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INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACHING COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH FOR UNDERGRADUATE ENGINEERING STUDENTS-A CASE STUDY FROM THE EASTERN INDIAN STATE OF ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of the teacher and the design of modules of the English Lab in the teaching of English communication skills to undergraduate engineering students.

Design/methodology/approach- The study used a questionnaire with 68 participants who had completed their undergraduate courses from the university and then enrolled in the management programs of another university.

Findings- The lab classes are not standardised, the activities and exercises do no develop communication, and a significant number find the classes boring. A high number of respondents neither agree nor disagree that the facilitator provided regular feedback and guidance or provided support by demonstration.

Originality/Value- It provides one of the first empirical studies in India and eastern India using the construct of lab module design and facilitator effectiveness.

Social Implication- There is a skill gap between engineering students who come from vernacular mediums of instruction and their classmates who have studied from English medium schools. When these students are unable to communicate in English or complete the tasks in the Lab, they are demotivated and stop making attempts to learn the language.

KEYWORDS: ***C****ommunication, Engineering, English Lab Design, Facilitator Effectiveness, Communicative English.*

INTRODUCTION

Ballinger (2017) mentioned that in the current scenario, an engineer needs to possess strong communication skills; it is the biggest determiner of success in the modern engineer's professional career. However, according to a World Bank report, the study finds that there is dissatisfaction among employers concerning the quality of Engineering graduates, many of whom do not possess soft skills such as reliability, ability to work in a team, and communication skills, which they consider as critically important.

This skill mismatch is a problem in all countries where students are not native speakers of English. In a developing economy like India, communication skills are an essential aspect of graduate employability (Blom and Saeki, 2011), for performing successfully on the job (Conrad and Newberry, 2011), and achievement in the organization (Duke, 2011).

In many countries, students pursue technical courses like mechanical engineering, civil engineering, architecture but the communication course (Business English) is not given as much importance as the technical subjects. At the end of their studies, when recruitment happens, students find it extremely difficult to communicate in English and also to present their technical knowledge.

Non-technical skills such as oral and written communication, apply to virtually all I.T. jobs (Cappel, 2002) and a key feature is the ability to give and receive feedback, speak publicly, participate in meetings and communicate with each other in an effective manner (Jackson and Chapman, 2012). Communication skills are, therefore, critical tools for success and survival, in real-world environments because scientists and engineers may be technically brilliant and creative. However, unless they can convince coworkers, clients, and supervisors of their worth, their technical skills will be not be noticed, appreciated, or used (Huckin et al. .1991).

According to Dearing (1997), communication skills are the foremost among the four essential skills to be developed at the undergraduate level, apart from arithmetic, I.T., and willingness to learn. Kiran Karnik, the chief of the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM), around the time the first batch of students of the university were appearing for recruitment quoted the **NASSCOM-McKinsey Report 2005** and said that only 25 per cent of technical graduates were employable. Six years later in 2012, Karnik, now a Member of Scientific Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, noted that India's educational system was traditional, and said "the communication skills of our students, even the bright ones are not adequate. We felt that it would be worthwhile to examine whether the situation has improved after eight years of Karnik's comment, or it is still the same.

The National Employability Report Engineers, 2019 based on a sample of more than 170,000 engineering students from 750+ engineering colleges across multiple Indian states, stated that the past nine years had brought no change in the employability of Indian engineering graduates. English proficiency is a critical parameter right at the time of entry-level hiring for I.T. service companies, which is the largest employer in engineering. Almost all the job roles require above average communication skills, and engineering students have found it a challenge to remain competitive in the job market without a focus on English. The lab course plays a vital role in building communication skills, but to the best of our knowledge, there has been no study done. The purpose of this study aims to fill the gap by examining why the impact of the Lab is minimal.

