

A Study on a Group of Indian English as a Second Language Learners' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has been one of the most popular terms in the language learning field lately. Researchers have been conducting studies to see different aspects of learner autonomy and to bring different suggestions to teachers to promote autonomous learning in their classrooms. Students of a particular cultural background would not show the same level of readiness for learner autonomy as the students of another culture. Cultural and educational settings of the instruction affect how the teachers and students perceive the concept of learner autonomy, and these differences in perception obviously affect how the ways to promote learner autonomy work. As the perception and realization of learner autonomy changes depending on the cultural background, it is important to see the autonomy-related perspectives of different learners and teachers around the world. Thus, aiming to contribute the relevant literature from this standpoint, the main aim of this study was to explore four Indian English as a second language (ESL) learners' perceptions related to teacher and learner responsibilities in the language learning process and to get an idea of how ESL students in the Indian educational context perceive the concepts related to learner independence. Three interview sessions were conducted with the participants in order to reach the aim of the study. The data were analyzed according to three main categories: (a) aspects of language learning for which the participants saw the teacher as the most responsible figure in the classroom; (b) aspects of learning for which the participants considered students to be more responsible; (c) aspects that both the teacher and the students share equal responsibility. It was hoped that the results of the study would provide guidance to teachers and researchers, especially the ones working with multicultural student groups, to understand the effects of culture on the interpretation of concepts related to learner autonomy.

Keywords: *Learner autonomy, ESL, readiness.*

Introduction

Learner autonomy has been one of the most popular terms in the language learning field especially for the last three decades. A lot of researchers have been conducting studies to investigate various aspects of learner autonomy, and to bring practical suggestions to teachers to promote learner autonomy in their classrooms. One of the most important points emphasized by researchers is that the concept of learner autonomy can be interpreted differently in different cultural and educational settings (Holliday, 2003; Littlewood, 1999). That is, cultural and educational settings of the instruction

affect how teachers and students perceive the concept of learner autonomy. In other words, students of a particular cultural background would not show the same level of readiness for learner autonomy as the students of another culture. Therefore, before making any attempt to promote it, students' perceptions related to learner autonomy should be investigated. (Yıldırım, 2008a; Yıldırım, 2008b; Benson, 2001; Cotterall, 1995).

Aiming to contribute to the literature on readiness for learner autonomy from a cultural standpoint, this interview-based qualitative study investigated four Indian ESL (English as a Second Language) learners' perceptions related to learner autonomy. The main aim of the study was to explore four Indian ESL learners' perceptions related to teacher and learner responsibilities in the language learning process and to get an idea of how ESL students in the Indian educational context perceive the concepts related to learner independence. More specifically, the study focused on Indian ESL learners' opinions related to teacher and learner responsibilities in the language learning process in order to better understand their perceptions of learner autonomy. It was hoped that the results of the study would provide guidance to teachers and researchers to understand the effects of culture on the interpretation of concepts related to learner autonomy.

Major reason for conducting this study was to contribute the relevant literature by describing a group of Indian ESL learners' perceptions of learner autonomy. As the perception and realization of learner autonomy changes depending on the cultural background, it is important to see the autonomy-related perspectives of different learners and teachers around the world. This study was an attempt to provide a small depiction of a group of Indian students' perceptions of learner autonomy. In order to better understand the effect of culture on autonomous learning perceptions and practices, more qualitative studies should be conducted with different groups of teachers and learners from different countries around the world.

The rest of this paper will unfold, first, discussing the relevant literature on readiness for learner autonomy putting a specific focus on the culture element, and then explaining the methodology and presenting the results of the study. The paper will finish by discussing the conclusions to be drawn from the study as well as the suggestions for further studies.

Review of Literature

As applied to language learning, learner autonomy means students' taking more control over and having more responsibility for their own language learning process. It does not mean learning in isolation. Autonomous learners do not learn language without a teacher and without peers. Instead, they develop a sense of interdependence and they work together with teachers and other learners towards shared goals (Üstünoğlu, 2009; Benson, 2001).

