

Translation as a Foreign Language Proficiency Assessment Tool

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Abstract: *Objective: To determine if translation can be successfully used as Proficiency Assessment Tool for differentiating the proficiency level of English Second Language Learners (ELL).*

On the whole, most research into issues in translation concentrates only on one Area i.e. evaluation of translations of literary and sacred texts and little research has been done on translation as a proficiency assessment tool. In this study, First Year (N=30) and Fourth Year (N=30) English majors at King Faisal University, KSA were selected for the assessment. One paragraph each was randomly selected for English to Arabic translation and vice versa. Similarly 10 words each were randomly selected for English to Arabic translation and vice versa. Each group was given the same set of paragraph and vocabulary for translation. A Five-Point Scale was used for the criteria of evaluation of student translation, based on The CASAS Functional Written Assessment for Translation.

Out of 30 first year students, 17% were high advanced ELL, 10% were low advanced ELL, 13% were high intermediate ELL, 17% were low intermediate ELL and 43% were beginning ELL. Out of 30 fourth year students, 20% were high advanced ELL, 30% were low advanced ELL, 30% were high intermediate ELL, 13% were low intermediate ELL and 7% were beginning ELL. Assessment in adult ESL is complicated by the fact that it requires measurement of skills in two domains: English language proficiency and literacy ability. The first year students are likely to have limited English skills and low proficiency so, as compared to fourth year students they are low-proficiency ESL Learners. The administered translation test was significantly (p value= 0.002) able to differentiate between the proficiency level of first year and fourth year students.

1. Introduction:

English is a widespread and important language in the world today. In some countries, it is often used as a means of communication between people who have different native languages (Kiato, 2002).

Nowadays, English is considered the most important international language and is a valuable asset in one's life. It is the major language of news, internet, information, business and governments around the world. It is the official language of the United Nations and many other professional organizations around the world. Quite often, it is the language used in international conferences and sports and also it is the language of science (Kiato, 2002).

In most countries, English is taught as a second language. There are very few places in this world that do not offer an English language course of some kind. In Saudi Arabia also, English is taught as a foreign language. People here use Arabic in their social life. Even those who know English do not use it while communicating with others in their daily life.

In school, all subjects provide tests to the students to evaluate their level of understanding of the subject. Tests are an important part of every teaching and learning process (Bachman, 1984). English language instruction is no different. Language teachers are concerned about testing and they realize that tests can improve their teaching and stimulate student learning and performance (Valette, 1977). There are different types of tests used to evaluate students' comprehension of the language. Any use of a language that can be graded or evaluated can be considered a language test. This commonly includes reading assignments, question/answer sessions, written assignments and conversations (Oller, Jr. 1987).

Furthermore, "Oller Jr. (1987: 42) states that it may be argued that all authentic uses of language tests so far, require some degree of comprehension." Language tests are an integral part of the instructional process and every test is a natural step towards the instructional goal of learning a language, e.g. to achieve some designed degree of proficiency. In the classroom, language tests provide many purposes such as, instructional- to improve proficiency; managerial- to help the teacher to provide a good basis for grading, and motivational- to provide rewards to entice both the teacher and the student (Oller, Jr. 1987).

Language testing has four basic aspects: evaluative, practical, instructional and theoretical. These aspects can be thought of as, either the functions of testing defining what the purpose of testing is, or determinates of testing prescribing the form a test should take in a given situation. The evaluative aspect deals with what a good test is supposed to measure in order to determine what has been learned accurately and consistently. A test should also provide us with scores on the basis of which we can differentiate between good and bad students fairly objectively and to place them in a reliable ranking order.

The practical aspect deals with basic, logical items. These items include things such as, conducting the test in a comfortable atmosphere (i.e. Room temperature, type of desks used, etc.), creating a test that is acceptable to both the teacher and the student. The instructional aspect concentrates on how testing influences the mode of teaching by providing insights into the learning process. Feedback, in the form of test results and students' comments, is the best form of assessment of the teacher's effectiveness.

The theoretical aspect breaks down into basically two types of tests: the analytic approach and the synthetic approach. A teacher should be careful not to favor one approach over another as the analytic reliability is greater than the synthetic one, but the analytic validity is lesser than the synthetic validity (Saleemi, 1988).

