

A Historical Perspective of the Persistent Problem of Lack of Proficiency in English in South African Schools and Universities

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Abstract --This article examines the nature of the problem of lack of proficiency in English by black students and black teachers in South Africa. Since liberation in 1994, South Africa has undergone changes in many spheres including in education. These changes have not necessarily translated into the improvement or betterment of the people, particularly the previously marginalized black people. In Education, there has been many experiments undertaken by the South African government and all these experiments have unfortunately failed to impact positively in students' abilities to acquire knowledge. This has resulted in South African Universities having to deal with students who are ill-prepared to function at University. This is also largely because these students come to University woefully lacking proficiency in English, which, incidentally, is used exclusively at University. The South African government, in tacit acknowledgement of its failures to prepare students adequately during their 12 years of schooling, has given billions of Rands to Universities to try and remedy this problem. However, this effort has failed drastically as Universities have just established Academic Development Centres which are expected to miraculously improve the lot of our student. It is the contention of this article that the problem cannot be solved at University level; it needs to be addressed at school level. This article traces the root of the problem prior to 1994 in an effort demonstrate the persistent nature of this issue.

Keywords: Black students, competency, English proficiency, performance

I. INTRODUCTION

STUDENTS' performance at university can be directly linked to the level of English students acquire during 12 years at school. The assertion is that in the last year of the 12th year, students whose matric subject was English 1st Language generally cope better at university than students whose matric subject was English 2nd Language. Because the English language is used exclusively at most if not all South African Universities, students can only be expected to perform well if they have a reasonable command of the language as all academic activities that determine competence in tasks are conducted in English. Seidhofer points out that other than that, students are groomed to be linguistically competent in the workplace where the lingua franca is basically English (2005).

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A pattern is therefore established that students should necessarily be trained at school and University level s in preparation for them to be able to perform at the work level.

Almost all studies addressing the issue of lack of proficiency in English agree that even with the introduction of Academic Development Centres, there is no deducible improvement in the students' use of English at University. What is discernible is that the same grammatical errors despite being exposed to remedial classes conducted by these Academic Development Centres. It has also been observed that students would repeat the same grammatical errors despite the fact that these errors were drawn to their attention.

This can to some degree be attributed to the fact that the manner in which these students express themselves using the English language has internalized over many years. Incorrect phrasing, when used over a period of time becomes standardized. This is perhaps the reason why it is so difficult to get the students to change their linguistic habits. The time allocated for the intervention certainly does not help. It is simply not possible to change linguistic habits formed and internalized over a period of twelve years of schooling in six months or even a year, particularly in reference to those L2 speakers of English who have no other significant contact with English except in a lecture-room. Even in these lecture-rooms, these students generally do not engage in activities in which they would be using the English language.

It is obvious that the present intervention strategy has not yielded the required results, that is, the improvement of the linguistic competence of the students to a point where they can express knowledge in a logical and comprehensible way. A new strategy urgently needs to be figured out if concerned groups in South Africa want to see some improvement in the students' performance. A historical perspective of the problem is pivotal here.

II. NATURE OF THE PROBLEM IN CONTEXT

The use of English as a medium of instruction can be traced back to the advent of the missionaries in South Africa after colonization. Only after the Act of Union of South Africa in 1910 did Afrikaans enjoy equal status in the eyes of the law, but English was maintained in mission schools as a medium of instruction because missionaries were, in the main, English speaking. They were also providers of better education for blacks than the Apartheid government. These mission schools

were primarily meant for the Africans and by learning in English Africans were also being orientated into a Western perspective. Language always brings along its own orientations. Mawasha observed that “the less obvious reason is that education as understood by these early teachers meant knowing and accepting things and ideas belonging to the western world or interpreting and evaluating things and ideas belonging to Africa from a Western perspective. To achieve all these things the main language of instruction and westernization (for blacks) had to be English” (1986: 16).

One can only concur with Mawasha’s assertion as this tendency has been sustained and the effects of this mentality still prevail. Over a long period of time black people’s perspective of themselves was blunted in such a way that they developed a mentality of viewing themselves as inferior and white people, their ways of life and the articulation of this character through language as superior. The black man was systematically brainwashed into equating the language and the ways of the white man with power, education, civilization and superiority. He was also encouraged to look down upon his language, way of life and to equate it with barbarism. So in pursuit of “civilization”, black people strove to emulate white people in many respects, and anyway, what better way of identifying oneself with a people other than that people’s language? Sociolinguists tell us that a people’s identity is best articulated or express through its language.