Emphasizing the desirability of learner autonomy in education, Kenny (1993) states that:

"Indeed it can be said that only when autonomy is being allowed to function is education taking place at all. For where autonomy is repressed or ignored- in other words where the learner has no say and no being- then what we have is not education but some sort of conditioning procedure; the imposition and reinforcement of dominant opinion. But education as an emancipatory agent empowers a person's autonomy, which allows new interpretations of the world and possibility of change" (p.440).

Focusing on the importance of learner autonomy in the language learning process, Ellis and Sinclair (1989, p. 1) state that 'helping learners take on more responsibility for their own learning can be beneficial because:

- learning can be more effective when learners take control of their own learning because they learn what they are ready to learn;
- those learners who are responsible for their own learning can carry on learning outside the classroom;
- learners who know about learning can transfer learning strategies to other subjects."

Literature suggests that the concept of learner autonomy is perceived differently in different cultural contexts. That is, the culture and educational contexts of students and teachers affect the realization of learner autonomy (Gremmo and Riley, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Benson, 2001; Holliday, 2003; Sert, 2006).

Ho and Crookall (1995, p. 236-237) support this view as:

"While personal autonomy appears to be a universally desirable and beneficial objective, it is important to remember that learner autonomy is exercised within the context of specific cultures. Therefore, in choosing the skills and kinds of knowledge to develop and selecting the procedures or methods that are to be used to help learners develop skills for autonomy, the culturally-constructed nature of the classroom setting needs to be taken into account."

Therefore, the effect of cultural background should not be disregarded while trying to implement learner autonomy. Research on learner autonomy should focus on the perception and implementation of this concept in different cultures in order to have a better understanding of the effects of cultural factors (Bullock, 2011; Chan, 2001; Cotterall, 1995; Cotterall, 1999). Benson (2001, p. 55) supports this view as he says "if we accept that autonomy takes different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different context of learning, we may also need to accept that its manifestations will vary according to cultural context."

Addressing the connection between culture and the realization of learner autonomy, Holliday (2003) states that the commonly held 'Western' notion of learner autonomy in TESOL is 'culturist' as it praises the notions of participation and liveliness, and as it puts passivity as unquestionable opposition to autonomous learning. In fact, Holliday says, autonomy resides in students' social worlds, students from different cultures can be autonomous in their own way.

One way of discovering the possible effects of culture on the realization of learner autonomy in a particular educational context might be to direct autonomy related research in that context towards investigating students' and teachers' readiness for learner autonomy. Since the perception of autonomy changes according to different cultural conditions, before making any attempt to promote learner autonomy, it would be worthwhile to investigate how ready students and their teachers appear to be to take on the autonomous learning conditions and opportunities (Chan, 2003). Promoting learner autonomy involves responsibility change between teachers and learners (Gökgöz, 2008; Balçıkanlı, 2006). It is important to examine the readiness of both parties prior to this change by investigating their perceptions of responsibility in the language learning process, and their actual autonomous language learning and teaching practices (Cotterall, 1995; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002; Chan, 2003). Such an understanding of readiness for learner autonomy could provide guidance for curriculum development, material revision and adaptation, classroom

practice, and teacher training (Baylan, 2007; Little, 1995; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; Chan, 2003). In addition, studying student perceptions of learner autonomy might also provide the opportunity of getting away from the 'culturist' (Holliday, 2003) view of learner autonomy as perceptions might reveal what actions may be failing to show. Being an attempt on that direction, the study reported on this paper aimed at discovering an Indian ESL learner's perceptions related to learner autonomy in the language learning process.

Method

Participants

The participants of the study were four 20 to 22 year-old male Indian students in the U.S.A. When the study was conducted, they had been in the United States for only one month as graduate students studying civil or computer engineering at a university in upstate New York. They all were born and raised in different regions of India where they never left before coming to the U.S.A. All the participants' fathers were middle-scale business owners in India and they all stated that they were not coming from highly educated families but their parents valued education although they themselves did not have the opportunity to get a good education.

Although they were exposed to English to certain extent before school, as a subject they started to learn English at the age of five or six, when they went to kindergarten. Formal instruction of English in India continued until they came to the United States. During this formal English instruction period they took different language skills courses such as speaking, reading, listening and writing, as well as the language area courses such as vocabulary and grammar. They stated that their English teachers in India would give great importance to communication, but they would never disregarded accuracy. Grammar had always been important in their language learning process. When the data for this study were collected, it was their first year in the U.S.A., and they had been sharing an apartment. They preferred speaking English at home not only because they all spoke different regional languages, but also because it was 'the way it is' in India.