There are also two basic types of English language tests. One is the informal test, which is made by the teacher in a classroom situation and the other

is the formal, large scale standardized tests which are used by professional testing services to assist institutions in the selection, placement and evaluation of students. In the informal setting, there is one person to write and score the tests. The students are familiar with what items the tests will probably cover and how the tests will be scored. The final student evaluation will also probably be based on more than one test and will be carried out by the same individual. (Harris, 1969)

Translation is the process of interpreting the meaning of a text, and subsequent production of an equivalent text, that communicates the same message in another language. Translation was once one of the most common teaching and testing devices in the world. It is still quite popular in many places.

Translation should not be thought of as a single type of exercise. There are many kinds of translation that can assist in different ways in learning a foreign language, such as written, oral, and mental translation; conscious and unconscious translation; translation from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1; translation that is an exercise or a test, and translation that is a tool or a goal (Urgese, 1989).

Translation is a very specialized and highly sophisticated activity. *“Translation is not a single exercise, but a complex reality”* Urgese (1989:39). It can be used as the last resort and sometimes, in certain sociolinguistic situation, it is the only technique that really works to avoid cross-cultural pragmatic failure. Translation can play an important role in teaching and learning a foreign language.

“According to Oller, Jr. (1979), successful translation of items requires maintaining roughly the same level of style, the same frequency of vocabulary and idiom usage, comparable phrasing and reference complexities.” Although it is difficult to translate puns, jokes or isolated test items in the same particular format, it is not terribly difficult to translate a novel, or even a relatively short portion of prose or discourse.

The importance of translation depends upon how we use it. Focusing the students’ attention on a certain set of sentences in order to deduce a grammar rule is not enough. Students need to compare the new rule with its counterpart in their own language and translating short, contextualized dialogues can help a great deal. Translation can help to focus students’ attention on the need to always express the subject, the structure of negative and interrogative sentences and word order. (Urgese, 1989)

Since it is very difficult to decode texts in a new language and impossible to comprehend texts in a language one does not know, different levels of English proficiency have to be taken into account. Valette (1977:260) indicated that “translation should be performed by advanced students who are familiar with English language vocabulary and structure.” He says, “translation may be scored for accuracy (for e.g. in a scientific article) or for literary expression (for e.g. in selections where tone and mood are of greater importance than a word for word rendering of the text).”

So, Can translation be used as a Proficiency Assessment tool to differentiate between the levels of proficiency achieved by the students?

2. Rationale:

Little research has been done on translation as a proficiency test. Proficiency tests are defined as the ones which tell us whether or not an individual is proficient enough in a language to perform certain tasks. Some of the studies done, claim that, translation is invalid and unreliable as a test for measuring the student performance in L2.

Reima Al Jurf (2002) identifies the difficulties that Arabic students face when asked to translate from L2 to L1. The English text achieves a higher level of informality by using a casual chatty style without wrapping up the sentences. In contrast, Arabic is a diglossic language i.e., it has two varieties: a high written (formal) variety and a low spoken (mainly informal) variety.

Al Jabiri states out that "Arabic speakers encounter some linguistic difficulties in Arabic which are similar to those encountered in learning a foreign language (qtd. in Al-Jurf 2002)." This is because the grammatical structure of the High written variety is learned at school.

Compared to Arabic, English generally prefers to present information in relatively small chunks using a wide variety of conjunctions and a highly developed punctuation system to signal breaks in sentences. Unlike English, Arabic prefers to group information in large chunks within relatively complex (usually long) sentences.

This is partly because punctuation and paragraphing are a recent development in Arabic. Alternatively, Arabic tends to use a relatively small number of conjunctions whose exact meaning depends on reader's interpretation of the context. Since word order is relatively fixed in English, the meaning of a given sentence depends on the order of its constituents. Compared to English, Arabic has a more flexible and versatile word order.

Some of the studies have found that translation is not reliable as a test but those who believe that translation measures general language proficiency mention that translation can be used for measuring the student's proficiency level. "Buck, (1973) suggests that translation should be used with extreme care." "Barely - Klein, (1994) believes that using translation as a test is invalid as it is not clear that what trait or skill translation is supposed to measure."

So, if it can be determined that what trait or skill should be evaluated and how, Can translation be used as a Proficiency Assessment tool?