In the South African context, black languages were systematically accorded an inferior status. This was deliberate official government policy. Regrettably it has had the desired effect. Even today in the new dispensation, knowledge of English is equated with being educated or literate. However, as is the purpose of this examination, the level of English proficiency for black school children and their teachers remains unimpressive despite the factors mentioned above.

When the National Party assumed power in South Africa in 1948, they systematically over the years introduced a series of laws which were all discriminatory in nature. To ensure white dominance in all spheres of life including education, the apartheid government perfected their discriminatory education policy to such an extent that they even removed most black schools from missionaries to ensure total control. The Bantu Education Act saw to it that blacks received inferior education to that of their white counterparts.

The language policy of the Department of Education and Training, which exclusively oversaw black education, did not in any way prescribe that black pupils and their teachers’ level of competence in English should be developed. In his research essay, Southey (1993) outlines the background to the causes of poor English competence in black schools as emanating from apartheid legislation and what it sought to do. He points out that the apartheid language policy was enshrined in Section 3 of Act 90 of 1979 and gave parents language policy at school level but at the same time reserved an overriding right for the minister on the same issue.

To realize its apartheid policies, the government provided unequal resources to whites and blacks in the education system. Black teachers were poorly trained in adverse

circumstances such as poorly equipped classes and poor physical facilities. They were often taught languages by lecturers who were themselves victims of the system and therefore possessed poor qualifications. These trainee-teachers were largely put through the motions of the duration of their studies and then handed certificates or diplomas without really having fulfilled the requirements of the courses. Armed with their diplomas and no meaningful command of the English language, they would then be employed in black schools to teach in the English language in which they themselves were not competent. Hence a characteristic of learning in a black classroom is rote-learning.

Another factor that encourages rote-learning is when the language used by the teacher is unintelligible or unrelated to life. Again meaningful learning is not realized. Indeed so, but a disturbing factor in this assertion is that of the teacher himself being unable to use the English language at least without breaking the linguistic rules of the language in every sentence he utters or writes! It is therefore hardly surprising that black pupils in most cases do not acquire mastery or reasonable competence of the language as their teachers themselves are not competent in the language and are ill-equipped to make any difference in their pupils’ acquisition of English.

Walters made the following observation on Rodseth’s research which dealt with the Molteno project: It was already known that the number of black children failing to read in English was out of all proportion: Twenty years of Bantu education had so far taken their toll that not only was the system producing ill-prepared pupils and students, but the first matriculants under Bantu education had themselves been trained as teachers and had re-entered the system as, through no fault of their own, a newly incompetent generation of teachers (1988: 8).

Successive generations of black teachers up to the present can be traced to this first crop. True to the spirit and intent of Bantu education, these products of the Apartheid system were not in any way supposed to be educated in a manner equitable to their white counterparts. So the black teachers produced by the system became useful, although sometimes unwilling, pawns in the larger apartheid game of systematic disempowerment. In these circumstances how then can we hope to undo this damage inflicted over so many decades? Why, despite so many projects in this regard such as the Molteno project and others being undertaken has there been no significant improvement to the problem?

Let us first look at what the Department of Education and Training did when pressurized by several Non-Governmental Organizations to do something about the problem. They outlined the aims of their 1985 language syllabus as follows:

1. To foster a desire to learn English and to assist pupils to meet the challenges of living in a multi-lingual environment.
2. To help pupils listen with accuracy, sensitivity and critical discrimination.

3. To help pupils speak fluent and acceptable English clearly, confidently and with a sensitive awareness of the audience.
4. To guide pupils towards reading with increasing comprehension, enjoyment and discrimination.
5. To develop pupils' ability to write English appropriate to their purpose.
6. To promote pupils' control of English and acknowledgement of its structure and usage.