The participants' consent for participating for this study was taken by using a consent form which explained the purpose, procedure, and possible risks of the study.

Procedure

This was a qualitative study which used interviewing as the way of data collection. The data for the study were collected in September - October 2006. Following Seidman's (1998) model, three different interview sessions were held with each participant. This model suggests conducting a series of interviews with the same participant, questions of each interview session are structured based on the analysis of the data collected during the previous sessions. Therefore, a semi-structured interview technique was used in all three sessions. The questions for the first session were identified based on relevant literature on learner autonomy. The researcher started each session with a set of pre-written questions but some of these questions were changed or eliminated, and some new questions were added depending on the flow of the interview. During the first interview, which took approximately thirty minutes, the participant was asked to talk about his experience and opinions about the topic being investigated. The second and third sessions took approximately forty-five minutes each, and during both of these sessions the participant was asked to concentrate and reflect on the details defined by the researcher depending on the previous interview. For both the second and the third sessions, again, some questions were prepared considering the participant's answers to the questions

in the previous session to guide the interview, and some other questions were asked depending on the answers of the participant during the sessions. All three sessions of interviews were taped and then transcribed by the researcher.

As for the analysis of the data, three main categories were identified as a result the first reading of the transcribed data. These categories were consistent with the findings of studies conducted for similar purposes (e.g. Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). These three categories were: (a) aspects of language learning that the teacher has more responsibility, (b) aspects of language learning that the student has more responsibility, and (c) aspects of language learning that the teacher and students share responsibility. After identifying the three main categories in the first reading, then the data were further analyzed and the participants' ideas were categorized according to the three categories stated above.

Results

Aspects of Language Learning that the Teacher has more Responsibility

The participants talked about a lot of different aspects of language learning that the teacher has the greatest responsibility. Generally they said that they considered the teacher as the main figure in the language classroom. The ideal teacher they had in their minds was 'everything' in the class, s/he is a great figure for the students. That teacher knows everything, never does mistakes, and controls every action taken by the students. The following extracts from the interviews exemplify how they see the teacher in the language classroom:

"We are looking for a teacher who is supposed to know everything. When we are kids, we think teacher is someone who knows much more than anyone in the world. So, the evening that you go home and your father tells that something your teacher taught is wrong, you don't listen to your father first, because teacher is someone really great. "

"Whenever a teacher speaks, he must be very very sure he doesn't make embarrassing mistakes because once the teacher makes mistakes, then no way for him to teach a language. There is a lot of differences between teaching a language and teaching a subject. Anyone can do mistakes at maths, that is allowed, but once you make a mistake at language, what are students going to do when even the teacher is making mistakes."

When we look at the data in detail, we see that correcting grammar mistakes, ensuring accuracy, planning the course, setting the objectives of the course, deciding on the content, deciding on the activities, and evaluating the course were the basic issues mentioned by the participants as the aspects of language learning that the teacher has much more responsibility than the students.

They mentioned that accuracy is very important in language learning, and it must be the teacher's responsibility to correct the students' grammar mistakes. They stated several times that language should not be learned just for the sake of learning a subject, but it should be complete in terms of accuracy and fluency to express one's own ideas, and therefore, the teacher should be responsible for the correction of mistakes. The following extract from the data shows what they think about the teacher's responsibility for correcting students' mistakes:

"... the teacher is supposed to be the one who corrects you in the basics of the language, so that you don't make mistakes. The teacher should be the person who should

emphasize that you learn the language in such a way that it is complete, that is not just for the sake of learning, but it is in the way of conversing and expressing your ideas in a better way."

Planning lessons was another aspect of language learning which the participants gave the greatest responsibility to the teacher. They were asked different questions related to setting objectives for the lesson, defining the content of the lesson, choosing materials for the lesson, and choosing activities for the lesson. Their answers to all these questions can be combined under the main title of planning language lessons. They gave greater responsibility to the teacher for all the aspects mentioned above. For setting the objectives for language learning, they said that the teacher, as the main figure in the classroom, should be the one to set the general objectives of the course. It may sometimes be possible for the students to set some personal objectives, but generally it must be the teacher who defines objectives of the course. The following sentences show how they think about the objectives in the language classroom:

"It has to be the teacher. Main person sets the objectives. But beyond the teacher's objectives, a student can set his personal objectives, which can help him improve much beyond what is taught in the class. But otherwise always the teacher sets the objectives. So generally if you ask me, it is the teacher who sets the objectives."

