Exploring the use of pictures in enhancing non-major students' oral competency at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University, Vietnam

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I. INTRODUCTION

Today English can be understood as an international language because people from many different countries use it to communicate. "English as a tool of communication has been playing an important part in acquiring cultural, scientific and technical knowledge, for collecting worldwide information and carrying out international exchange and cooperation" (Liu, 2010, p. 136). Consequently, English speaking ability is very important because it is the key to unlock the door of the world. Budiastuti (2007) conceded that speaking is "verbal language" to deliver ideas or express thoughts and feelings. However, most students of Vietnamese universities are unsuccessful in developing their English proficiency, especially speaking skill. They find it difficult to express their opinions or thoughts in English. There are two main reasons.

Students lack of linguistic competence. It means that they do not have enough vocabulary to fully express their ideas in English. Secondly, they are unconfident and unwilling to speak English because they are afraid of making mistakes. Thus there is a lack of active and enthusiastic participation in communicative activities in English in class.

After having taught English for more than four years at BVU, I found that my students have low motivation in learning speaking English. They are unwilling to participate in speaking activities in class. They do not pay much attention to practicing speaking skill. They have difficulties to pass their oral exams because it is very difficult to clearly express what they think in English.

In order to help my students develop their communicative ability, I need to create supportive leaning environment and teach the second language in an active and interesting manner. This helps reduce my students fear of errors. (Gregersen, 2003, p 30, as cited in Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). In an attempt to improve the situation, I conducted an action research with the title: "Exploring the use of pictures in enhancing the students' oral competency at BVU to encourage students' speaking ability. Moreover, from my own experience, when I was young, I liked reading picture books. I could recall the stories in my mind without re-reading. In this research, I would like to investigate the benefits of using pictures in teaching procedure text to improve students' speaking ability. The study aims to find out the answers for the research questions:
1.   To what extent does using pictures enhance students' spoken competency in class?
2.   What are benefits of using pictures in improving students' speaking ability at BVU?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to support my research topic, I have found some articles in which the researchers examine and investigate the effectiveness of pictures in improving students' spoken competency.

Paivio's dual coding theory (1986) asserted that the effective use of visual aids has a positive enhancement of learning. According to Gerlach and Ely (1990), pictures consist of photographs or any objects or events. (Gerlach & Ely, 1990, as cited in Budiastuti, 2007). Harmer (2001) defined that pictures can be flashcards, large wall pictures, cue cards or photographs which are used at any levels in classes for kids, teenagers and adults to motivate them to learn (Rosalia, 2013).

Miolo (2004) conducted a study to investigate using pictures in improving the speaking activities used for third grade students in Language Department of SMU Negeri I Gorontalo. She employed audio tape-recording, questionnaire and observation to collect data. The result showed that a way to overcome the difficulties in learning English is using pictures in teaching to help students become more creative. Miolo's article is a key underpinning literature to my research because she pointed out that pictures were very good

visual aids in making students active and creative when speaking English; giving them opportunities and motivation to study English.

Ha (2005) conducted a study to explore the benefits of using pictures as visual learning techniques to foster students' higher order thinking skills and encourage connections in the secondary classroom. Her study was an investigation of her own classroom. She found the answer to the question "how to help students understand lengthy texts". Ha's article supports my research because she proclaims that there is an obvious change in using pictures in teaching and learning which supports students to successfully perform speaking activities, understand and answer the questions about the long texts.

Kayi (2006) stated that the ability to communicate in a second language clearly and efficiently contributes to the success of the learner in school and success later in every phase of life. Despite its importance, the goal of teaching speaking should improve students' communicative skills. Teachers should create a classroom where students have real-life communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks to promote oral competence. Kayi (2006) recommended that using pictures to help students retell stories or describe pictures in groups foster learners' speaking ability and their creativity and imagination. Kayi's article makes a strong impression on me because Kayi concluded that pictures used as an effective teaching technique to make students more active in the learning process and at the same time make their learning more meaningful and fun.

