

ONLINE ELT TRAINING IN THE 2020 PANDEMIC: PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES

The main goal of the study was to investigate tertiary students' experiences with *English Language Teaching* 2 online classes during the 2020 pandemic, which they attended as pre-service co-teachers (group presentations), pre-service teachers (microteaching sessions) and students. The sample comprised N=14 participants (m=2, f=12), who completed the *Online pre-service training questionnaire*, devised to determine the participants' perceptions of online ELT training. Overall, all the participants found this experience valuable, most of them were initially nervous and worried, and surprised that "everything turned out fine" in the end, they felt comfortable with their peers' teaching, they were engaged in the learning process. The main reported advantages were working from home, flexibility and creativity, and disadvantages, a lack of human contact or in-person interaction, and technical issues. Although online teaching was imposed upon these students, they managed to benefit from it, and apply their previously acquired knowledge successfully.

Keywords: ELT training, online teaching, pre-service English teachers, student engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

After the onset of the 2020 pandemic, all educational institutions were forced to go online due to the state of emergency that the Serbian government declared in March. This resulted in university courses "combining physical real time engagement with asynchronous learning activity" (McDougall, 2021: viii) since the entire world confronted the problem of an imposed shift to online classes (Chan et al., 2022). Tertiary students in Serbia are not typically offered this delivery mode at state universities, so this 'imposition' was quite a challenge to all institutions, even more so because online learning and/or "massive open online courses" (cf. Ferguson et al., 2015) are not commonplace in Serbia.

The subject matter of this study is thus the educational format that primarily implies physical separation of students and teachers, whereby instruction is conducted via different technologies to ease interaction and communication between the teacher and students. In the literature, this format covers a diversity of terms, such as distance learning, remote learning, e-learning, online learning, distance education, and so on. Terminologically speaking, the broadest term appears to be digital education, and the other terms differ not only in who uses them or what the educational policy might be but also in content (*Quality Assurance Agency*).

Regarding recent research into the characteristics, benefits and drawbacks of online learning and teaching, an inescapable conclusion is that learners need to adapt and integrate new learning skills and competences due to different technologies use (ElSaheli-Elhage, 2021), which made teaching in the pandemic even more demanding. Studies also show that developing countries were growingly becoming disengaged from modern technologies and their use at that time (Mseleku, 2020). One of the biggest challenges of this teaching format during the pandemic was the issue of quality, since both students and professors reported online teaching as subordinate to in-person teaching (Shim, Lee, 2020). Similarly, decreased motivation and student engagement were also reported (Means, Neisler, 2020). However, this might have been caused by factors other than the teaching format itself (e.g. the lockdown stress, anxiety and depression, as confirmed by a plethora of psychological research into COVID-19, emergency online teaching sessions etc), because prior research indicates different results. Studies suggest a positive

association between student engagement and achievement, retention and satisfaction (Lei et al., 2018), as well as positive course experience (Leslie, 2019), and learning performance (Ifenthaler et al., 2020).

At the very beginning of the pandemic, the use of audio and video conferencing was the most commonly used instructional method across the planet (Chan et al., 2022). In Serbia, students had the material and presentations sent or posted online, and the use of online platforms was not a requirement set by the Ministry of Education. However, due to the practical orientation of the ELT2 course, which is the main setting of our research, it was organised via *Zoom* because these participants were being trained for their future teaching job, thereby developing *their* teaching skills, necessary both for in-person and online teaching. These pre-service teachers were involved in “agentive online learning” (cf. McDougall, 2021: 4), and asked to reflect on their roles as teachers in a virtual (synchronous) environment. Therefore, we will be using the term online teaching (OT) herein, or more precisely emergency online teaching (EOT).

In sum, a large body of research has been conducted to investigate how online teaching and learning (OTL) differ from in-person teaching, in different educational settings, with the focus on learning outcomes, students’ needs, on the one hand, and teacher load, techniques, on the other. Since pre-service teachers (PSTs) are taking their first steps in the teaching job, and thus find it quite intimidating, the enforced switch to an online format could be a factor further aggravating their teaching experiences. Accordingly, we set out to determine how the teachers-to-be from the sample experienced such classes, both in terms of OTL benefits and drawbacks.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main idea behind this qualitative research was to outline the main characteristics of online classes as seen by PSTs, particularly in the context of a practical course such as ELT. What makes these classes different from any other university class is that the course is primarily aimed at developing teaching skills and providing students with hands-on experience in teaching.

2.1. Sample

The sample included N=14 English language and literature students (m=2, f=12), who attended a practice-oriented ELT course at the State University of Novi Pazar. The number of students who enrolled in Year 3 as well as those re-attending the course was low, which is the reason of small sample size.

These students are currently offered the ELT1 and ELT2 courses. The former is aimed at introducing students to general ideas of foreign language (L2) teaching, including different teaching methods and approaches, the subject matter of L2 teaching, classroom management etc. Hence, it is more theory-driven and provides students with occasional microteaching sessions (volunteer microteaching, and the-end-of-the-term coursework microteaching). The latter is more practice-oriented and primarily includes testing and assessment, the process of lesson planning, delivering and observing lessons, both at university and schools, and is thus more demanding for students since they are encouraged to be more independent, innovative, initiative-taking. Moreover, it includes more microteaching sessions, such as teaching grammar creatively and teaching young learners, together with volunteer microteaching sessions, demonstration of activities in their group presentations etc.

