools was neither cost-efficient nor particularly effective. More recently, a review of many comparative studies of early and late SLT beginners in European schools (Blondin, Candelier, Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek-German & Taeschner, 1998) concluded that an early start to SLT is not necessarily an advantage, especially when delivered extensively—that is, in three or four lessons a week over two or three school years.

Over the past thirty years, it has consistently been argued (Brewster, 2001; Girard, 1974; Kubanek-German, 1998; Singleton, 1989; Singleton & Lengyel, 1995) that unless a primary SLT policy is supported by high-quality materials, appropriately trained teachers and favourable public attitudes, the experience may be negative and the effects counter-productive. Governments have consistently failed to provide this support, or even to consider the possible impact of the introduction of primary level SLT on the secondary sector where, typically, the curriculum remains unchanged. Even more importantly, there is a lack of clarity about precisely why it is important for young children to learn another language, and what the aims and purposes of SLT might, or should, be.

It should be obvious—although it is not fully appreciated by many policy makers—that any SLT curriculum should begin with a precise statement of what the overall goal of that programme should be. Various aims for SLT will be considered later in this article, and then related to primary school contexts in New Zealand. Before that, however, there will be a brief review of the five paradigms that dominated SLT in the 20th century, all of which still influence second language classrooms across the world. The point will be made that each of these paradigms provides alternative pedagogic goals and methodologies, and each provides insights for language teachers in the 21st century. However, none of them can provide a blueprint for successful language learning for all contexts, especially when considering the needs of young learners in school settings.

PARADIGMS, METHODS AND APPROACHES

The earliest paradigm, *grammar-translation*, derived from the traditional way by which classical languages (Greek and Latin) were taught using texts of literary value to explain the rules of grammar and the meaning of vocabulary. Instruction was in the learners' first language, and there was no intention to enhance their second language speaking or listening skills; more attention was paid to the aim of developing the learners' mental discipline and intellectual skills. While this approach has been disparaged by applied linguists (such as Stern, 1983), not least because it lacks an explicit theoretical basis, it is still prevalent across the world in many SLT contexts.

The next paradigm, the *direct method* (also known as the natural method, or the Berlitz method) was developed in strong reaction to the earlier SLT focus on written language. Proponents of this method argue that the spoken language is primary and that therefore the aim of language teaching, and its methodology, should focus on developing students' speaking and listening skills towards native-speaker-like competence. Vocabulary should be presented by demonstration, realia, and pictures—and certainly not by translation; oral skills should be developed in a carefully graded progression, grammar points should be taught subsequently, and inductively. Only the target language should be used by teacher and students; the use of students' own language is forbidden. Like Grammar-Translation, the Direct Method is still very influential, notably in those private language schools which make it a key selling point that their teachers are native speakers of the target language, and who are thereby presumed to be the most effective teachers of the language. It also explains preferential recruitment and status of such teachers in other institutions. So powerful and insidious is the idea of native speaker competence that the linguistic knowledge, cultural awareness and pedagogical skills of the vast majority of 'non native speaking' teachers across the world have been heavily discounted (Cook, 1998; Rampton, 1990; Widdowson, 2003).

The third paradigm, *audiolingualism* (AL), is firmly rooted in a structuralist theory of language (Bloomfield, 1933) and a behaviourist theory of language learning (Skinner, 1957). In this case, language is seen as a set of interlocking structural and phonological patterns that can be learnt by forming good language habits through stimulus-response mechanisms. The role of the teacher (in person or indirectly, such as by recorded dialogues) is to provide clear and accurate input models of language structures and to activate strictly controlled practice. The point of this practice is for the learners to manipulate the target structures, for example by drills and other mechanical exercises (Mackey, 1965), and produce error-free sentences. The aims and methods of Audiolingualism are still widely applied, not least in terms of the dominance of structurally-based syllabuses and the need for the rigorous correction and elimination of errors. This is despite the criticisms of many applied linguists (for example, Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983; Howatt, 1984; Rivers, 1964) that AL is ineffective in its outcomes and somewhat dehumanising in its methodology. A particularly strong reaction to this paradigm came from Stephen Krashen, who argued (1982) that any emphasis on the explicit teaching of grammar was both unnecessary and counter-productive. He based his thinking on Chomsky's notion of an innate language acquisition device (LAD), which triggers first language acquisition.