Budiastuti (2007) employed questionnaire, observation and test to gather data for the study which aimed to describe the process of teaching and learning spoken descriptive text by using cue card to find out the improvement of students' achievement in using cue card as the teaching medium to the eighth year students of SMPN 13 Semarang of the academic year 2006/2007. The article underpins my research because Budiastuti (2007) claimed that using pictures as cue cards as teaching media improved students' speaking ability including pronunciation and fluency. The researcher encourages teachers to use cue cards so that students are more interested in learning and speaking descriptive text.

Peskova (2008) used observation and questionnaire as data collection methods for the research with the purpose to identify the fact that pictures had an important place in teaching English and they were an appropriate supplementary material. According to the result, pictures served for illustration; developed learners' imagination; made learning process more interesting and entertaining at the same time. The study found that pictures enriched the class and made learning easier. The article supports my study because it is a good answer for the question "Why pictures have been chosen as effective visual aids to foster students in speaking English?" There are two main reasons. Firstly, pictures are inexpensive and easy to get – teachers can cut from magazines, books, calendar posters or download from the internet. Secondly, pictures draw learners' attention and interest. Texts accompanied by pictures are more attractive for learners than plain texts.

This research is supported by a study carried out by Richards & Dolati (2011) with the aim to investigate the ways in which visual learning aids might be used by teachers of English as second or foreign language to enhance the learning of their students. The interviews were conducted before and after using visual learning aids in teaching English to recognize that learners of all ages benefit from teaching where an appropriate and effective use of visual learning aids is demonstrated. The finding of the study showed that the picture is a kind of effective visual learning aid which assists students to understand lessons and gain long-term memory.

The research was carried out by Sasmedi (2012) with 43 students of the third years of SMAN 2 Makassar in 2005/2006 academic year supported my study because the researcher concluded that using pictures as a teaching strategy could nurture students' motivation in improving their ability to speak English significantly. Questionnaire, pre-test and post-test were employed for gathering data. Pre-test was a diagnostic test, and post-test were used to measure the improvement of students' ability to speak English of each cycle. The questionnaire was done in getting information on the students' motivation in speaking English using pictures. In the study, the researcher asserted that pictures as visual aids attract students' attention and motivate them to learn because pictures encourage students to speak English, help students overcome the lack of ideas and worry of making mistakes when they are asked to speak English.

The article of Rosalia (2013) which examined the advantages of using series picture slide to improve students' skill in procedure texts is an important underpinning piece of literature because Rosalia pointed out the benefits of the strategy. Rosalia (2013) emphasized that using series picture slide made the students improve their speaking in procedure text. They can control their speaking, become motivated in speaking and more confident while speaking by using series picture slide. The students enjoy the class, and unconsciously they can improve their speaking fluently. They arrange the sentences perfectly to speak from their series picture slide.

INNOVATION PROJECT
The context of innovation

"Today English is no longer the property of the English-speaking countries but it is an international or global language"(Richards, 2002, p. 4). However, most students of Vietnamese universities fail to improve their

English proficiency, especially speaking skill. The majority of them find it difficult to express their opinions or thoughts in English. I realized that many of the students are often shy and ashamed. They are unwilling to take part in speaking activities confidently. They are afraid of losing face if they make mistakes. In other words, they fear that their teachers and classmates will evaluate them negatively. They lack motivation in speaking. In this research, I would like to investigate whether the pictures could be used to enhance the students' oral competency at BVU. The innovation research has the potential to be very important because Budiastuti (2007) claimed that using pictures as cue cards as teaching media improves the speaking ability including pronunciation and fluency. Sasmedi (2012) asserted that pictures are not only very good visual aids used to make students active and creative to use English in speaking activities, but also give them motivation and opportunities in speaking English.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in my research was combined both qualitative and quantitative approach. I strongly believed the researches were an effective way because my study was about the interpretation of my pedagogical innovation. Norton (2009) asserted that qualitative research brings to the study "a richer understanding of the perspective of the person being research" (p. 116). I applied qualitative research in my study because it gave me practical advantages. Firstly, I could get detailed and in-depth information to explore students' ideas, experiences, attitude and behavior toward using pictures in teaching procedure text to enhance their spoken competency. Flick (2009) emphasized that "qualitative research attempts to interpret meanings, emotions, behaviors and/or perceptions by analyzing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity and starting from people's expressions and activities in their local contexts" (Flick, 2009, p. 112, as cited in Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010). Dahlberg and McCaig (2010) admitted that "qualitative research is about looking at the depth information involved in an issue" (p.112). Secondly, it was flexible and convenient in collecting data for my study because I could conduct interviews in any where at any time. According to Savenye and Robinson (2005), qualitative research is typically conducted in "natural settings without manipulation of the environment" (p.68).