Additionally, while interacting with teachers, students and former students of the university, we noticed that a significant number of students did not take the lab classes very seriously and did not regularly attend even though they were not comfortable in communicating in English. Lacking this skill thus prevents them from presenting their domain knowledge, affects their chances for recruitment and even hampers their chances of pursuing higher studies abroad. The study was to investigate the effectiveness of the teacher and the design of modules of the English Lab in the teaching of communication skills to undergraduate engineers. We set out to identify the reason for which the English lab classes were not taken seriously and to understand whether it was the teachers who were to blame for the students' disinterest or the lab modules were not well designed. We identified a batch of students who were graduates of the university and enrolled in the MBA programs of a reputed university, several of whom had work experience and shared the questionnaire with them.

MAIN BODY

A Review of the Situation

Engineering students in Odisha, are generally a heterogeneous mix of domiciled (from Odisha) and non-domiciled (other states) youngsters. The non-domiciled students are mostly from Hindi speaking belts and typically have a regional dialect (L1) as their mother tongue, Hindi as their second language (L2) and English as their third language (L3). Most of the students in Odisha have Odiya (L1) as their mother tongue, Hindi, as the second language (L2) and English as the third language (L3). However, in Odisha for all professional and academic purpose, English functions as a second language, thus creating a peculiar situation where there is a sparingly used L2.

Odisha has a culture where people prefer vernacular as a means of communication. This culture created its own set of problems with people being reluctant to speak in English, as well as the national language (Hindi). A large number of students are first-generation learners from tribal belts or small towns and have had limited scope to converse in English. Most students were either educated in the vernacular or did not have access to an English medium education owing to financial problems. A vast majority lack the most rudimentary language skills yet aspire to become engineers. These students are at a disadvantage, when their classmates who have had the benefit of English medium education, excel. The lack of language skills serves to demotivate them. Thus the course only widens the skills gap further and does not cater to their needs. Unfortunately, these students are left to fend for themselves when it comes to overcoming their fear of English. The 'swim or sink' approach by the teachers of communicative English does not help in any way. When the students find that they cannot keep up with their classmates, they become demotivated and stay away from the English Lab and classes. With the rising cost of education, there is a moral and ethical issue attached to this entire situation, especially for those who come from families with economic constraints. Being proficient in speaking in English has never been a criterion for admission, and this has also caused many problems. It seems likely that students believe that their communication skills will be polished up, so they took admission into the course. The aspirations of a great future, a job in the industry, and excellent career prospects are enough for them to shoulder the burden of a student loan. When the student is unable to develop oral communication skills, it is demotivating and sometimes impacts overall performance. Not landing a recruitment offer also increases the mental strain and the financial burden is very difficult to handle. It is, therefore, imperative to develop oral communication skills.

Earlier' Communicative English' was taught in the first semester, and the second semester but, the current course has Communicative English in the first semester and a Business Communication course in the sixth semester. A student typically uses his regional dialect to interact with friends and classmates, so the only time that a student speaks in English is during the English Lab. Bright and McGregor (1978) opine that the development of any skill can be achieved only through practice. As no structure exists between semesters to practice or develop communication, the students stop learning. Anders Ericsson, along with Herbert Simon and Bill Chase, validated the Ten-Year Rule, which says that expertise in any domain requires roughly a decade of committed practice. (Coyle, D., the Talent Code, 2009). Even though many of its students are not comfortable with speaking in English, the university currently offers only two semesters spread across three years, which limits the opportunities to learn and develop oral communication.

Research Design and Methods

We conducted a questionnaire-based survey to collect data from former students of the university. The sample consisted of 68 respondents, after removing the unusable, incomplete and outlier cases. We developed a scale to measure facilitator effectiveness and the design of the English Lab

modules. We measured facilitator effectiveness with a self-developed seven-item scale. We used a 5-point Likert scale with anchors that ranged from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale reliability is .86.

The role of lab class design was measured with a self-developed seven-item scale with a 5-point Likert scale with anchors that ranged from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale reliability is .70.

A self-developed nine-item scale measured the overall satisfaction with the course. We used a 5-point Likert scale with anchors that ranged from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale reliability is .72.

Method

Participants and Procedure:

Measures:

The facilitator effectiveness: was measured with the self-developed seven-item scale. A 5-point Likert scale, ranging from*strongly disagree=1* to *strongly agree=5* measured the items. Sample item includes: "The facilitator presented clearly to assist my understanding before having an activity", "The facilitator promoted adequate participation". The scale reliability is. 86.