The fourth paradigm, the *Natural Approach* (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), extended the metaphor of the LAD from first to second language acquisition and argued that teachers should provide learners with meaningful messages through comprehensible input, that is, subject matter content embodied in language just above the learners' existing level of linguistic competence. If this were done, and if the learners were free from stress, threat, or anxiety (which Krashen referred to as a "low affective filter") second language acquisition would be not only inevitable but also unavoidable (Krashen, 1985, pp. 1-15). Krashen's influence has been very strong, especially in North American

SLT contexts, where teachers welcomed release from the limited goals and methodological strictures of audiolingualism. There have been many criticisms of the natural approach: that the research upon which the model is based is flawed (Gregg, 1984); that second language learning is fundamentally different from first language acquisition (Bley-Vroman, 1988); that an explicit focus on grammar *can* facilitate language learning (Pienemann, 1989); that comprehension is not the same as acquisition (Ellis, 1992); and that the methods proposed by Krashen and Terrell are culturally insensitive (Cook, 2003). Despite these criticisms, the Natural Approach has intuitive appeal and many SLT teachers have thrown out the grammatical baby with the bathwater to such an extent that many learners have no explicit knowledge whatsoever of the organisational features of the target language.

While Krashen has argued that the aim of his approach is communicative, it is essentially a psycholinguistic approach based on the triggering of innate cognitive and linguistic mechanisms. By contrast, the fifth and currently most powerful paradigm, *communicative language teaching* (CLT), was developed with a primarily social focus. CLT is based on the seminal sociolinguistic insights of Hymes (1971) and the assumption that comprehensible output is as necessary for second language acquisition as comprehensible input (Swain, 1985; 2000). The essential aim of CLT is to learn the language by using it to communicate, not merely to understand rules and vocabulary (grammar-translation), or to attain native-like pronunciation (the direct method), or to memorise and repeat structural patterns (audiolingualism) or to comprehend input (the natural approach). Thus, there is an emphasis in CLT classrooms on communicating messages between, and negotiating meaning among, learners. The primary role of the teacher is to facilitate, provide resources for, and participate in such activities (Breen & Candlin, 1980). So great has been the appeal of CLT that it has now achieved the status of an orthodoxy—among lay people, SLT methodologists among lay people, SLT methodologists and coursebook writers (for example, Richards, 1997), and educational policy makers at all levels. However, it has also been critiqued by applied linguists both generally (Cook, 2003; Holliday, 1994; Swan, 1985a and b) and in specific national contexts such as Vietnam (Ellis, 1996), Korea (Kim, in press) and Japan (Hasegawa, in press). There is increasing recognition (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Kaikonen, 2001; Kramsch, 1993) of the need for SLT methodology to be culturally responsive, so that learners can acquire a sense of intercultural awareness.

So far, the discussion of SLT has been in terms of paradigms, and the use of the word is valid in two senses: firstly, in that each of the five paradigms presents a largely coherent and distinct set of assumptions about the nature of language and the processes involved in language learning; secondly, there is a sense that a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) occurs as the proponents of each paradigm implicitly or explicitly claim the need for a fundamental change in the philosophy and practice of language teaching because of important deficiencies in previous models. It should be clear from the above review that SLT is a dynamic profession, and that ideas about how teaching might be made more effective have developed dialectically as proponents expand or rebut claims of the other paradigms, and offer alternative insights for consideration and experimentation. The

implementation of these insights in language classrooms allows further refinement, synthesis, or antithesis.

However, it may now be more useful to refer to the distinction first formulated by Anthony (1963) between an *approach* and a *method*. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), a method refers to a specific instructional design based on particular theories of language and of language learning. In any method, the following are closely specified, even prescribed: the linguistic content and the sequencing of the syllabus, the roles of teacher and learners, classroom techniques, and assessment procedures. Audiolingualism clearly falls into this category. The corollary of prescription is that there are areas that are proscribed, forbidden. Thus, the need to avoid errors in AL leads to the prohibition of any creative use of language by learners, as this is conducive to making errors. Likewise, the insistence in AL and the direct method of the exclusive use of the target language prevents meaningful explanations in the learners' first language. An approach, by contrast, is based not so much on tightly constructed theories as on a set of underlying beliefs and principles about language learning. Rather than providing a detailed prescription of what should be done, much is left to the individual teacher's interpretation, skill and expertise. Grammar-translation and CLT fall into this category, as they leave much more room for the teacher's interpretation and flexibility. (According to this distinction, the natural approach can, despite its name, be viewed more as a method than an approach.)

Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Brown (2002) consider that the present time in SLT is a post-methods era. By this they mean that it is inappropriate to think of the process of language teaching as the adoption of a one size fits all method that will suit every language learner, and language teacher, irrespective of personal factors and the specific contexts in which learning and teaching occur. They support their view by emphasising that there is no empirical evidence to support the superiority of any one method (or approach) over another. Indeed, rather than being based on actual pedagogical experience, methods are derived top down from linguistic theories which often bear little relationship to the social and psychological reality of classroom learning. They also point out that, while methods are usually clearly distinguishable in the elementary phases of learning, they tend to lose their individuality in later stages. They argue, too, that prescriptive methods tend to be ethnocentric, and may lead to a form of cultural and pedagogical imperialism. The same point is made by writers such as Peirce (1989), Pennycook (1989) and Phillipson (1992) as regards the unreflective adoption in many foreign language contexts of Anglo-Saxon assumptions and norms underlying communicative language teaching. Brown (2002) suggests that teachers should adopt an eclectic, but principled, approach to SLT that would allow them to focus on their own particular learners and on the specific context in which the teaching and learning take place.

SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING GOALS

With regard to the specific context of SLT in New Zealand schools, in order for second language teachers to consider what might be an appropriately eclectic approach to adopt with their learners, it is necessary for clear and achievable goals to be established. Only when the aims can be clearly identified, and agreed upon, can important curricular decisions be made regarding the syllabus, materials, methodology and assessment of learning. The above consideration of paradigms, approaches and methods suggests a number of possible goals for second language teaching in New Zealand: these include linguistic, communicative, and intercultural competence. Each will be briefly discussed in turn.

Linguistic competence

One of the goals of second language teaching may be to develop the linguistic competence of the learners: that is, the knowledge of how the target language works—its linguistic organisation. If this is an appropriate aim, learners' attention needs to be focused on the formal features of the language: its patterns of phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse. They need to be able to match the form of an utterance, sentence, or message with its meaning. They need to realise that there is rarely a close one-to-one matching of form with meaning, and so they should learn to cope with linguistic uncertainty. They will need to experiment with the grammar and vocabulary of the target language, making use of contextual clues in order to formulate and test their own hypotheses about how the target language works. Thus, they will need to make intelligent and creative guesses about the language, not least by comparing and contrasting the target language with their own. While there may be some theoretical doubt about the ability of primary age children to focus on form, there is sufficient empirical research to indicate that even very young children can and do play with both the form and the meaning of a second language to assist their language learning (Gibbons, 1998; Lantolf, 1997; Poole, 1992; Saville-Troike, 1988; Willett, 1995). A focus on linguistic form (Doughty & Williams, 1999; Fotos, 1987) and consciousness-raising activities (Ellis, 1992; Rutherford, 1987) also help learners to reflect on the way that their *first* language works.

Communicative competence

A second goal of second language learning could be the development of the learners' ability to use the target language appropriately (as well as reasonably accurately) to communicate meaningful messages according to the social context. Thus learners would need to be aware, not only of the vocabulary of the topic, but also of the functions for which the language is to be used, the relevance of the setting (time and place) to the communication, and the importance of the relationship between the interlocutors. These factors influence the style and organisation of the language used in communication, and learners need therefore to have a sense of audience awareness, not only in spoken messages (especially as regards intonation) but also in formal and informal written communication. This latter is increasingly important as so much written communication

nowadays occurs electronically. In order to be communicatively competent, learners need to develop the self-confidence necessary to cope with the chaos inherent in human communication; they also need to lower inhibitions and develop a willingness to take social risks. As Hasegawa (in press) has pointed out, these skills are not easy to develop in typical school contexts, where only a few hours a week are devoted to SLT. Kim (in press) has pointed to the need for, and general lack of, communicative competence among those teachers who are not first language users of the target language. Crucially, they also need opportunities to use the language communicatively in real life situations, beyond the confines of a classroom. If these affordances are not possible in primary school contexts, serious questions arise as to the feasibility of developing communicative competence in a second language.

Intercultural competence

A third goal of SLT might be to assist the learners to grow out of their “cultural shell” (Kaikonen, 2001) which—while possibly protecting them from culture shock—tends to constrict their intercultural development. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), this involves several things. Firstly, it may mean the ability of the learner to explore and discuss aspects of their first culture through the second language; in communicative terms, this may mean the ability to take part in meaningful interaction with overseas visitors and tourists. A second aspect of intercultural competence is to become aware of the habits, attitudes and values of people who live in countries where the language is spoken—the target culture. A third dimension of intercultural competence is that of international communities who use a second language for professional or academic purposes. Such intercultural understanding not only opens windows on the outside world but also leads to the ability to view one’s own culture through the prism of another language. Finally, there is the culture of learning itself—the dialogue between learners and teacher and the instructional materials and technology which mediate that dialogue. An intercultural classroom should embrace the sociocultural and communicative norms of the target culture, which includes issues such as what topics may be discussed, for what purposes, by whom, and in which settings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN NEW ZEALAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS

It is hoped that the above points have made it clear that it is essential to choose appropriate and achievable aims for second language teaching. None of the goals suggested are incompatible with the others, but the more that are attempted the greater will be the demands on resources of time, expertise, and money in order to ensure that they can be achieved. Much depends on the choice of language to be taught, the availability of competent teachers, the starting age of the learners, and the anticipated duration of the programme. While all national education systems have to identify their

primary objectives in the light of these matters, the SLT situation in New Zealand is more complicated than elsewhere because of three interconnected factors.

In the first place, unlike most national education systems, the study of a second language is not compulsory in New Zealand schools, and only recently (as indicated in the introduction) has the Ministry of Education obliged schools to offer instruction in languages other than Māori and English as the eighth essential learning area. More than this, the Ministry has indicated that all languages in New Zealand are to be treasured and offered by schools. Secondly, therefore, many languages are competing for the limited available resources. Since 1995, the Ministry of Education has introduced curriculum documents for the following languages: Chinese, Spanish, Samoan, Japanese, German, Korean, French, Cook Island Maori, Tongan, Niuean, Tokelauan, and New Zealand Sign Language. The third factor, consequent upon the two above, is the low take up and retention rates, making the annual cost per SLT student extremely high. The plethora of options has been accompanied by a reduction in the numbers of students studying second languages. For example, two years after the introduction of the Chinese curriculum statement in 1995:

the take-up rate for Chinese was only 0.4% of the secondary school population. That represented 948 students spread over five years of schooling in thirty four different schools, an average of fewer than six pupils per school year in each school. (Johnson, 2000, p. 86).

According to Peddie (2003, p. 24) only 24.5% of the nation's high school population of just over 200,000 studied a second language. Such a low take-up rate is compounded by low retention. Half of the students reported by Peddie were taking short courses in Year 9, and Johnson (2000, p. 521) gave average retention rates in high schools as follows: French 7.5%; Japanese 14.5%; German 14%. The take-up of SLT in primary schools is even more limited: Peddie (in press) reports that just under 17% of all New Zealand primary students study a second language, 84% of whom are in Years 7-8, and only 3% receive more than 30 hours a year. Given this situation, it is difficult for secondary schools to effectively plan for, and implement, follow-up language programmes.

Various reasons can be adduced for these limited take up and retention rates. One may be that New Zealand is still, as Janet Holmes declared several years ago, a "determinedly monolingual country" (Holmes, 1990, p. 19), unwilling to accept the need for bilingual education for the majority of students. Peddie (2003, p. 14) cites census data that suggest that over 80% of the population is monolingual in English. Secondly, the proliferation of SLT curriculum documents has led to a lack of clarity about objectives, standards, and proficiency levels. For example, there is no common framework, as there now is in European schools, to compare achievement standards across second languages. A third reason is that school curricula are already heavily loaded, and the addition of the eighth essential learning area makes syllabuses, especially those in primary schools, overcrowded. There is also a major problem of teacher supply. Johnson (2000, pp. 84-85) has pointed to the fact that many schools in remote areas find it difficult to recruit

language teachers. Indeed, there is a shortage of competent language teachers throughout the country. Evidence of this may be adduced from the diminishing number of students graduating from New Zealand universities majoring in a second language: according to Johnson (2000, p. 522), “whereas 6% of all New Zealand graduates completed their degrees with a major in an international language in 1970, only 3.18% did so in 1997”. Moreover, she also reports that it is very difficult to establish the actual or relative linguistic competence of students graduating from language departments in universities: “each university is free to establish its own concept of what constitutes progress, achievement and proficiency” (Johnson, 2000, p. 247). One possible source of language teachers is among the immigrant communities, but according to Shameem (2003, p. 229), there have been too few opportunities or resources provided for overseas-qualified teachers to work in New Zealand schools or to receive appropriate training to facilitate their entry to the workplace. Among existing language teachers, there is little in-service professional development: even in the government-funded Second Language Learning Project reported by Peddie, Gunn, and Lewis (1999, p. 52) almost 60% reported that no professional development took place in their schools to facilitate the project.