For defining content, the participants said that it must be the teacher who has the main responsibility, students cannot decide on the kinds of topics to add into the content or kinds of topics to skip, and therefore what teacher defines as the content of learning must be followed by the students. Some language learners enjoy being involved in the process of defining the content of the lesson. However, the participants of this study stated that students have to follow what the teacher sets. This can provide us a clue about their understanding of learner independence in language learning. Here are some extracts from the interviews:

"The content ... the teacher again has got better responsibility ... teachers can take off that content that they feel it is not good, which the student has to follow in the class at least. From chapter one to ten ... this is my point of view ... see ... in chapter four there may be some vulgar content, or violence, or sex, or something like that ... so ... it is ... it is always better to skip these topics ... so again I am telling you, the better responsibility at this part goes to the teacher, it is never the responsibility of the student because what the teacher sets has to be followed."

The aspects of choosing materials for the class and defining activities were also considered among teacher's responsibilities by the participants. For choosing activities to be used in the classroom, they stated that the teacher always knows appropriate activities to be used in the class, and he/she should always take the initiative for this aspect of learning. For choosing materials to be used, they again said that it must always be the teacher who gives the final decision. They stated that if the responsibility of choosing materials is given to students, they might choose inappropriate or unnecessary materials. However, if the teacher is the one to define the materials, he/she can always do that better because he knows the students' levels and interests.

The participants stated that the evaluation of the course is another aspect of learning for which the teacher has the greater responsibility. They were most clear about this issue when they were asked whose responsibility it should be to evaluate how the course is going. The following quotation shows what they think about this aspect of learning:

"... that (evaluating the course) is always the teacher's responsibility, because the teacher knows better, because the teacher is always experienced, and he or she knows the best, so it is always the teacher."

To summarize, related to the language learning process, the participants of this study stated that correcting grammar mistakes of students, ensuring accuracy in the language, planning the language course, setting the objectives, deciding on the content and the activities, and evaluating the course are the aspects that the teacher has the greatest responsibility. In the next section we will focus on the aspects that the students have greater responsibility than the teacher.

Aspects of Language Learning that the Student has more Responsibility

Another category that the interview data were classified into was the aspects of language learning that the student has more responsibility than the teacher. For this category, the participants stated fewer aspects than they stated for the previous one. Aspects of language learning such as deciding on what to learn outside class, and evaluating what has been learned were stated by the participants as the areas that the students themselves are responsible for.

For deciding on what to learn outside class, the participants stated that the teacher has nothing to do to decide on outside class learning, all the responsibility belongs to the student. Some language learners prefer negotiating with the teacher about what they should do outside class, and some others think that teacher is responsible for everything in class but s/he has nothing to do when the student leaves the class. The participants of this study seem to be in the latter group. The following extract from the interviews shows what they think about outside class learning:

"It (responsibility) is students', because for outside class learning, teacher can't impose anything on the students, because once they go out of the class, these rules, regulations ... nothing matters to the students. Teacher does not control over the student once the student is out of the class ... so outside the class, it is hundred percent responsibility of the students."

When the participants were asked if the teacher has a guiding role for outside class learning, they generally said that although the teacher tries to guide the students, they cannot guarantee that the students will follow his/her guidance. One of them explained this situation as follows:

"... teachers can guide, but I have seen the general tendency of the students ... they listen to these rules, regulations they hear teacher telling everyday like go home and practice the stuff, but the student has never done that, I mean generally ninety-nine percent of students will not do that because they don't have time, first of all, and secondly, they are busy doing something else."

