THE EFFECT OF NARRATIVE PARAGRAPH WRITING ON IRANIAN INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS' IDIOM LEARNING IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract

Idiomatic expressions usually make FL learners feel worried in the process of language learning. Due to the fact, that there has been no clear-cut answer as to how to teach idioms effectively, answering the question *whether narrative paragraph writing facilitates idiom learning improvement* may be of great help to put an end to the problem. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine the effect of narrative paragraph writing on learning improvement of idioms. 24 intermediate students were selected out of a larger population of 60 students in Karoun Language Institute in Touyserkan, Iran, and randomly assigned to the experimental and the control groups. The treatment lasted for eight sessions, each session with at least a two-day interval, about two months. At the end of each class, the control group had to do matching exercises while the experimental group was asked to write a short narrative paragraph using as many newly-taught idioms as possible. The results of the study revealed that subjects in the paragraph writing group performed better on the post-test than the control group. The findings of the present study can be of great help for non-native speakers of English and teachers to teach better and feel the pivotal role of writing in SLT.

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1. Introduction

Newly the role of lexical acquisition in language learning has become one of the important concerns among foreign language researchers. It is clear that the more we improve our understanding of the way learners learn lexicon of foreign language, the more we understand FL learning.

As Carter et al. (2001) showed, idioms make language learners experience difficulty in the process of language learning. Firstly, figuring out if an idiom exists is not always possible for learners; so they tend to look for the literal meaning. Secondly, learners cannot always translate idioms into their own language. So they need a good dictionary containing examples of idioms.

Idioms appear in almost all forms of language: in movies, lectures, television programs, etc. Since they are frequently used, it will be like sailing against the wind to try to communicate without having the knowledge of idioms. As a result, although it makes language learning a little bit challenging, FL learners should understand the importance of learning idioms. In effect, to have a better understanding of the target language, every FL learner should be equipped with the knowledge of idioms as well as grammar and vocabulary of that language. A study by Seccord and Wiig (1993) showed the central role of idiomatic knowledge for social communication and reading.

Most Iranian learners, like every other FL learners get bored when they come across idiomatic expressions and even prefer not to learn them. According to Irujo (1986), this can have its roots in the interference of L1 or partly in the incomplete mastery of English idioms.

Figuring out whether writing has any effect on cognitive abilities has been the topic of lots of research (Barcroft, 2004; Lee, 2003; Swain, 1996; &Zamel, 1992).

Both semantic elaboration and output are involved when it comes to writing new idioms in a paragraph. Barcroft (2004) believes semantic elaboration plays a role because learners include the new idioms in sentences after they can understand the meaning of them to some extent. Also since paragraph writing has a production process, it involves output as well. Barcroft (2004) suggested that lexical learning can be facilitated through semantic elaboration and output which are involved in sentence or paragraph writing.

While some researchers believe that mixing vocabulary and reading tasks with writing activities is not effective for learning the vocabulary to which idioms belong, Zamel (1992), Swain (1996) believe in the positive effect that writing may have on reading and also in

incorporating writing with reading. Zamel (ibid.) state because of its heuristic and generative nature, writing allows students to write their way into reading and to discover that reading shares much in common with writing, that is, reading is an act of composing.

In conclusion, since there has been no crystal clear answer to the question whether narrative paragraph writing has any effect on FL learners' idiom learning, the present study through a course of instruction hopes to investigate the effect of narrative paragraph writing on learning idioms.

To scientifically tackle the problem of this research, it is essential to have a clear research question as follows:

Does narrative paragraph writing have any significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' idiom learning improvement?

In order to answer the research question, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

Narrative paragraph writing does not have any significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' idiom learning improvement.

2. Review of the Related Literature

Since this study was done to examine the effect of narrative paragraph writing on the improvement of idiom learning, it made the researchers provide a survey of idioms which included their definitions, features, etc.