PATICIPANTS

The participants of the study were 200 first and second first-year students. They come from many provinces in Vietnam. Their ages are from eighteen to twenty years old. Their abilities of English are different from each other. They need to improve speaking skill so that they can meet the demands of their study or their future jobs.

INSTRUMENTS

Hinchey (2008) stated that using triangulation for data collection in action research helps the researchers determine reliable answers to the research questions and minimize the ambiguity in the findings (p.76). In the study, the data collected by three methods: questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observation.

Questionnaire

Firstly, I used questionnaires to collect the data because students gave honest answers through anonymous survey (Norton, 2009, p. 91). Questionnaire was an inexpensive, useful and quick method to get data from a large number of participants in a short time (Norton, 2009, p. 92). Closed-ended questions in the questionnaire provided information needed for the research. This brought the high validity to my research. Open-ended questions in the questionnaire allowed respondents to state their own opinions of the topic I had researched. Therefore, questionnaire was an effective method of collecting data for my study. Moreover, it was easy to apply this method in my research at my university as my students were familiar with being collecting opinions by questionnaires.

Semi-structured interview

Secondly, I employed semi-structured interviews to collect data for my research. Interview was a valuable method for in-depth data collection used to gather data on participants' thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of a specific research question (Norton, 2009, p. 99). That was why I wanted to employ this method to measure the students' attitudes and interest in using pictures in teaching procedure text to improve their speaking ability. I did believe that the semi-structured interview was the most appropriate method for my study. It let the respondents to talk more freely about their opinions on my research topic. I could get more detailed information from the interviewees on the topic I am researching.

Classroom observation

Thirdly, I did believe that classroom observation was the most suitable method of collecting data for my research because I could examine what the students actually did in class. Kawulich (2005) conceded that observation methods were useful to find out or to check for nonverbal expression of feelings or attitude. Savenye and Robinson (2005) also claimed that observations facilitated the collection of rich data in natural settings; it also helped generate and refine questions during the informal and formal interviews. Norton (2009) claimed that "observational research" was a useful way to "find out the effects of an intervention" (p. 107). Direct observation was one of popular methods applied in my university to clearly see students' behavior, students' interaction and students' performance that helped me evaluate the effectiveness of using pictures in teaching speaking procedure text.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis was seen as the most difficult part of the research. Collected data was analyzed qualitatively. Firstly, I used frequency counts to analyze the closed-ended questions in questionnaires. Savenye and Robinson (2005) emphasized that "a qualitative researcher can count frequencies of behaviors in certain categories of interest and present these types of data using tables and figures" (Savenye and Robinson, 2005, pp 67-68). The analyzed data was displayed in a summarized form and illustrated by a bar chart or a pie chart. The numbers were a clear evidence that supported for a deep analysis of the data.

Secondly, the interviewees' responses and the open-ended questions in questionnaires were analyzed by a thematic analysis because of "a richer understanding" of the topic I am researching from "participants' point of view" (Norton, 2009). There are seven stages in carrying out the method: immersion, generating categories, deleting categories, merging categories, checking themes, linking themes and presenting findings. The data is gathered and classified into three categories: students' attitude towards practicing speaking skill; students' participation in speaking activities in class; and students' interest in teaching speaking procedure text through pictures.

Finally, narrative analysis is an effective method to analyze data from observation because I wish to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic I am doing research. Smith (2000) claimed that narrative language provides "access to subjective experience", "insights into conceptions of self", identify and "open up new ways of studying language and thought" (p.328). Narrative analysis is employed for analyzing data to know what students actually do in class, how they engage in my lessons through using pictures in teaching speaking procedure text.