One detects the same objectives in the post-Apartheid government's Outcomes Based Education. The problem lies in the fact that in 1985 it was just all talk and no action. No resources were provided to black schools to meet these objectives. The same teachers mentioned earlier on were not provided with any training that would effectively make them impact positively on the learning processes of their pupils. Despite these aims, the black classroom remained relatively unchanged and the system continued to produce the same type of teachers and matriculants. Southey (1993) points out that even the Council for Education and Training held the same view. This Council was an advisory body appointed by the Minister of Education and Development Aid and it consisted of eminent black academics, educationists and community leaders.

He states that in discussing the problem of poor English proficiency among teachers and pupils at one of its plenary sessions held on 13-15 October 1987, this council found the causes of poor standards of English to be:

1. The Policy of the Department of Bantu Education (1995-1976) of using mother-tongue as medium of instruction in the primary school and then switching over to three languages as medium of instruction at the secondary level.
2. Lecturers at Black colleges of education are in most cases not English speakers. Non-English speaking lecturers using a language that is foreign to both trainer and trainee.
3. Lack of motivation among the teachers, pupils to improve their English language proficiency. The Department of Education and Training does not seem keen on promoting English as a medium of instruction and of communication in African schools.

The Council's proposal was for English to be introduced as a medium of instruction much earlier than in the case at present. Of course, this recommendation was overlooked and the status quo maintained. It is disturbing and disappointing that a body as eminent as this did not strongly recommend the retraining of black teachers to enable them to be proficient in English and therefore effective in the classroom. Or better still, this body could have recommended the total overhaul of the education system. Such a recommendation would have spoken volumes for the credibility of such a body even if its recommendations were not heeded.

Carol Macdonald, in the highly acclaimed research in black schools, *The Threshold Project* (1991) highlights the fact that the linguistic abilities of Std 2 and Std 3 pupils are woefully inadequate for the demands of using English as a medium of

instruction. This linguistic impoverishment is, among other things, a result of lack of teaching materials for both teachers and pupils, outdated teaching styles which have as one of their characteristics, rote-learning, and poorly devised materials which did not comply with the requirements for the linguistic enablement of the learner.

In yet another "effort" to determine the problems that black pupils have in acquiring English and of proposing strategies for solving them, the Department of Education Training appointed a commission headed by Prof P.H. Swanepoel. Swanepoel's (1989) commission's brief was to identify the hindrance to second language acquisition (English/Afrikaans). One must point out here that the D.E.T. might have felt obliged to have this undertaking because of the mounting attacks on it which were a result of the increasingly poor results in black schools. Swanepoel's findings are not dissimilar to Macdonald's findings except perhaps on recommendations about the total overhaul of the language policy in black schools particularly on teaching methodology and materials (syllabuses and text books).

III. THE BLACK STUDENT AND THE BLACK ENGLISH TEACHER

It has been noted previously that the lack of proficiency in English by second language teachers is by no means accidental or due perhaps to their incapacity to learn and use the English language. Many factors can be attributed to this, particularly the apartheid policy prescriptions. The education policy of the apartheid government ensured that trainee teachers at black colleges were not adequately equipped with the necessary skills that would enable them to be efficient in the classroom after completion of their training. In turn, these newly qualified teachers, as has already been alluded to, produced students who were linguistically incompetent in as far as English was concerned. Mawasha (1976) in his empirical study relating to the teaching of English to North-Sotho speaking children notes that most of the teachers of English in black schools are not sufficiently qualified. He points out that only about 27,5 percent are actually qualified to teach English in the secondary and high schools. Accordingly, the problems relating to performance in English in black schools should be directly related either to lack of English language proficiency or outright limited linguistic background on the part of the teacher to render effective teaching.

He also notes Sneerby's contention that "the reason for the deterioration in the standard of English is because a vicious circle has been set up in this area in black education, that is, poorly prepared students enroll as teacher-trainees to become poorly prepared teachers who in turn teach and produce poorly prepared students and teachers and so the vicious circle continues uninterrupted from generation to generation" (1976: 92). This phenomenon still persists today in post-apartheid South Africa.

Looking at the magnitude of this problem one wonders what the government's relevant department tried to do to remedy the situation. In answering we must not lose sight of the government of the day's overall intention in as far as

education as a whole was concerned concerning black people. It is a common fact which even apologists of the apartheid government concur with the view that the education system of South Africa was not meant to be equal for all race groups in the country. White people were privileged in that they were provided with the type of education that allowed them greater access to social, economic and political advantages. On the other hand the education dished out to black people was deliberately inferior in order to relegate black people into a position of "hewers of wood and drawers of water", in other words, a position which would not make them able to challenge the system.