3. Study Design:

In the study we need to consider the possibilities of using translation as a tool for measuring the learner's proficiency in L2. The study addresses these points:

3.1 How can we reduce the unreliability of translation as a test?

The unreliability of translation as a test can be reduced by adapting a clear marking criterion. We divided the test into two parts and a clear marking criterion was adapted by using the analytical method for marking and giving certain marks to every language aspect e.g. Mechanism, grammar, content, style, etc.:

- Translating one word (objective marking)
- Translating a short paragraph (subjective marking)

3.2 How can we assure the validity of the translation test?

“Barely - Klein, (1994) states that validity is not so simple to measure by a translation test.” Furthermore, “Barley Klein, (1994) suggests that it is not very clear what translation is supposed to measure and even if we use a criteria for reliable marking, translation test is difficult to mark objectively”. “Buck, (1973) states that translation test has acceptable construct validity.”

So, instead of passing sweeping value-judgments on the overall quality of Translation Text, it would be more sensible to screen the points of equivalence and the points of divergence at various levels of analysis in line with the model of this study.

A number of senior faculty in the Department of Foreign Languages, King Saud University, Riyadh were consulted for the criteria of assessing and evaluating a particular translation corpus and most of them suggested that while evaluating a translation corpus, idea or concept, honest/ complete translation, grammatical rules, style, meaning, coherence and connectivity, spelling, word choice, etc. are the most important.

The same criteria were suggested not only for English to Arabic translation evaluation and vice versa, but also for English to Spanish, Spanish to English, English to German, German to English, English to Italian, Italian to English translation evaluation.

The CASAS Functional Writing Assessment provides teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) at the adult basic education or adult secondary level, with a means of assessing their students’ writing skills in a functional workplace, employability, and life skills context.

In The CASAS Functional Writing Assessment, the categories considered for evaluation are content, organization, word choice, grammar and sentence structure, and spelling/ capitalization/ punctuation and each of them is analytically scored which is then computed for a total weighted score.

Content category is given more weightage because it is essential for the communication of ideas in functional writing, while the category of spelling/ capitalization/ punctuation has least weightage. These weightings are suggested by a panel of experts familiar with writing instruction for adult ESL learners.

Learners’ skill levels in writing may be different from their levels in listening, speaking, and reading. So, the proficiency levels were based on the California ESL Model Standards Writing Skill descriptions as “ESL Beginning Literacy” (<50%), “ESL low intermediate Literacy” (50-60%), “ESL high

intermediate Literacy” (60- 70%), “ESL low advanced Literacy” (70- 80%) and “ESL high advanced Literacy” (80-100%).

4. Methodology:

First year (N=30) and fourth year (N=30) English majors at King Faisal University, KSA, taught by different teachers were selected for the assessment as they are liable to have different levels of proficiency owing to the difference in curriculum and teaching that meets the instructional needs in a multilevel course over a time frame of 4 years. The Course has a managed enrollment policy where students are only allowed to enroll at the beginning of the class term.

Ten possible paragraphs were selected on the basis of the student demographics, background knowledge of the language, cultural and social differences, age and level of starting the formal training in the second language etc. One paragraph each was then randomly selected for English to Arabic translation and vice versa. Similarly, out of 100 possible words, 10 words each were randomly selected for English to Arabic translation and vice versa. Each group was given the same set of paragraphs and vocabulary for translation.

The criteria of evaluation of student translation was based on The CASAS Functional Written Assessment for Translation and the suggestions of the senior faculty at King Saud University. The paragraph corpus from each sample was double scored in ten categories (general writing level, content, organization, word choice, meaning, grammar, sentence structure, spelling, capitalization and punctuation). A marking scale from 1-5 (1-poor, 2- average, 3- good, 4- very good and 5- excellent) was used for each category. To evaluate the vocabulary, three categories were selected viz. word choice, spelling and meaning and the same scoring scale was used.

A total score was achieved. Writing Assessment Scores from each sample were entered into a database and percentage for each student sample was calculated. The same procedure was used for both the Arabic to English and English to Arabic translation.

5. Results:

Study results showed that out of the 30 first year students, 17% were high advanced English Language Learners (ELL), 10% were low advanced ELL, 13% were high intermediate ELL, 17% were low intermediate ELL and 43% were beginning ELL.