PROCEDURES

In my research, questionnaire, interview and observation were used to collect data. The first week, I had a meeting to explain the importance of speaking skill in second language acquisition; introduce the purpose and the potential benefits of the research and inviting students to participate in my research. A pre-questionnaire was designed to identify the problems of students in learning speaking English. The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate the reasons why students were not active and enthusiastic participation in communicative activities in English in class. After having identified the problem from students' feedbacks, I began taking the actions by using pictures which were chosen to be appropriate to the contents as well as the level of the students in teaching procedure text to improve students' speaking ability. During week two and week three, the innovation plan was implemented. There were two hours forty-five minutes speaking lessons in the textbook each week. Getting students' involvement in developing speaking skill through pictures was the purpose of this innovation implementation. Therefore, the researcher carried out two changes to the ways of teaching speaking skill by using pictures. Two lessons were taught with traditional teaching method without pictures. Two other lessons were applied innovation – teaching speaking procedure text through pictures. I chose pictures carefully and designed the speaking tasks which were suitable for students' level and interest. The preparation phase was time-consuming. Concretely, I explored the procedure texts, and I searched for and downloaded pictures from the internet. Then I cut, pasted and edited them that were appropriate to the content of the texts. After having "finished products", I myself tried to practice speaking English through pictures. I had to make sure that my students could understand clearly and speak the procedure texts confidently. I also asked my colleagues to see the "finished products" and gave any comments on the meaning of the pictures. The lessons were designed by the three-stage model PPP (presentation-practice-production). In the presentation stage, vocabulary was taught in advance so that students had enough vocabulary to speak English confidently and the grammar could be reminded or emphasized in order to help students avoid making mistakes in speaking. In the practice stage, the students were asked to comprehend the procedure texts and memorize the new words through pictures. The students could practice individually, in pairs or in groups with an emphasis on pronunciation. In the production stage, the students were asked to recall the procedure texts in groups or in front of the class. They could use their vocabulary which they had just studied to express their understanding procedure texts through pictures. The

observation was done at the time of teaching in order to know how students' engagement in learning was. Observation checklists were collected at the end of each lesson to evaluate students' participation in communicative activities during teaching and learning process in class. A post-questionnaire was delivered to students in week four to collect the students' ideas in using pictures in improving students' speaking ability through teaching procedure text. The interviews were both recorded by my cell phone and noted down in my teacher's diary in week four to get students' reflection to the implementation of innovation. Based on data collected, I analyzed the outcomes and reflections.

V. FINDINGS

Two hundreds students (100%) agreed that speaking skill needed to improve for communicating effectively. Everybody didn't deny the important role of speaking in teaching and learning a second language. However, the data from the chart identified the problems which students had to face in language class.
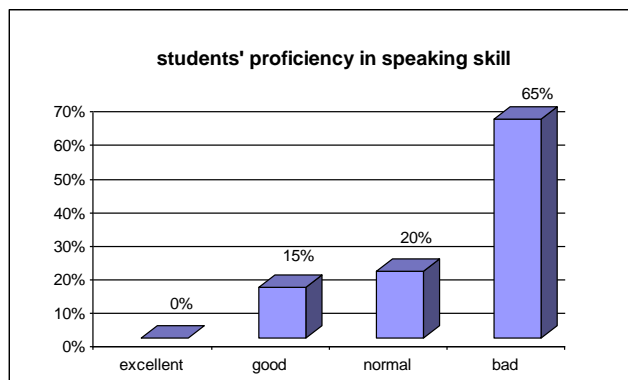
Figure 1: students' proficiency in speaking skill

In general, the students' proficiency in speaking skill was low. There were only three students (15%) who were good at speaking skill, (20%) were normal whereas (65%) were weak on speaking ability.
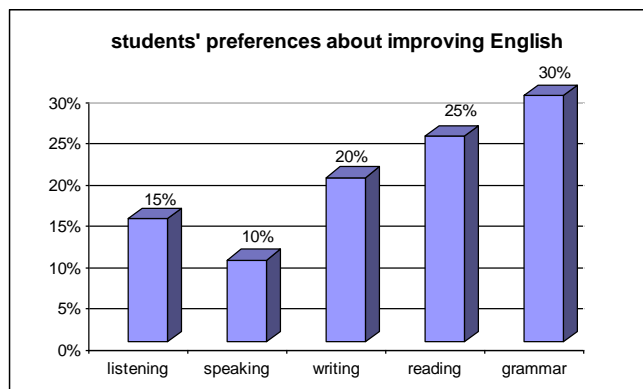
Figure 2: students' preferences about improving English