For evaluation of learning, the participants said that a student should always be responsible for his/her own evaluation. One of them said that teachers generally compare some successful students to unsuccessful ones, and this is not a good way of evaluation, and he stated that a student can evaluate himself/herself better than the teacher does. The following sentences exemplify what the participants think about this issue:

"I will say it (evaluator of learning) is always student, I mean you can evaluate yourself always better than that the teacher can evaluate you because usually what happens is the teacher puts a benchmark, particular student X is always best in her eyes, and remaining students are graded based on X. This is what I have seen most of the times. But the student can put that X as himself, and compare himself to himself every time he is given an exam, I think that will help him much better than comparing himself to someone else whom he doesn't even know. So I think students can always evaluate themselves better."

In summary, the participants of the study stated that deciding what to learn and what to study outside class, and making an evaluation of the progress in the language learning process were the aspects of language learning that the students have more responsibility than the teacher. The next section will focus on the aspects of language learning that the teacher and the students equally share the responsibility.

Aspects of Language Learning that the Teacher and Students Share Responsibility

The participants of the study mentioned two aspects of language learning that both the students and the teacher have equal responsibility. One of them was increasing students' interest to language learning, and the other one was making sure students make progress during language learning process.

For increasing interest to learning English, they generally stated that students should always look for interesting aspects of language learning so that they can learn the language in a more meaningful and enjoyable way. On the other hand, they mentioned that students are not the only ones who are responsible for this aspect of language learning, their teachers should also encourage and guide them to be more interested, and they should provide them with the interesting, meaningful and enjoyable ways of language learning.

For making sure of gaining progress in language, the participants again mentioned shared responsibility. They said that both the teacher and the students should do their jobs appropriately in order to make sure that the student is learning something in terms of language. The following extract shows how they see teacher and learner responsibilities for making sure students make progress during the language learning process:

"... the teacher and the student have got fifty fifty percent of responsibilities because the teacher can do his job, but if the student does not, then the process is incomplete, and if the student tries to do the job but the teacher is not good enough, again the process is incomplete. So what I feel is the responsibility is fifty fifty."

To summarize, there were two main aspects of language learning that were mentioned as the ones that students and teachers share the responsibility: increasing students' interest, and making sure of learners' progress in the language learning process.

After presenting the results for the three main categories focused on in this study, now we can discuss what all these findings mean in terms of learner autonomy and culture in the language learning process.

Discussion

The aim of this interview-based qualitative study was to explore four Indian ESL learners' perceptions related to teacher and learner responsibilities in the language learning process. Three interview sessions were conducted with the participants in order to reach the aim of the study. The data were analyzed according to three main categories. The first category consisted of aspects of language learning for which the participants saw the teacher as the most responsible figure in the classroom. These aspects were ensuring accuracy, evaluating the course, and planning learning via setting objectives, defining content, and deciding on activities and materials. Second category consisted of aspects of learning for which the participants considered students to be more responsible. Aspects in this category were evaluation of learning and deciding on outside class learning activities. The last category consisted of aspects that both the teacher and the students share equal responsibility. Aspects of this category were increasing interest to learning English and ensuring that students make progress during the language learning process.

When we look at the aspects in the category that the teacher has more responsibility, we see that almost all the aspects are related to methodological issues of learning. In other words, almost all the aspects that the participants thought the teacher has the greatest responsibility are about planning and organizing the English lesson such as setting objectives, defining content, choosing materials, and evaluating the course. Although these may be the participants' personal opinions, they may also have been affected by their cultural and educational background.

The participants' opinions about the aspects of language learning that the teacher has the greatest responsibility could provide some practical implications. For the ESL teachers who want to promote learner autonomy in their classrooms, these results might mean that some of their students may not be quite ready for a sudden responsibility change as they might be thinking that the teacher has the absolute responsibility for choosing materials, setting objectives, or evaluating the course. Therefore, it might be better for those teachers who want to create a more autonomous learning environment to start by giving small responsibilities to their students and to increase the responsibility level slowly in time.

Also, some teachers might want to involve their students more into the teaching and learning processes by letting them set some objectives, choose some materials, or evaluate the course. For those teachers, results of this study might mean that some of their students may not be coming to class ready to take such kind of responsibility. The reason for those students' reluctance to take more responsibility in their own learning process should not always be interpreted as lack of interest to the class. Those students might still be under the influence of their past learning habits. It is important for these teachers to understand that idealistic moves deeply influenced by Western values to create student independence might not always work as desired with students from different cultures (Kubota, 2002). Adamson (2004) support this argument by stating that "[i]ndeed, it is often reported that idealistic moves to create independent, reflective learners in tertiary settings encounter problems with some Asian learners who may find it hard to relinquish their old strategies quickly" (p. 51).