2.1. What is meant by idiom?

What follows is what appears in Oxford Advanced learner's dictionary (2005) as the definition for idiom: a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words. Here are some other definitions:

Carter (1987) writes idioms are "restricted collocations which cannot normally be understood from the literal meaning of the words which make them up."

"The traditional definition of an idiom states that its meaning is not a function of the meaning of its parts and the way these are syntactically combined; that is, an idiom is a non-compositional expression" (Linder, 1992: 223). Greater details about non-compositionality of idioms will be given later.

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"I shall regard an idiom as a constituent or a series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed" (Fraster, 1970).

"An idiom is any string of words for which the meaning of the whole expression cannot be determined from the meanings of the individual morphemes that make up the string" (Falk, 1973, p. 420).

Cooper (1999) classifies idioms as decomposable and non-decomposable. Decomposable idioms are those which can be analyzed. For example, *pop the question*. In this idiom, figurative and literal meaning correspond: *pop* means *ask* and *the question* refers to *proposing for marriage*. Non-decomposable idioms, on the other hand, cannot be analyzed. In fact, the meaning of the words in non-decomposable idioms has nothing to do with the figurative meaning. For example, *to kick the bucket*which means *to die*.

2.2. Idioms and other figurative expressions

It is not always easy to make a clear distinction between an idiom and other kinds of figurative expressions because almost all figurative expressions have unusual meaning. So it seems there is an overlap among these terms. However, a distinction between idioms and other figurative expressions has been made by authorities. The following examples help to better understand the point:

1. People always ask him for advice although he is very young. He *has an old head on young shoulders*.
2. Since they have got married, they've been in seventh heaven.

Everyone thinks of the italic expressions as idiomatic expressions because no one can be in the seventh heaven or have another head on their shoulder. It is not possible to think they have literal non-idiomatic meanings.

2.3. L1 and comprehension of FL idioms

Learners usually face lots of different problems in the process of learning a foreign language. This sometimes persuades or even tempts them to rely on their L1. It has been observed more among beginner language learners. When it comes to learning idioms, the very

first thing learners do is to consider idioms' literal meaning which is available in the context and try to guess the meaning. It is because idioms deal with figurative language which is always challenging. Sometimes foreign language learners become more interested in making use of their mother tongue. What is more is that even students of advanced levels also tend to rely on their mother tongue to grasp the meaning of an idiom. Therefore, it has been in question whether using or depending on L1 is of any help in learning FL idioms or not.

In a study by Irujo (in Cooper, 1999) participants' comprehension of three groups of English idioms was examined. She reached the conclusion that those idioms which were different in the languages were the most difficult and those which were very similar and identical to their L1 were the easiest to comprehend. Also, Cooper (1999) believed that L1 is important in FL idiom processing. This was revealed through an investigation. Another study by Irujo (1986) showed that identical idioms were easily comprehended and produced while different idioms were the hardest ones to comprehend and produce with less interference than identical ones.

Considering the fact that learners can benefit from the similarity between their L1 and foreign language to understand the figurative meaning, yet this similarity can mislead them as well. To make it clear, when a learner reads or hears the sentence "They'll be on your back", he may think it means "They'll support you", while it means "They'll criticize you". What happens here is that the learner relies on his mother tongue since he trusts it, and based on the individual words concludes that it is talking about *supporting*, which is false.

2.4. Translatability of idioms

Considering the fact that there are some idioms that can be translated word for word into other languages, it goes without saying that the majority of them are not be able to be translated this way. Iranian FL learners my think of the idiom *better late than never* for example, as an idiom which can be easily translated into their mother tongue; better to say, they may think they have the same idiom in Persian. On the other hand, they may find it difficult to translate the idiom *to have butterflies in your stomach* or *keep it under your hat* into Persian. Idioms can be different in different languages due to their form, meaning, stylistic value and pragmatic function. There is no guarantee for two idioms in two different languages to have the same stylistic value or pragmatic function even if they enjoy the same form and meaning.