The bar chart showed preferences of the learners about improving English skills. Most students (30%) said that they liked to improve the grammar best because it helped them easily pass the final examination at the end of the course. They are also interested in studying writing and reading with the percentage of students 20% and 25% respectively. Only 20 out of 200 students (10%) wished to practice speaking skill because they thought that it was a difficult skill in learning a foreign language.
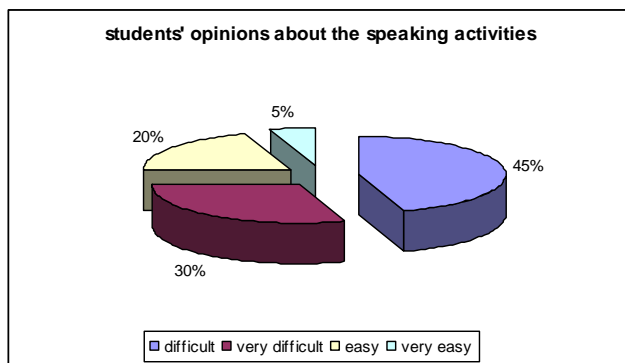
Figure 3: students' opinions about the speaking activities

The pie chart presented the students' ideas about communicative activities in class. Overall, more than 70% of students thought that the speaking activities in class were not easy. They were unwilling and unconfident to express their opinion in English. Firstly, they lack of vocabulary. Secondly, they were afraid of making mistakes. However, there was only a student who thought that speaking activities in class were very easy because he was good at English when he was a child.

The result of analyzed data in pre-questionnaires helped me identify problems that my students had to face in learning English: the communicative activities in class were not interesting, attractive and appropriate for the students' level; and speaking skill was not included in the tests or examinations in my university.

Based on the analysis of collected data from students' feedback in the post-questionnaire, I fully acknowledge the authentic assessment.
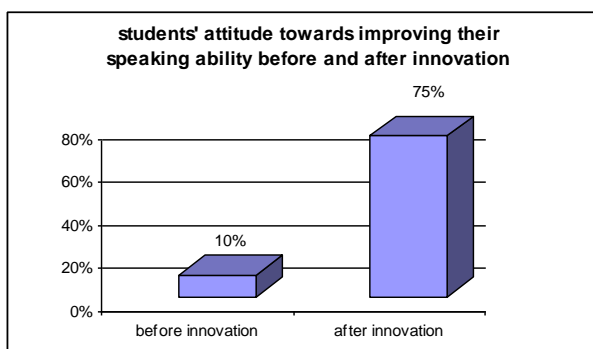

Figure 4: students' attitude towards improving their speaking ability before and after innovation

The bar chart showed that the students had positive attitude towards improving their speaking ability in learning procedure texts through pictures. There were only 20 of 200 students (10%) who were interested in practicing English before the innovation. However, after the innovation-using pictures in teaching and learning procedure texts, a number of students who actively got involved in communicative activities in class increased dramatically up (75%). They confirmed that pictures could help them memorize new vocabulary and speak more fluently and confidently. On the other hand, only some students expressed that they did not like studying English, especially speaking skill, because English is too difficult for them to learn. Consequently, they did not need to concentrate on practicing speaking skill. For these students, learning English was a great challenge.

The results of the interviewees' responses and the classroom observation that properly evaluated students' learning interaction as well as students' performance provided reliable evidences of students' positive attitude; students' participation in speaking activities in class; and students' interest in teaching speaking procedure text through pictures. In the interview, all five students admitted that using pictures in teaching speaking English could foster their speaking skill. They actively and confidently participated in communicative activities in class. Here were their comments:

"I like studying speaking English with pictures in class because the pictures are very interesting, funny and closely related to the real life", student 1 said.

"I think that using pictures in teaching and learning speaking could create excitement and attract students' attention to lessons", student 2 said.

"Studying with pictures helps me speak English fluently and confidently", student 3 said.

"I love pictures because I can learn a lot of vocabulary and memorize them longer. I feel self-confident and more active. I become more familiar with the spoken English language", student 4 said.