Role of lab class design: was measured with the self-developed six items scale—a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from*strongly disagree=1* to *strongly agree=5. Sample item includes: "*The classes did not have a logical sequence", "The activities and exercises did not develop oral communication skills". The scale reliability is .70.

A self-developed nine items scale measured overall satisfaction with the course and a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from*strongly disagree=1* to *strongly agree=5 measured the items. Sample item includes: "the course helped me develop my communication skills, my overall satisfaction with the module". The scale reliability is .72.*

Results

TABLE 1: THE FREQUENCY TABLE FOR FACILITATOR EFFECTIVENESS (REPORTING THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE IN EACH VARIABLE)

	Variables	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	The teacher presented clearly to assist in my understanding before having an activity.				54	
2	The teacher explained the concepts using relevant examples.				58	
3	The facilitator promoted adequate participation.				68	
4	The teacher was able to clarify my doubts.				80	

5	The teacher provided regular feedback and guidance.			72		
6	The teacher provided support by demonstrating how to speak/pronounce.			75		
7	The teacher was actively involved in the class for the duration and was not desk-bound.				62	

54% of the students agree that the facilitator presented clearly before having any activity, explained the concept 58%, promoted adequate participation 68%, able to clarify the doubts of the students 80%, and actively involved and was not desk-bound 62%.

In case of the facilitators providing regular feedback and guidance 72%, neither agree nor disagree, and a very high number (the highest percentage 75%) neither agree nor disagree that facilitators provide support by demonstrating how to speak or pronounce.

TABLE 2 ROLE OF LAB CLASS DESIGN IN THE COMMUNICATION COURSE

	Variables	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neither disagree nor Agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
1	The classes did not have a logical sequence.			33	43	
2	The activities and games that were part of the class were not relevant to the development of oral communication.			21	58	
3	The activities and exercises did not develop oral communication skills.				58	32
4	Too much time was spent on preparing for the activity, and too little time was allotted for speech.			30	78	
5	The Lab was boring, and learning was minimal.			22	62	
6	The lab classes are not standardised, and each teacher teaches what he/she thinks is essential.			21	68	

43% of the student did not have a logical sequence followed by 33% neither agree nor disagree. 58% of the activities and games that were part of the class were not relevant to the development of oral communication and 21% nor agree nor disagree. 58% agree that the activities and exercises did not develop oral communication skills, and 32% strongly agree about it. 78% agree too much time was spent on preparing for the activity, and there was not enough time left for speaking. 62% reported that the Lab was boring, and learning was minimal. 68% of the respondents felt that the lab classes are not standardized, and each teacher teaches what he/she thinks is essential.

TABLE 3: OVERALL SATISFACTION IN THIS COURSE

	Variables	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neither disagree nor agree**	**agree**	**Strongly agree**
1	My overall satisfaction with the modules			27	45	
2	The BPUT should increase the time spent on this module.			22	51	
3	The BPUT should ensure better teaching of the communication skills model.				32	51
4	The course in business communication helps in the development of soft skills.				26	42
5	Soft Skills are actually ignored in the business communication course.		22	20	25	22
6	The BPUT should redesign the communication module.				27	35
7	The communication skill module is not taught properly.		16	27	27	16
8	The teachers of the module need to show more interest in the students.			29	29	20
9	More time should be spent on developing oral					

	communication skills rather than focusing on activities.					

In the survey, 45% of the students are satisfied with the module. 51% of the participants reported that BPUT should increase the time spent in this module. 51% reported that BPUT should ensure better teaching of the communication skills model. 42% of the participants reported that the course in business communication helps in the development of soft skills. We noticed an interesting pattern in reporting whether Soft Skills are actually ignored in the business communication course the percentage of agree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, are almost very close to each other (20% to 25%). 35% strongly agree that BPUT should redesign the course. While 27% of the students surveyed agree, another 27% of them are not confident about the teaching of the communication module. 29% of the participants agree that teachers of the module needed to show more interest in the students, while 27% neither agree nor disagree.