The participants' opinions about the aspects of language learning that the students have more responsibility, and that the teacher and students have equal responsibilities might also provide some practical implications. Evaluation of learning was one issue that the participants thought the student was more responsible. This might seem in contrast with their view of teacher figure that is the absolute authority in learning. Here, the reason might be that some of these students were given chances for evaluating himself in his own language learning process, and this might have affected

how they see evaluation issue in language learning. The implication of this contrast in the participants' views might be that students are ready to take more responsibility when they are given the chance to take charge of their own learning. The participants' notion of shared responsibility for making sure of gaining progress in the language learning process might also support this argument.

The participants' opinions about the aspects of language learning that the students have more responsibility, and that the teacher and students have equal responsibilities might provide another important implication: no matter what cultural background the students have, or no matter how big responsibility they give to the teacher, there may still be some aspects of learning that the students are ready to share responsibility, or take more responsibility than the teacher. Teachers may identify those aspects with the help of simple surveys or classroom discussions, and use them as the starting points for promoting learner autonomy.

Overall, learner autonomy is one of the most popular topics in the field of language learning. Many teachers are trying to foster learner autonomy in their classrooms. However, especially in the multi-cultural classrooms, all the students may not be equally ready for learner autonomy in terms of the level of taking responsibility. Therefore, before making any attempt to foster learner autonomy, teachers should be aware of their students' educational background and perceptions related to learner autonomy.

Conclusion

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings of this study is that learner autonomy is not an all-or-nothing kind of concept. In other words, it does not seem possible to talk about completely non-autonomous or completely autonomous students. Most of the students would be ready to give greater responsibility to teacher for some aspects of language learning whereas they take greater responsibility to themselves for some other aspects. The participants of this study might be very good examples for this argument because even they, students who say the teacher is the absolute authority in the language classroom, though that there are some aspects of language learning which the student should have the greatest responsibility. That is, even the students who seem to be very far away from behaving autonomously carry the potential for autonomous learning within themselves. What is important for language teachers is to be able to determine where to start from for change.

Teachers and professors, especially the ones from Western cultures, who want to promote learner autonomy should not start by bringing the 'ideal' autonomous student image into the classrooms. They should know that students from different backgrounds bring different perceptions of responsibility with themselves, and some of those perceptions might not fit into 'ideal' type of autonomous learner which is defined according to Western values. Discussing how to deal with this problem, Holliday (2003, p. 118) states that a 'social autonomy' approach can escape the trap of "culturism by introducing three disciplines:

1. not *beginning with* an essentialist culture description of students from a certain part of the world, and not *presuming* that autonomy is the domain of a Western (or any other) culture;
2. trying to see through and beyond a TESOL professionalism which is influenced by native-speakerism, to search for the worlds which the students bring with them.

...

3. presuming that autonomy is *universal* until there is evidence otherwise – and that if it is not immediately evident in student behavior, this may be because there is something preventing us from seeing it – thus treating people equally as people.”

Findings of this study, and the conclusions drawn from those findings suggest some implications for further studies. First of all, more studies, both quantitative and qualitative, are needed in order to better understand the notion of learner autonomy and its connection to culture. Quantitative studies on this subject would make generalizations more likely whereas qualitative ones would paint richer pictures. This study was a qualitative one based on the interviews with four participants. Further qualitative studies should involve more participants, and should use more than one source of data such as observations, interviews, and artifacts. Secondly, further studies should focus on teacher perceptions of learner autonomy as well as learner perceptions because teachers’ cultural backgrounds seem to be as crucial as learners’ cultural background in terms of understanding and promoting learner autonomy.

To conclude, this study depicted how four ESL students coming from Indian background sees teacher and learner responsibilities in the language learning process. Although many more studies are needed to understand how students from different cultural backgrounds perceive learner autonomy, the results of this study may provide guidance for teachers and curriculum developers in different educational contexts who are seeking ways of promoting learner autonomy.

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