Given the above circumstances, and the lack of evidence for successful SLT programmes for your learners, it may be thought that an attempt systematically to introduce second languages in New Zealand’s primary schools is futile. However, the government is committed to its policy—at least for the next few years—and if it is to be effective, that commitment needs to be backed up with clear policies and sufficient resources. A major policy issue that needs to be resolved is the decision as to which language/s to offer. A simple distinction might be made between those languages used in the community (for example, Samoan and Tongan) and international languages which are not (such as German, Japanese, or French). However, such is the diversity of the nation’s linguistic heritage that this distinction can no longer be easily taken for granted. An obvious case is Chinese: the number of ethnic Chinese among New Zealand’s resident population is over 100,000; the numbers of Korean and Japanese are also growing, as are speakers of other languages (Peddie, 2003, p. 10).

One way forward is to devolve the major responsibility for the choice of second language/s to the school principals and boards of trustees, with advice from regional language advisers, experienced second language teachers, and other competent authorities. Based upon local needs and resources, schools can decide which second language/s to offer and, thereafter, what the goals of these programmes should be.

It may be decided to introduce an international language, such as German or Spanish, perhaps because there is no relevant community language widely used locally. In this case, a goal of communicative competence would almost certainly be unrealistic, given the number of instructional hours that would be available and the lack of opportunities to practise the language outside the classroom, not to mention the current dearth of communicatively competent and well qualified teachers of such languages. Rather than set an unattainable goal, it would be better to aim for a limited measure of linguistic and intercultural competence; the former would provide young learners with a basic conceptual framework for future study, while intercultural sensitivity could be

developed through the interactive use of attractive and socioculturally relevant media, especially the electronic resources increasingly available online. The exclusive use, or even a dominant use, of the target language is not necessary for a limited attainment of linguistic and intercultural competence.

On the other hand a school may decide, on the basis of the local wishes, needs, and resources, to introduce a language such as Samoan or Tongan or another language used in the specific community such as Chinese or Korean. In this case, the aim of communicative competence is not unachievable, given the real opportunities for learners to use the language beyond the classroom—and the availability of teachers who speak these languages and/or bilingual members of the community who could be trained to teach them. The intercultural competence of those learners who are not already members of the linguistic community can be developed through structured (and, it may be hoped, eventually spontaneous) contact with the local community. In these circumstances, formal linguistic competence could be deferred until a later stage of learning, when the experiential foundation formed by immediate contact with users of the target language can be built upon.

The decision about whichever of these languages is to be introduced at a local level should be informed by broader educational principles than the attempt to achieve various degrees of linguistic, communicative, or intercultural competence. For example, the aim of linguistic competence, especially if it is combined with consciousness-raising strategies, should raise learners' awareness of how language in general operates. This is itself an entirely valid goal for second language learners, not least because it enables learners to reflect on the way that their first language is structured. With regard to communicative competence, it might be pointed out that developing an awareness of the communication norms of a second language should enhance the learners' appreciation of those in their first language, thus serving a more general educational goal. Thirdly, the second language classroom should, by the way that it operates, facilitate learners to bridge the cultural, as well as linguistic, distance between their own and the target communities, and make them more sharply aware of the particularity of their own first language and culture. An ecological (van Lier, 1996) or holistic (Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikonnen, & Lehtovaaran, 2001) perspective on SLT places language learning in a broader context than is allowed by much applied linguistics theory, research, and pedagogical paradigms: key sociocultural factors inform each learner's receptivity to, or defensiveness against, the learning of a second language (Stevick, 1999). An implication is that the language-learning programme should help learners extend their existing abilities in cognitive, affective, social, and aesthetic domains to a higher potential level of development. Thus, the second language teacher in schools is, like any other, primarily an educator of young people rather than a mere language instructor.

CONCLUSION

It should be apparent from the above that it is unrealistic to attempt the same goals for second language teaching throughout the nation's primary schools. In addition to

sociocultural variables, linguistic factors (such as the relative distance between the first and target language) will mean that the specific objectives for teaching, and reasonable attainment levels in learning, will be very different for Japanese, French, and Samoan. It follows that all other curricular decisions will also differ, including the syllabus, materials, methodology and the criteria and means of assessment. Decisions in these matters cannot be imposed by the Ministry of Education, although sound guidelines should be provided for, and in response to, local needs and initiatives. The Ministry also needs to consider fully the issue of teacher supply, and make provision for the recruitment of linguistically competent teachers, including native speakers of relevant second languages. A further corollary is that the preparation and professional development of language teachers in this post-methods era must extend well beyond training them to implement specific methods to achieve predetermined goals. Rather, they must be fully informed of the diversity of possible aims of second language teaching, and educated to make heuristic curricular decisions based on the needs and resources of their learners, and the opportunities and constraints presented by the context in which they work.

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