It is also possible for related languages to have completely different idioms and the same time they can share very similar idioms. One of the reasons why some idioms are the same in different languages is stated by Fraster (1970) who believes those languages probably have a common culture, so some idioms can be commonly borrowed from the other language(s).

Based on what went on about how idioms of L1 and FL are categorized above, when it comes to translating some idioms from a language to another, lots of attention must be paid to the fact that idioms can be expressed and translated differently because of their differences. The following examples will shed some light on whether idioms are translatable.

If the idiom *to be on somebody's back* is to be translated to Persian, some mistakes may be unintentionally made due to the fact that although the form seems the same in both languages i.e. English and Persian, the meaning is completely different. This idiom means *criticize somebody*. So an Iranian beginner language learner or even translator can easily make a big mistake and translate it as *supporting or helping somebody* which is false and should be *criticizing somebody*.

Another interesting idiom to be discussed here is *Charity begins at home*. This idiom shares the same concept between English and Persian, although the form is different. Most Iranian FL learners can translate it into Persian on the condition that they already know what the word *charity* means.

Finally some idioms like *the apple of somebody's eye* has the same concept in Persian, too. However, the form is a little different. It must be translated *a person or thing that s loved more than any other*.

2.5. Acquisition of idioms

Research into idiom learning just like every other foreign language learning component needs careful and well-designed study. Some strategies which have pedagogical implications for teaching idioms have become clear as a result of idiom acquisition research. McCarthy (1998) believes that most researchers have considered context-based teaching as the most effective way for teaching idioms. It also should be mentioned that Krashen (1985), Swain (1995) and Zamel (1992) and some others emphasized the role of input and output which raises the question if students' idiom learning improves if they are made to use them contextually.

Swain (1996) gives a summary of the output hypothesis by writing "through producing language, either spoken or written, language acquisition/learning may occur" (p. 159) and believes that the ultimate goal of the output hypothesis is that learners have to be responsible for what and how they learn. Swain (1993) also believes that frequent use the target language helps develop fluency.

Cooper (1998) writes "idiom acquisition research [...] has uncovered a number of findings that have pedagogical implication for idiom instruction" (p. 255). There are three hypotheses about how idioms are processed according to Swain (1998) which can lead to an effective plan for teaching idioms.

The first one is the *literal first hypothesis* consisting of two modes: one processing the literal meaning and the other one processing the figurative meaning.

The *simultaneous processing hypothesis* is the second one which states that the literal and figurative meanings are mixed and this mixture matches the context.

The third one is the *direct access model* which only uses the figurative meaning and there is no literal analysis of an idiom.

2.6. Teaching idioms

One of the most difficult areas which involves both teachers and learners is teaching and learning idioms. As a result, it has made researchers try to find out suitable and effective and at the same time easy techniques to teach idioms. As it was mentioned earlier, every discourse contains a great deal of idioms, so the studies in the area of idiomatic expressions are connected with the comprehension and production of idioms.

Boer and Demecheleer (2001) believe that teaching idioms requires teachers to be aware of cultural aspects of idioms. Also the figurative meaning in the target language ought to be paid close attention to by teachers.

According to Cooper (1999) how native speakers of English comprehend idioms is explained through four different theories. The first one is called *idiom-list hypothesis* claiming that the first thing which is considered is the literal meaning of the idiom. On the condition that the literal meaning doesn't fit the context, then a particular idiom lexicon will be made I his mind.

The second theory is *representation hypothesis*. In this theory idioms are seen as long words which are stored in the lexicon with all other words. It is also believed that there is a simultaneous processing of both literal and figurative meanings of the idioms.

The third theory is called the *direct access hypothesis*. It claims that the literal meaning of an idiom is hardly considered by a native speaker, but instead he tries to directly access the figurative meaning from the mental lexicon.

According to Mendis and Simpson (2003) there should be a balance between a 'holistic approach' and an 'analytical approach'. Holistic approach requires learners to learn idioms as chunks which means that the composite meaning should be focused on. Meanwhile analytical approach claims that the meaning of an idiom should be taught via the meaning of its containing words explained. They believe that are better taught through an analytical approach. They also claim that learners should be taught how to learn idioms as chunks and not be persuaded to analyze the words making up the idioms.