Despite legislation and practice to this effect, the apartheid government continuously denied as it was warranted to do that this was its grand plan. In fact the D.E.T. produced documents that supported the apartheid lie that government was doing its best to improve the quality of education in black schools. In his study referred to earlier, Mawasha writes that according to the D.E.T. Report (1983:3) this department is directly involved in the full spectrum of education incorporating preprimary and primary education, secondary and differentiated education, initial in-service further training of teachers, tertiary training and adult education (1976: 261).

He goes on to point out that there is a centralized in-service training of teachers under D.E.T. and education departments of the Bantustans. This kind of training was aimed at providing assistance, support, guidance and upgrading the effectiveness of teachers in their classrooms. This need emanates from the notion that education is a continuous dynamic process and therefore teacher training must not end with pre-service training. If one were to take these documented proclamations at face value one would applaud the D.E.T. for leaving no stone unturned in its "quest" to upgrade black education. It is also worth noting that these apartheid proclamations have manifested themselves in today's education system. While it is true that structures were put in place to window-dress the D.E.T.'s proclamations, nothing that would result in meaningful change was effected. The D.E.T. made sure that the vicious circle alluded to by Mawasha remained in place. Ill-equipped trainers or lecturers were employed without being provided with the proper training required to carry out their tasks. It was really a charade because these trainers were not themselves proficient in English or other subjects for that matter.

In as far as in-service training is concerned perhaps it would suffice here to point out what it entailed. Makgeledise (1994: 10) quotes van der Westhuizen thus: "In-service training could ... be taken to mean the inclusion of all professional development courses and activities in which a serving teacher may participate for the purpose of extending his professional knowledge, interests or instructional techniques after initial certification and does not conclude until there is termination of service". Although Makgeledis simply gives an overview of in-service training in black education, it should be noted that his study would have been more complete if it stated whether this in-service training was effective or not.

While no one will disagree that it is essential to give teachers possibilities of continuous training, it must nevertheless be seen as crucially important to adopt measures to that end. According to Mabitsela (1988: 100), "to eliminate the shortcomings in the education system and at the same time to provide the teaching corps with the opportunity to develop their inherent potential to the advantage of the school population they serve, the D.E.T. has decided to launch a project to identify certain needs of the teachers". However, it is one thing to decide to do something and another to actually do it.

It is undeniable that traditionally and historically, teachers have been recognized as agents of educational change and in-service training has always been recognized as the best way to effect these changes. However, this in-service training must be well-intentioned and properly structured and conducted in order to produce the desired results. The teacher, as a very crucial role player in dispensing education, needs to be constantly upgraded to meet the challenges inherent in education. Murphy (1985) states that the task of school teachers is now increasingly complex and demanding. It is now accepted that qualification and training is insufficient for a life-time of professional service in a rapidly changing world. Other factors such as commitment, vocation, education, personality and enthusiasm are as important as knowledge of the subject matter and strategies needed in the daily task of teaching.

It should also be noted here that although the D.E.T.'s policies were at times frustrating and unworkable, there were, nevertheless certain individuals who undertook sterling efforts to genuinely improve the lot of black teachers. Abram Mawasha, for instance, contributed a great deal to teacher training via language laboratories. Ken Hartshorne and others despite working as officials of the D.E.T. worked against the apartheid policies of the government when they were involved in in-service training of black teachers.

The black English teacher, as has been shown above is compounded with a lot of problems that hamper the effectiveness in the classroom. Amongst other things Malefo (1991) mentions the already exhausted point that the lack of adequate qualifications on the part of the teachers leads to their lack of proficiency, a good command of English and a low level of expertise in teaching it. As a result the teachers' success in teaching English will always be limited by their own difficulties such as inadequate presentation skills. If both the teacher and his pupils have low or no capabilities, proficiency and competence in English, optimum learning on the part of the pupils is unlikely. The tendency would be to use rigid methods which encourage memorization in preparation for examinations instead of encouraging pupils' discovery of knowledge through participation (negotiated). Also impulsive adoption of text books, especially the old graded ones is often encouraged by teachers.