Developing communication skills in its graduates is a critical challenge facing any university, so the findings of the study have implications for teaching communication in technical universities across India. On the surface, there are the emotional, cognitive, neurophysiological, physiological, foreign-language specific and learner external factors associated with L3 learning (Hufeisen and Marx, 2007).However, the study has pedagogical value as a large number of the students are not comfortable with speaking in English. When they are unable to speak as well as their batch mates, they develop an aversion for the English lab classes. They will revert to their culture of speaking in their L1 and develop a negative perception of their competence and self-worth akin to students with high levels of foreign language anxiety (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999).

The responses indicate that a very high number of respondents felt that teachers allow an excessive amount of time to prepare for any activity which limits the time left for actually speaking in class. A group of thirty students would have around ten lab classes in a semester, and a best-case scenario is that every student would get an opportunity to speak for three or four minutes a week (out of 120 minutes). This time offers a negligible amount of practice to learn or develop skills in English. Although we did not specifically explore the use of teaching materials in the Lab, the fact that a significant number of the respondents felt that there is no standardisation, indicates that the teaching materials are not taking into consideration the professional interest of the students or simulating real-life situations through role-playing (Newberry and Collins, 2012). As oral communication implies the receptive skills of listening and understanding, and the productive skills of speaking (Byrne, 1991), the instructor should consider them both when designing and planning lessons. The facilitators should keep in mind that tasks must consider particular skills which will allow students to think and behave like engineers while putting their English skills to practical use.

Most importantly, the materials on spoken language should have the potential to engage the students' interests (Timmis, 2005). When dealing with such topics, activation of specific language structures in order to express oneself through different language functions, such as information-handling, expressing attitudes, describing logical and personal relations, and persuasion (Brieger and Comfort, 1992, p. 139-178). Students should be able to express themselves in areas of general as well as special interest and vary their language to suit their audience. Even though they are born with the ability to vocalise students must learn and be taught the skills to communicate effectively and appropriately with others (Morreale and Pearson, 2008). This goal is achievable only with clear concepts, examples and practice.

The university will need to ensure proper learning orientation of the teachers of communication to develop creativity and innovation. It is a concern that a high number of respondents felt that the

activities and exercises conducted in the Lab, do not develop oral skills which indicate a complete and total lack of planning of the module. A revamping of the syllabus would be a step in the right direction as the findings indicate that there was no logical sequence of the modules. Similarly, when there are no standardized modules in the Lab, each group of students learns or practices something different. This lack of standardized Labs does not allow students the option of interacting or practicing a particular skill with their peers. A large number of our respondents felt that the activities conducted did not contribute to the improvement of oral communication skills. While interacting with a number of the respondents, we learnt that activities like origami, pot painting, bridge building and other similar activities were used thus giving students novel ways of engaging themselves while providing limited scope for the development of oral communication. Activities must be relevant and allow for interaction and communication between students who will not only add value but also help students grow comfortable with the language while encouraging peer interaction and learning. In the process of keeping students happy, the teachers have lost sight of the objective of the Lab. Students have become accustomed to a relaxing activity in the Lab at a relaxed pace. As a result, when they are required to apply themselves, they are no longer interested and find the class boring (62% agreed that Lab was boring and learning was minimal).

Before the activity, the students must know what they need to do, how they should do it, and what the expected result is. The teacher must monitor the activity and ensure that there is adequate participation by engaging with the students often. Though a significant number of respondents agreed that teachers were actively involved in the class, on probing we found that most teachers moved around and engaged students but did not regularly check for understanding by asking questions or persist in inviting questions from students. When teachers ask questions, students feel that the teacher is interested in their performance and is with them on their journey of learning and developing communicative skills. Most students, who feel embarrassed at their lack of competence, often do not ask questions, to avoid revealing their ignorance (Razlina, 2010). Using a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions would not only help the teacher analyse student understanding, but it would also actually benefit the student (especially the weaker ones) by allowing them to speak and interact.