According to what went on it seems necessary to have some teaching strategies to help learners both comprehend and produce idioms inside and outside the classroom.

Mendis and Simpson (2003) believe that teachers should first teach students the nature of an idiom ad then how to guess the meaning from the context. Teachers can the ask students to find idioms in any kind of discourse e.g. written or spoken. It is also claimed that it is effective to compare idioms with what they mean in students' native language as well.

A kind of cloze exercise in which there is a paragraph used as a context for an idiom can help students to guess the meaning from the context. On the condition that students are able to do this exercise, in another kind of activity, they can be asked to complete the paragraph by filling the blanks using idioms.

3. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of narrative paragraph writing on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' idiom learning improvement. This chapter is the detailed description of the participants, instruments, procedure, design, and data analysis of the study.

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 24 intermediate learners of English attending Karoun language institute in Touyserkan, Iran, selected from a larger group of 60 students. The researchers used Nelson proficiency test in order to decide on the homogeneity of the participants. That is, 24 out of 60 participants were chosen. They were all female and aged between 13-19. The participants were randomly assigned to two groups; an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group received the treatment which was writing a narrative paragraph using the newly-taught idioms.It is worth noting that all the participants were studying the book American English File 4 and the institute confirmed the same level of the participants.

3.2. Instrumentation

The instruments in this study included the assessment materials (the test of idioms) and the tasks and activities for each group.

3.2.1. Language Proficiency Test

This was the test of Nelson (adapted from Nelson English Language Tests, by Fowler & Coe (1976), (Series 100D). This standardized and validated test was administered in order to check the homogeneity of the experimental groups. The test had fifty multiple-choice items of Grammar and Vocabulary.

3.2.2. The Pre-Test and the Post-Test

These tests were prepared by the researchers to be used as the pre-test and the post-test. The tests consisted of 40 multiple-choice idiom items which measured the knowledge of the idioms taught in the study. The book English Idioms in Use (Michael McCarthy & Felicity O'Dell, 2002) was used as the source of items because it was based on Cambridge international Corpus. As the book was designed for intermediate learners, the researchers assumed that it was a perfect source due to the fact that the participants' proficiency level was intermediate as well. It should be pointed out that the same idioms were tested in both the pre-test and the post-test. In order to validate the test, its validity was confirmed by a panel of three experts. Then the researchers carried out a pilot study for the test on a group of 30 students. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the pilot group was 0.64 which was a desired value leading to a reliable test. It should be mentioned that the pre-test and post-test were paralleled.

Along with the assessment materials, the researchers used certain activities during the instruction. The experimental group was supposed to include as many newly-taught idioms as they could in their narrative paragraphs. Narrative paragraph writing gave the participants a chance to write what they were interested in. On the other hand, in the control group students were asked to match the idioms with their definitions. The researchers prepared all those materials in advance to practice the new idioms during each session.

3.3. Design

The study was done during summer 2014 including 8 sessions of treatment in about two months. The framework of this study was pre-test, post-test experimental design with one control group and one experimental group. In effect, both groups underwent the instructions and the tests. The independent variable in this study was narrative paragraph writing and the dependent variable was idiom knowledge development of the learners.

3.4. Procedure

Both groups received 8 sessions of instruction through which 40 idioms were taught. There was at least a 2-day interval between them. Each session 5 idioms were focused on.