She further states that teachers are demotivated by the chronic shortage of facilities, teaching material and poor salaries. So, some good teachers leave the teaching profession for greener pastures and which carry less headaches. The

resultant shortage of teachers gives rise to overcrowded classrooms and specialization under such circumstances becomes impossible. When black teachers attempt to improve their qualifications it is usually more for salary betterment than to gain deeper insight and clarity in the subjects they teach. The implication is that there will always be misgivings about the linguistic competence in English of black English second language teachers.

In black education, as has previously been shown, the situation is still more serious, since English is also used as a medium of instruction, following initial instruction in the mother-tongue of the pupils' ethnic group for the first four years of primary schooling. The base for future linguistic retardation is laid here in other subjects taught using English as a medium of instruction by a linguistically incompetent teacher. Pupils are therefore taught to be linguistically incompetent themselves in English.

Ellis (1987) identifies the inability of teachers to use English to generate the kind of classroom interaction in which learning can flourish. He maintains that the problem is in all likelihood not simply one of both teachers and pupils, but more generally the way in which both teachers and students regard their respective classroom roles. Ellis' argument is, basically, that the ability to use English effectively for classroom communication constitutes a specific competence in the language. If there is a language barrier between the teacher and the pupil obviously learning will not take place.

IV. O.B.E. AND A.S.P.: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

Outcomes Based Education (O.B.E.) is an approach to learning and teaching that the South African Department of Education committed itself to post 1994. This educational model differs in scope from the old one as it based on the ideal of lifelong learning for all individuals and seeks to contribute to the development of the individual. This model results in a new curriculum called Curriculum 2005 which has as its architects politicians, educationists, the business sector and other parties that have a stake in the education system of the country. All these stakeholders wanted to usher in a new order in education that is intended to be both visionary and practical. Professor S. Bhengu, the National Minister of Education post 1994 had this to say about the new curriculum: "Essentially, the new curriculum will effect a shift from one which has been content-based to one which is based on outcomes. This aims at equipping all learners with the knowledge, competencies and orientations needed for success after they leave school or have completed their training. Its guiding vision is that of a thinking, competent future citizen" (Department of Education, Curriculum 2005, 1996: 2).

Bhengu and other proponents of this ambitious Curriculum 2005 hoped that the new curriculum would be a major step forward to ensure quality education for all South Africans and that it would be embraced by all who have a stake in the learning process. Academic Support Programme on the other hand, is similar to O.B.E. in that it is also largely learner

centered since the needs of the learner drive it together with the expectation of those who commission it. Since the new curriculum was a total break with the old it obviously came with new implications and practices of say, the register used. So it was imperative for A.S.P.'s to be instituted throughout the country to better enable teachers to best deal with and to adapt to the new educational dispensation. Perhaps it will suffice here to point out the differences of the old and the new curriculums in order to context the language issue.

The new Curriculum prescribes that there should be eight learning areas. This paper will restrict itself to one learning area namely, Communication, Literacy and Language Learning as it encompasses the teaching of English. The basic tenet for this learning area is that language is a means of communication and that human development is facilitated through interaction. According to the Department of Education, the more we are able to communicate the better we are able to learn from each other and understand each other. In fact, most of the conflicts of the past were largely due to misrepresentations and unwillingness to communicate. Improved communication can only lead to a South Africa free of intolerance, misunderstanding and prejudice, and this is the focus of this learning area.

This is clearly a far cry from the old education system and its associated academic support programme. Kroes points out that: "Academic Support in the South African context, has for the last twenty years also been mostly associated with the communicative needs of radically disadvantaged students. These students were required to study at tertiary level in a language which was not their own mother-tongue. Programmes were developed to bridge the gap between school and university" (1996: 282).

He goes on to state that academic support is actually needed at almost all levels of school study in black schools. With this massive movement of educational focus, it has become necessary to institute academic support programmes that should not only address the educational needs of the learner but also the resultant trauma that usually occurs whenever there are massive mental focus shifts. It is difficult to simply regard O.B.E. as unworkable. The problem that one can advance is that of the teaching fraternity.

One could ask, do we really have adequately trained teachers who would be capable of facilitating O.B.E.? After all our present language teachers are not delivering. However, in general and particularly as far as language is concerned one is tempted that it is an ideal system.