An initiative that could produce results would be to involve students in role-playing in settings like machine rooms, labs or workshops which would simulate a workplace setting thus, providing the ideal authentic setting and context for learning activities within engineering (Blakeslee,2001). The need of the hour is, therefore, integrated teaching methodologies by combining the skills of engineering and humanities staff, which will make a huge difference in making engineers industry ready (Iijima et al.). As increasing employability through the development of workplace and industry desired communication skills is the goal, the technical university and its constituent colleges may consider constituting TDTs (Teacher Design Teams), which have become quite popular in several countries, to chart a roadmap for implementation. This step will ensure connectedness between the teachers of different branches (Penuel, Fishman et al., 2007) with the team members having a clear mandate to move away from maintaining the status quo.

Feedback and demonstration are an essential aspect of enabling the students in developing skills. However, a significant number of our respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that the teachers give regular feedback and guidance or demonstrate. Demonstrating serves the purpose of guiding the student through a speech activity, and feedback can help to make corrections. While giving feedback, the facilitator should draw the student's attention to mistakes only if they are flagrant and impede communication (Harmer, 1991, 2007). This approach will ensure that progress is tailored to the needs of the student, thus encouraging the student to speak in English without highlighting every error. We understand from our discussions with the stakeholders that the feedback provided by the teachers is more about identifying the mistakes made without providing

any remedy. This lack of specific instructions or guidance could be because of a lack of attention to time management in the Lab but becomes demotivating for the students. Teachers usually prefer a short-term motivation approach by trying to attract students at the beginning of a lecture and expecting that initial motivation to last, which often does not work. Thus, in order to motivate the students, the teacher should also emphasise their progress. (Byrne, 1991, p.11) often. Once the course progresses, the teacher should try and encourage more interaction between the students, stepping in only when necessary and focus on giving individual students, the floor as often as possible.

It is a well-known fact that every group might have a mix of students who are comfortable with the language and a number that are not. To deal with this problem, an effective learning strategy for a heterogeneous class, like peer tutoring, must be encouraged (Bland and Harris, 1989). Cooperative learning in small groups (Ballantine and McCourt Larres, 2007) and group presentations are also an effective way of developing communication skill, and teachers do use this strategy. However, focuses on group activities alone will not foster learner autonomy (Wenden, 1991). The value of in-class group activities is indisputable, but a student must also work independently (Byrne, 1991, p. 2). We agree that oral presentations, debates and group discussions are effective learning methods, but these will do more harm than good as many of the students lack the necessary skills but are still required to participate in these activities, as is the case in various engineering colleges. The students who cannot speak in these activities fear negative evaluation by the teacher and their peers. The facilitators need to plan and ensure a smooth transition from controlled practice to free expression exercise (Byrne, 1991, p.111) and sufficient time must be devoted to practice before getting students involved in activities. With more practice, students will expand and improve vocabulary and gradually gain more self-confidence and self-esteem, eventually losing their initial inhibitions and shyness. (Hošková-Mayerová, 2013)

As students do not always have the chance to speak English as much as they require, the modules must afford them the chance to speak, and the teacher must endeavour to help the students make the best use of the language knowledge they have (Byrne, 1991, p 11). Similarly, students might believe that the teacher's job is to provide learning without actively involving them in the learning process (Harmer, 2007, p. 21). Low study motivation and willingness to get new knowledge mostly result in reduced marks, so their final grade and class participation must be linked. Cognitive studies also point towards the importance of a learner's efforts and strategies for learning successes (Dickinson, 1995).

We also learnt that the teachers in the technical courses are also somehow contributed to this situation. Although they have the best interests of their students at heart, teachers of domain areas are known for their academic overkill with their emphasis on domain knowledge and downplaying of employability skills like communication. As a result, students often focus more on their technical subjects and attend the English communication classes only for a passing grade. The faculty from the branches do not counsel or encourage their students to develop communication and other skills. In several colleges, the department or branch starts running its communication training modules, ensuring that attendance is mandatory. This parallel learning is a retrograde step because these modules are taught by the teachers of the department who are engineers and therefore might have no knowledge or experience on how to develop communication skills.