In both group the subjects were taught 5 idioms each session. The instructor wrote idioms one by one on the board and asked the students if they could guess the meaning. Then the students were given an example for each idiom which helped them to better understand the idioms and figure out in which situation they should be used. Persian equivalents were thought of as just the last resort when the subjects found it difficult to understand the idioms. The subjects in the experimental group were asked to develop a narrative paragraph including as many newly-taught idioms as possible. They had to write the paragraph individually. They were supposed to complete and hand in their writings next session. The instructor corrected them and wrote his comments and gave them back to the subjects. The comments included the correct use of idioms and if necessary correcting spelling or punctuation mistakes. It is worth mentioning that the instructor paid close attention to the correct use of idioms in the context and meanwhile focused on the aspects of narrative paragraph writing including correct use of the narrative tenses. It should also be noted that the researchersconsidered that the subjects knew how to develop a narrative paragraph prior to the treatment based on what they had studied in American English File series.

In the control group, the same five idioms were taught in the same way as described in great detail earlier. Afterwards, some matching exercises (matching the idioms with their definitions) were done each session. At the same time the instructor made sure if all students were busy doing the exercises. The correct responses were presented to class the following session to make sure that all students had noted the correct use and format. In effect, this group received some placebo treatment.

The treatment went on for 8 sessions with at least a 2-day interval between each in both groups. Finally, the post-test was administered whose results were used as the criterion to check the efficacy of narrative paragraph writing.

4. RESULTS

In the previous chapters, the problem, background, and method were presented. This chapter deals with the statistical analysis used, results, and findings of the study.

After submitting the collected data to the SPSS 19.0, the researchers conducted a descriptive analysis of the sample. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1 below. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the different tests used in this study. The mean (M), standard deviation (SD), maximum (Max), and minimum (Min) of the scores of the control group (CG), and the experimental group (EG) are tabulated.

Table 1 Basic descriptive statistics for the tests used in this study

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Control	12	13	3	16	10.33	4.207	17.697
Experimental	12	16	7	23	13.00	4.690	22.00
Valid N(listwise)	12						

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Control	12	15	10	25	17.92	4.680	21.9.2
Experimental	12	12	27	39	32.33	4.868	23.697
Valid N(listwise)	12						

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The above table shows the range of scores on a pre-test from 3-16 with a mean of 10.33 and a standard deviation of 4.20. While scores of the participants in the experimental group ranged from 7 to 23 with a mean of 13 and a standard deviation of 4.69. However, the dispersion of the scores from the mean for two groups is not statistically different. In other words, the scores for two groups are similarly dispersed from the mean.

The third and fourth rows of the above Table on the post-test demonstrate that the difference between the means of the two groups can be an indicator of the effectiveness of the treatment of instruction of narrative paragraph writing. However, further research is needed to examine the effectiveness of this treatment in the long run.

Table 2 Group statistics of the CG and EG

			N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Control	10.33	12		4.207	1.214
	Experimental	13.00	12		4.690	1.354

Table 3 Independent-Sample t-test for the pre-test of the CG and EG

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Paragraph	Equal variances assumed	0.074	0.788	-1.466	22	0.157	-2.667	1.819	-6.439	1.105
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.466	21.745	0.157	-2.667	1.819	-6.441	1.108

As Table 3 indicates, there was not a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the participants in the control group (M=10.33, SD=4.20) and experimental group (M=13.00, SD= 4.69). One can infer that according to the Sig (two-tailed) .157> 0.05, (0.05 is the significance level of the test), there is not a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the pre-test. In other words, the results show that the two groups were homogenous before presenting the treatment. The next statistical procedure is the performance of the participants of the EG and the CG on the post-test.

Table 4 Independent-Sample t-test for the post-test of the CG and EG

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Paragraph	**Equal variances assumed**	0.530	0474	-7.39	22	0.000	-14.417	1.949	-18.459	-10.374
	Equal variances not assumed			-7.39	21.966	0.000	-14.417	1.949	-18.460	-10.374

The answer to the research question of this study can be found in Table 4. This question investigates the effect of narrative paragraph writing on learners' idiom learning improvement. The results of the t-test also indicate that the Sig (two-tailed) .00<0.05 which is less than the level of significance, means that the difference is statistically significant. In other words, narrative paragraph writing has an impact on learners' idiom learning improvement.