The bulk of the teachers in South Africa will have to be retrained as they themselves are products of the old approach and on this hinges failure or success. Thankfully, the Department of Education has committed itself to providing support in the form of in-service teacher training, assessment, guidelines and student orientation. The language teacher, hopefully, would apparently no doubt benefit from this challenging undertaking. However, the evidence shows that there is no deducible improvement in the competence of the teachers.

It has been mentioned here that the “old” teaching programme required teachers and learners to follow rigid, presentation methods in the facilitation of teaching and learning. So inflexible is this programme that it does not allow scope of independent thinking, planning, and various ways of doing things. One is prompted here to say that programmes were designed to produce robot-like citizens who would not question things but follow pre-set patterns of thinking and doing things. This way of doing things was purely bureaucratic. Olson had this to say about it: “The current dominant conceptions of school change do not give proper attention to the role that it ought to play in understanding and transforming them. The teacher is reduced to an element to be manipulated within a framework of social control based on social science theory. One consequence, is that the important moral agency of the teacher is reduced to an instrument in a technical rational plan” (1992: 2).

This state in which language teachers sometimes also find themselves defies most descriptions of innovative teaching and learning. It compartmentalizes knowledge in given situations and shows scant regard for explorations of knowledge. It also makes a mockery of learning. The question that begs asking is, perhaps: What is learning?

As early as 1980 when few, if any, South Africans could meaningfully conceive of the concept O.B.E., Stevick (1980) pointed out that learning involved stages of action and that it takes place through formations of new images or the re-shaping of old ones. The learning process should always be skewed or beneficial towards the learner as it should of necessity be learner-centered. The learning process should also be learner driven.

Sotto (1994), in explaining motivation as a crucial factor in facilitating learning compares this factor to breathing. He points out that nobody lacks motivation. Motivation to him is like breathing: if we are alive we will be motivated, given the correct circumstances. In other words it is all a matter of choice to learn or not to learn. According to him two things seem to follow from this. First, teachers must be alert to factors inhibiting their learners’ motivation to learn. And second, teachers must consolidate the learners’ existing knowledge. So it is a matter of creating situations which enable us to become actively engaged in the learning process. What this approach does is that it causes a shift from teaching and onto learning.

V. IN CLOSING

There is generally a need in the country for the government and other concerned groups to institute facilities and resourced that will counter the prevalence of English Language illiteracy in the country. Much research is clearly needed to address this problem. The government’s practice in this regard is clearly not the best way. Simply providing resources such as classrooms and teachers for adults serves very little purpose. For instance, government-run educational projects are serviced by teachers who have been trained to teach children and not adults. The government employs these

teachers to teach adults almost the same material that is taught in high schools.

In as far as the teaching of English as a second language is concerned, it is important to address concerns about this. Adult education teachers should be trained to teach adults. What our language planners should do is to research first before just imposing a language-teaching system whose only credibility is that teaching is taking place in a void. If a good research is undertaken, and when the research findings are implemented, what ultimately goes on in the classroom has relevance and impacts in people’s lives in a meaningful way.

It must be pointed out here that this work does not advocate or imply that black teachers of English should have the same competence in English as L1 speakers of the language. What this study does is to investigate the background and causes of why these teachers, and by extension their students do not have reasonable competency of standard English given the fact that it is a medium of instruction. In any case, education is largely a formal exercise and the language through which it is dispensed must be that which both the teacher and student understand and are able to communicate in.

It is fruitless really for an incompetent teacher in English language to be teaching L2 students who can hardly make out what he is teaching and at the end of the day to expect results. This amounts to a case of the blind leading the blind.

In order to succeed in giving pupils enough relevant exercises in the use of English and in order to cultivate communicative competence in English L2 learners, teachers themselves are expected not only to be fluent speakers of English, but also to be specialists who are well-versed in current theories and strategies of English L2 teaching. But the structure of centralization of black education deprives teachers of playing that role.

If O.B.E. is to succeed, the government must provide the necessary resources. The government is not the only beneficiary of good educational products. So it is imperative that business and N.G.O.’s should provide the necessary support to make the new education system work. More detailed researchers on the problems pointed out in this work should of necessity be conducted to address the prevailing situation.

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