The English Lab is also not given much importance and often scheduled after the technical classes or in the afternoon. Once they have completed their technical courses, the students are too tired, so they often skip the Lab. As the different departments are liberal when it comes to their students attending the English Lab or communication classes, the students take the issue of attendance lightly. The system of allowing students who miss the English lab classes, a chance to achieve a

grade, by giving them a chance to perform a single activity or presentation and be graded for the whole semester is counterproductive. Skipping lab classes often become the norm, and students who stay away from their lab classes for some reason or the other still get a passing grade at the end of the semester. Allowing this travesty only serves to enforce the belief that the active participation of students in the communicative English classroom or lab activities, does not influence the final grade and that students can get a passing grade by providing a medical certificate or some other flimsy excuse. This message is passed on to the juniors, thus perpetuating this cycle.

The management of engineering colleges has not been able to appoint dedicated and motivated teachers to oversee the Lab and communicative English classes. The quality institutes were particular in their choice of faculty and, for the most part, screened their faculty. However, with the high initial demand for engineering courses, the management was most likely unable to or did not invest in hiring competent English faculty. The BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries are guilty of devoting limited financial resources to train engineering students compared to the United States and Europe. The low levels of spending per student indicate lower salaries paid to faculty which means that institutes do not hire quality and well-qualified faculty and are unable to deliver a higher quality program (Loyalka, P et al., 2014). As a result, the institutes often turn to external experts or training institutes to improve the communication skills of their students. The hiring of outside experts sends out the wrong message to the students that their faculty are not capable of grooming them or helping them develop communication skills. Our interaction with faculty and students of engineering colleges confirms that students from several of the colleges of the university believe that they need to be taught by external resource persons.

Additionally, most institutes have no academic review of the English Lab, and the instructors go on teaching the same thing year after year without making any significant changes in their methodology. Student feedback for lab activities is also often ignored for logistic reasons. Over the years, most colleges have seen some form of sensitisation regarding the issue of developing English as a communicative skill, but by and large, the situation has not improved.

The university may examine its role, adopt a more supervisory approach and ask its constituent colleges to start preparing students, especially those from rural areas who lack the necessary language skills. Constituent colleges of the university must mandatorily constitute a committee headed by the Principal of the college, including all the Heads of Departments and the Training and Placement Department. Within two weeks of admission, the English Department using a combination of interaction and testing must identify students who will need extra attention. A schedule for additional English labs or classes for the entire semester and a list of students could be shared with the university to ensure compliance. A teacher from the English Department should mentor the students, and reports must be presented to the committee and also shared with the university every forty-five days. This training should continue for at least the first three semesters. Assigning the same teacher who is taking their lab classes as a mentor to the students will make the classes more effective and also ensure attendance. This step will be more productive as the teacher will be acquainted with the students and familiar with their shortcomings. Most importantly and students will not miss these classes owing to a fear of displeasing the teacher and having their grades affected.

The university must also consider continuing with the regular English Lab at least until the third semester (with a focus on increasing the level of difficulty after the second semester).From the fourth semester onwards, students must be given pre-placement training with the focus on communication skill development continuing. This training can be handled by the Training Department of the college, in close coordination with the English Department. The mentors and teachers who take up this additional responsibility should be given an honorarium, in addition to

their salary, which will motivate them and compensate them for the extra effort they will need to put in. If this is not possible, the next best option is to provide an orientation course, spread over six to eight weeks covering necessary language skills for those who need it.

As difficult as it may be, colleges must be required to make an effort to develop communication skills through a genuine and concerted approach. The challenge, therefore, is to provide an orientation course spread over six to eight weeks in necessary language skills. If the students are to be made employable, then there must be a concerted effort made to help them overcome the fear of speaking. In the long run, this can only benefit the colleges with better recruitment numbers as the students will eventually become ambassadors for the college and university.

Policy Implications

In conclusion, the study attempted to investigate a critical yet unexplored area of communication skills development. Future research should focus on examining the effects of policies by the management of the institutes affiliated to the university and the impact that teachers of the domain areas and the training fraternity have on the development of communication.

In summary:

- The university should develop learning orientation across all its affiliates to ensure a syllabus according to the needs of the industry.
- The university should focus on the marginalized students to develop their communication skills and provide them with support beyond the syllabus, which will make them industry-ready.

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