Out of the 30 fourth year students, 20% were high advanced ELL, 30% were low advanced ELL, 30% were High Intermediate ELL, 13% were low intermediate ELL and 7% were beginning ELL.

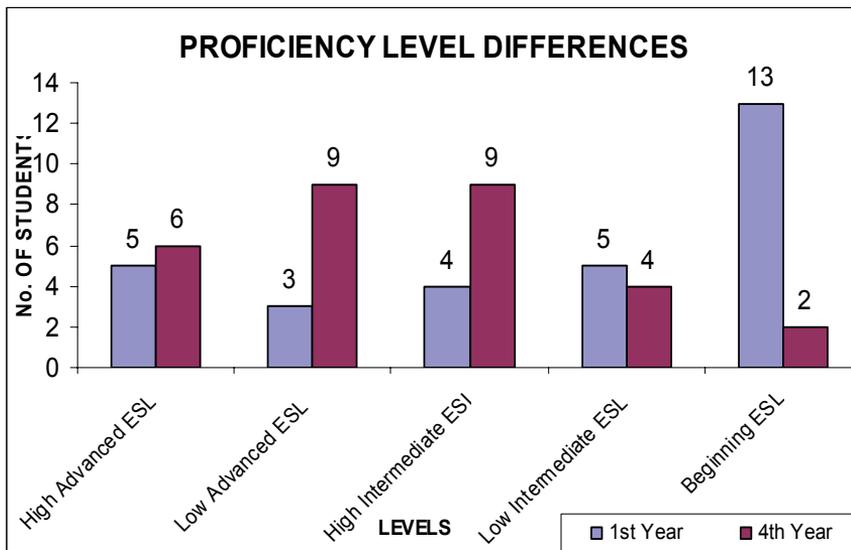


Figure 1: Proficiency Level Differences between First and Fourth Year Student Translations

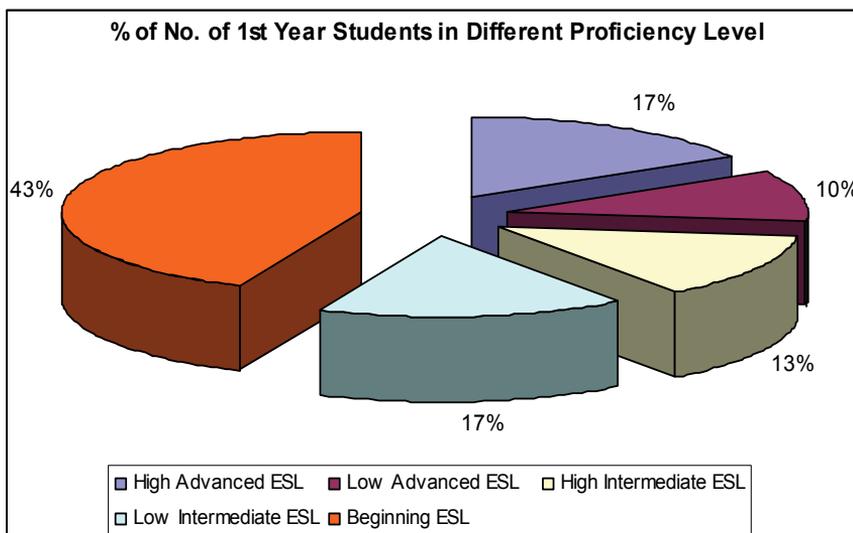


Figure 2: Percentage of Number of First Year Students in Different Proficiency Levels