"Using pictures will create funny, friendly and supportive learning environment which it is very easy for me to speak English in class. I am not afraid of making mistakes", student 5 said.

The results of the classroom observation showed that students engaged in the communicative activities and pictures interestedly and enthusiastically. Students actively took turn in presenting each picture in groups. They could memorize new vocabulary and could volunteer to speak confidently in front of class. Moreover, they actively answered teacher's comprehension questions.

In short, using pictures in a second language teaching and learning process had a significant influence on speaking skill. The students looked interested in participating in communicative activities enthusiastically when they learn with pictures. Learning English with pictures did not bore students. It brought the inspiration into the language class. Most students felt satisfied to study English through pictures.

VI. DISCUSSION

Positive aspects of the research

After collected data was analyzed, I found that the results of the research contrasted to the study of some researchers. Concretely, Rasch and Schnotz (2009) stated that the processing of pictures wasted more time, but it didn't bring considerable benefits for students' learning outcomes. Nevertheless, most studies from Miolo (2004), Ha (2005), Kayi (2006), Budiastuti (2007), Peskova (2008), Richards & Dolati (2011), Rosalia (2013) have shown that the combination of pictures and text improves students' comprehension and problem-solving. The results of the research have proved that pictures are beneficial and effective visual aids which support students to acquire the knowledge of English as well as improve their speaking ability.

Clearly, the findings showed that the pictures played an important role in learners' memorization because they are ideal for reflecting the reality. Thus pictures facilitated the process which required students to memorize the new words or phrases, practice and recall the procedure texts in front of the class. Furthermore, pictures also were seen as an effective visual aids for teaching purposes that make it easier for students to understand lessons and gain long-term memory. Through pictures, the learners can develop their ability to speak English in class confidently and naturally. Miolo (2004) addressed that visual aids could stimulate the learners to speak the language. In fact, I could totally make sure that the students didn't spend much more time to grasp the meaning of the texts. They could understand the gist of the texts and recall them confidently in a short time.

Considerable impacts on the students' motivation

The research was not only found to have positive benefits for teaching practice but also reflected significant influences on the learners' engagement in speaking English.

Firstly, pictures created a supportive learning environment which helped students study easier and better because they could brainstorm and map what they intended to speak in their mind basing on the information contained in the pictures. In term of students' behavior in class, the observation and interview showed that students' attitude towards speaking activities has changed. This has been confirmed through students' attention, participation, and enthusiasm for communicative activities in class. Moreover pictures helped students remember vocabulary longer and grasp the main content of the texts quickly. In addition, pictures might bring active and interesting atmosphere for the language classroom which could reduce the fear of mistakes when students were given opportunities to speak the language freely.

Secondly, the analyzed data from the research indicated that using pictures in enhancing students' spoken competency in class fostered foster my students to become autonomous in their learning. They were positively encouraged to observe the pictures, share ideas and practice in pairs or in groups. This helped them become more and more dynamic to self-study, self-evaluate and control their own learning effectively. The success of the innovation could be seen clearly through their demonstration and reaction in volunteering to present the texts in front of the class confidently.

VII.CONCLUSION

To sum up, I would like to cite a famous saying "a pictures is worth a thousand words" to emphasize that using pictures will be an effective technique for teaching speaking, especially in improving students' ability to speak English. According to Sasmedi (2012), pictures should be used as visual aids in teaching speaking to attract students' attention and motivate them to learn. The aim of the study was to improve students' speaking ability through using pictures in teaching procedure text. Using pictures in teaching speaking procedure text could help students feel easier in developing their ideas and speak English fluently and confidently in class. In my research, I attempted to find and solve the problems that students encountered in learning speaking English. Although the research had some limitations, the results from the innovation implementation were satisfying. I found that students participated actively and enthusiastically in communicative activities in class. Especially,

they were highly motivated to practice speaking skill. In other words, they made their great effort to improve their speaking ability. I hope that my research is a powerful tool to help both me and English teachers in Vietnam carefully reexamine and gradually change the ways of teaching speaking to enhance students' spoken competence. I wish that my study will play a crucial role in improving English teaching in Vietnam, especially in teaching speaking skill. I suggest that more researches should be done about using pictures in teaching writing and reading comprehension.

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