The results indicate the significance of the treatment in the experimental group is in line with Mirhassani and Talebi (2007), who ran a study to investigate the effect of sentence writing on EFL learners' retention of idioms creating a context for learners to make use of

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idioms they learnt. It revealed that the sentence writing group recalled and recognized significantly more idioms than the control group.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of narrative paragraph writing on learners' idiom learning improvement. Because of the importance of learning idiomatic expressions, it was on the focus of the present study. The participants of the present study were a total number of 24 EFL learners studying in Karoun Language Institute in Touyserkan, Iran. Two instruments used to collect the data for the present study, were (a) the pre-test of idiom, and (b) the post-test of idioms. The analysis of collected data in the previous chapter revealed the following findings:

There was no significant difference between the control and the experimental group before the treatment in participants' performance on the pre-test. Therefore, the two groups were homogeneous and at the same language proficiency level.

According to the results of the participants' performance, due to the effectiveness of the treatment, the scores of the participants in both groups improved in the post test, but the improvement of the control group was not statistically significant.

In the previous section, the obtained data from the performance of the control group and the experimental group were analyzed. Based on the findings, the groups performed differently and it can be concluded that narrative paragraph writing is an effective method for teaching and learning idiomatic expressions. It means that creating a context for idioms by learners will help them understand and learn idiomatic expressions. The results of this study can be compared to the results of a study conducted by Mirhassani and Talebi (2007) who worked on the effect of sentence writing on EFL learners' retention. They concluded that the sentence writing group recalled and recognized significantly more idioms than the control group.

6. Conclusion

The results of the study showed that there was a highly significant difference between the control and the experimental groups after narrative paragraph writing. In other words, narrative

paragraph writing affects Iranian EFL learners' idiom learning improvement. Therefore, it can be concluded that the null hypothesis is rejected.

This conclusion can be compared to Mirhassani and Talebi (2007), who conducted a study to probe the effect of sentence writing on EFL learners' retention of idioms creating a context for learners to make use of idioms they learnt. What was revealed by the results was that the sentence writing group recalled and recognized significantly more idioms than the control group.

In sum, as the results of this study showed, narrative paragraph writing can advance Iranian EFL learners to a higher level of idiom learning. If teachers help students write narrative texts or paragraphs, the learners will improve their language proficiency levels and develop much higher idiomatic achievements.

7. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study can be significant for language teachers, language learners, and for those dealing with foreign language such as syllabus designers, material developers and the like.

The findings of the present study have certain implications for EFL teachers and learners. The findings of this study can convince the language teachers to pay more attention to idiomatic expressions. Language teachers should become more aware of the role of idioms in the context. By doing so, language teachers will be able to devise and develop the most appropriate courses to suit their students' needs and levels to achieve the best educational results.

Language teachers should help less successful students learn how to deal with idioms. In other words, language teachers need to incorporate use of idioms into the everyday classroom activities. Therefore, language teachers can help their students learn easier, quicker, and more effective.

It is necessary for instructors to provide the essential motivation for learning to idioms and being a good user of them. Watching native movies is a good way to encourage learners to be more aware of idioms in context. Motivation can also be created from many sources including positive views about idiomatic expressions and the need for development in reading students' interest in texts and content involved, the level of challenge offered by tasks and materials, the

quality of amount of feedback given to students with regard to their work, the supports and scaffolds available to the learners, and the nature of learning context.

The findings of this study can also help EFL syllabus designers. Syllabus designers must be familiar with the nature of idiomatic expressions in order to prepare more appropriate materials, which can meet the real needs of the students. As a matter of fact, there is a gap between our current pedagogic curricula and the current developments in language teaching and learning. Therefore, the results of this study may convince the EFL syllabus designers to incorporate idioms, especially effective ways of teaching and learning, into our university syllabuses. In addition, the results of the present study is hoped to be fruitful in coming up with well-organized curriculum for language learning and teaching.

For any instructive program to be effective, it is important to design effective teaching and learning ways and activities that not only are interesting, but also they should be meaningful and relevant to the objective of the course.

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