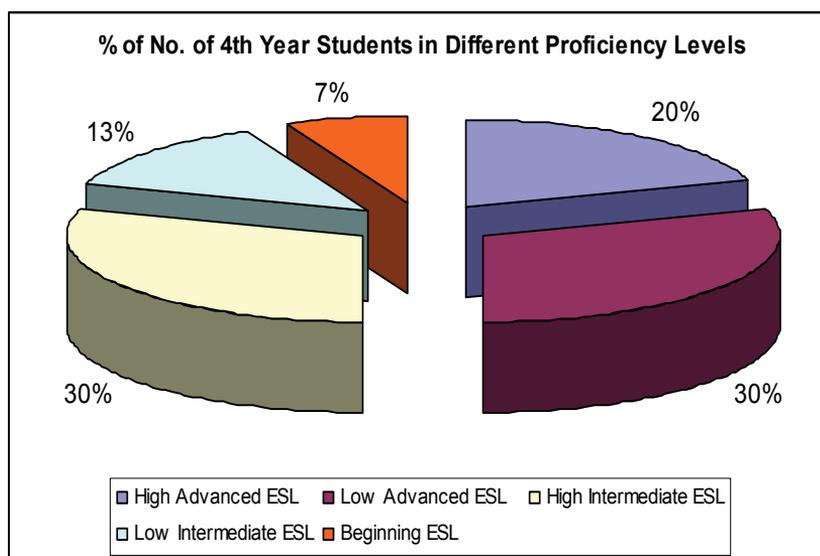


Figure 3: Percentage of Number of Fourth Year Students in Different Proficiency Levels

The 4th year students showed more proficiency in Arabic to English translation of the corpus but a number of students in the high intermediate level ESL category was the same for both 1st year and 4th year.

The 4th year students and some of the 1st year students showed almost equal proficiency in English to Arabic translation of the corpus but majority of 1st year students were in the beginning ESL Level.

Both the 1st year and 4th year students were sufficiently proficient in vocabulary translation but the majority of 4th year students were more proficient in English to Arabic translation while the majority of 1st year students were proficient in the Arabic to English translation of the vocabulary.

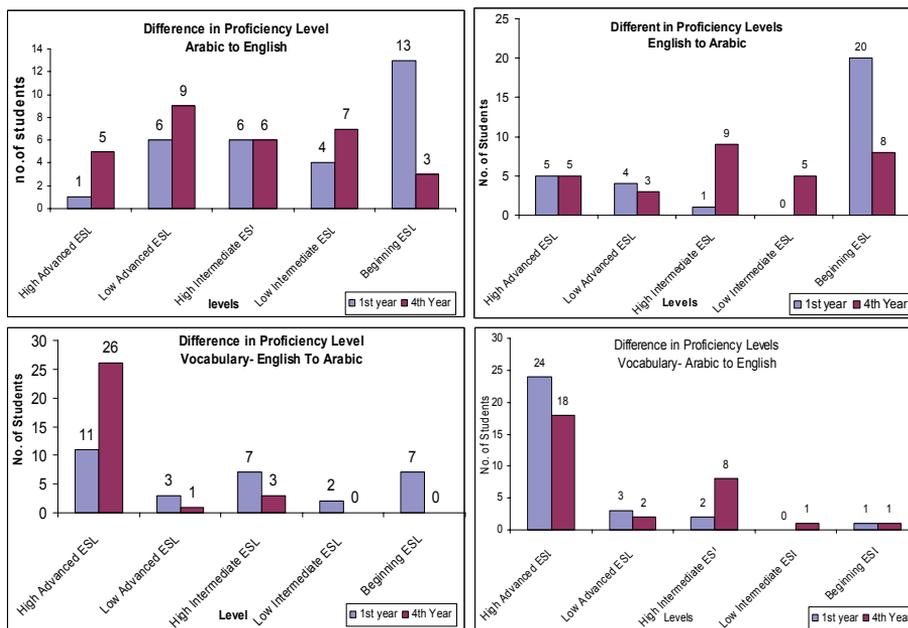


Figure 4: Results of Individual Translation Scores

The above results clearly show that there is a difference in the proficiency level of first year and fourth year students and the administered translation test was successfully able to differentiate between the two.

5.1 Statistical Analysis:

The descriptive statistics were used to organize and summarize the data and inferential statistics were utilized to generalize and predict the inference of the obtained results on the general population. Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS v. 10 programs.

Table 1: Statistical Analysis for Total Translation Test Scores

Level	N	Mean	SD	T Test	DF	P value
1 st year	30	69.4	23.04	2.01	46	0.002 *
4 th Year	30	85.3	13.08			

* p= <0.05

The above analysis significantly voids the null hypothesis as the p value is less than 0.05 and we can clearly suggest that the administered translation test successfully differentiated the level of proficiency of English second language learners. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of individual translations as seen below.

Table 2: Statistical Analysis for Scores of Arabic to English Translation

Level	N	Mean	SD	T Test	DF	P value
1 st year	30	25.63	10.01	2.00	49	0.001 *
4 th Year	30	33.23	6.37			

* p= <0.05

Table 3: Statistical Analysis for Scores of English to Arabic Translation

Level	N	Mean	SD	T Test	DF	P value
1 st year	30	20.63	7.81	2.00	50	0.015 *
4 th Year	30	27.20	12.01			

* p= <0.05

Table 4: Statistical Analysis for Scores of Arabic to English Translation of vocabulary

Level	N	Mean	SD	T Test	DF	P value
1 st year	30	13.00	2.25	2.00	58	0.019 *
4 th Year	30	11.63	2.14			

* p= <0.05

Table 5: Statistical Analysis for Scores of English to Arabic Translation of Vocabulary

Level	N	Mean	SD	T Test	DF	P value
1 st year	30	10.16	3.58	2.01	42	0.0001 *
4 th Year	30	13.23	1.77			

* p= <0.05

6. Discussion:

Assessment in adult ESL is complicated by the fact that it requires measurement of skills in two domains: English language proficiency and literacy ability. Language proficiency includes skills such as the ability to communicate face-to-face (or over the phone), a store of vocabulary, and the ability to create sentences that are comprehensible to native speakers, if not always grammatically correct.

The ability to communicate in English also includes understanding the rules that govern social communication, e.g. what to say to whom under what circumstances and, sometimes more importantly, what not to say, a concept known as “social appropriateness.”

Literacy, on the other hand, requires the ability to process print, which involves decoding, and encoding skills, “meaning making” (ability to understand written texts and the ability to write in ways that convey meaning), and use of strategies to deal with different kinds of texts and vocabulary knowledge.

A class is likely to represent a wide range of English abilities that students bring to the learning process. For example, the student sample is likely to represent a range of proficiency with written English, ranging from “silent ability” (able to understand some but not yet able to produce English) to the ability to use simple English related to everyday life.

Most of the first year students showed the silent ability of English learning which could be easily deduced from the test results that show the difference in their Arabic to English translation scores and vice versa. The four years of excessive language training improved the situation and proficiency level was increased. The administered translation test significantly differentiated the proficiency level of the first and fourth year students.

The first question in administering translation tests would be: ‘Is a translation test capable of assessing the level of student’s learning of the second language?’ If it is part of the student’s learning experience, then proficiency-type, task-based assessment may offer the best or the only way forward.

A detailed analysis of the “how’s” and the “why’s” of the linguistic forms and functions of a translated text, in comparison with its original form, is the descriptive foundation for any valid assessment of whether, how, and to what degree a given translation can be more or less adequate. Clearly, this means recognizing the inevitable subjective part of any translation assessment by a human evaluator.

However, this recognition does not invalidate the objective part of the assessment. It merely reinforces its necessity. Making a distinction between empirically motivated linguistic description and socially conditioned grounds for evaluating a translation, may lead us one step further towards solving the puzzling complexity of human translation.

7. Conclusion:

My main theme has been parallel developments in second and foreign language learning and teaching and in this contribution, I have selected only one particular issue of translation as a proficiency assessment tool. Since assessment plays a key role in the educational system, the questions of vital importance in teaching second language are proper test assessment criteria, error analysis in order to identify and classify patterns of errors, establish levels of difficulty, select prototype texts (authentic or otherwise) to illustrate specific translation problems and levels of competence, etc.

A direct application of Translation to the assessment of student learning implies a task-based approach which is appropriate to proficiency testing, but not necessarily to the formative assessment which characterizes an on-going tuition. So, while training students in a foreign language, translation assessment should not be an end but a means.

Translation is like language itself. In other words, to judge is easy, to understand, less so. Therefore, in translation assessment we have to make explicit grounds for our judgment, basing it on a theoretically sound and argued set of inter subjectively verifiable set of procedures. In order to develop and validate the importance of translation as a proficiency assessment test, we must follow empirical-experimental research criteria by which we may test; contrast and measure the assessment results obtained by means of specific instruments (See Waddington 2000, where various scales are experimentally tested.)

I therefore consider it necessary to research the current situation of translation assessment in teaching second language and carry out surveys with teachers and students in order to know their views on translation based proficiency assessment.

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