2.2. Instruments and procedures

To assess how the sample experienced a teaching format that they had not been trained for, we devised an *Online pre-service training questionnaire*, which included fifteen open-cloze questions that the participants were instructed to reflect on in as many details as possible in the form of narratives.

Broadly speaking, the questionnaire reflected on their experiences as pre-service co-teachers (being members in group presentations), pre-service teachers (doing their microteaching) and students (attending classes). The participants were encouraged to reflect on their OT experience (feelings and impressions) as co-teachers, pre-service teachers, and students (both in their peers' and professors' teaching). They were asked to elaborate on the level of engagement in the learning process as students, to list the advantages and disadvantages of OT that they had experienced (as co-teachers, pre-service teachers, and students), as well as competences they possessed/lacked that eased/impeded their OT. The sample were also required to expound on knowledge/skills they had acquired during their OT experience, as well as some specific qualities of this teaching format (e.g. how appropriate it is for giving feedback, checking on students' progress, prompting students to interact). Finally, the participants were asked to explain the difference between online and in-person teaching, and enlarge on how valuable this teaching experience was to them, as well as how useful their knowledge and skills acquired in the ELT1 and ELT2 courses were.

The participants completed the said questionnaire online, via the *Google forms* app, the participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained by clicking on the appropriate box. The completed questionnaires were gathered, the answers grouped, and consequently analysed via content analysis so as to gain some general tendencies in terms of the participants' views and perceptions.

3. RESULTS

Since the main goal of this exploratory study was to determine how the PSTs perceived their OT experiences, which were imposed on them by a worldwide pandemic and a state of emergency, we will present the most important aspects that the participants' responses point to, with illustrations of some of their answers.

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3.1. Online teaching experience

All 14 participants underlined that it was a new experience for them, something that they did not know what to expect from or were not accustomed to doing, and the vast majority (12) explicitly stated that they were nervous at first but eventually managed to do it successfully. Some participants were primarily focused on the positive outcome.

It went unexpectedly well, although I felt a bit nervous, scared, as it was the first time to teach like that, but still it didn't seem so difficult and impossible;

I didn't know what to expect [...]. However, it was all right, I managed to do it without major problems and in the end, I think it was fun and interesting. [...]. All in all, online classes to me were, above all, a very valuable experience;

The whole experience as seen from this point was a very good one, we gained considerable experience and learnt how to use this kind of teaching when necessary.

A small number of the participants (2) dwelled on 'difficulty' and focused on the 'non-human' quality.

[...] it was difficult. It would have been much easier if I could have met my colleagues in person. Online gatherings seemed to me to be distant and cold. I didn't feel very comfortable;

[*mixed feelings*] I like that I am able to do a different kind of teaching, but I miss the classroom atmosphere and the visual contact with the others, I miss the human aspects of it.

Regarding the level of participation and engagement in other people's teaching, the answers were somewhat divided. The majority of the participants compared in-person classes as a response to how they experienced being an online student. More than half of the participants (8) reflected on these classes as a new kind of experience. Approximately a third of these embraced it as a new way of doing things, with activities and tasks being adjusted, and challenging since they had to work with one another.

It was great. I felt relaxed and motivated for the work and the tasks. Even though we could not meet in person and do the activities, as we always do, it was surprisingly interesting. The activities and tasks were adjusted, so we were able to do everything that we were supposed to;

[It was] interesting and challenging, since we all had to work together and help each other.

The other third made no difference with “real classrooms” and the underlying reasons were different from participant to participant. Some reported not being stimulated to take part in it since they did not feel “compelled” to participate, as they would be in in-person teaching, some stated the same level of participation and/or emphasised that they had to participate actively to fulfil their tasks. The remaining third made a clear distinction between in-person and online formats, saying that they found it challenging to stay focused and not drift away, or alert in case something goes wrong (technology-wise) or when working together to follow each other’s lead.

Concerning their personal engagement, the new-experience third reported to have been highly active and engaged, the no-difference third predominantly stated the same level of engagement and a small number of the participants that they lacked focus and motivation to maintain their attention, as did the clear-difference third.

3.2. Advantages and disadvantages of online teaching

The main advantages reported by the sample were working from home, flexibility and creativity. Most of the participants seemed to embrace these classes as a new (valuable) experience. OT was mostly described as more unpredictable than in-person teaching. Some participants, in specific, stated that in reality unexpected situations *do* happen, and thus regarded such experience as beneficial in terms of teacher preparedness and creativity (i.e. having to adapt their teaching and themselves as teachers, and the choice of the material/content).

As a student, I got used to learning in a completely different way, in special circumstances and this helped me, and actually prepared me for the future and unexpected situations, it taught me that a teacher must be prepared for various situations. As a co-teacher and microteacher, I learnt how to overcome fear and stress regarding teaching, and had more confidence while presenting;

[...] to be prepared for every situation that may happen. [...] that I have to organize my class well no matter the circumstances;

[co-teaching] We proved to each other that we can work together and fulfil our tasks, no matter what.

Many participants (9) underscored the convenience of working from home (i.e. when students and professors agree on the most convenient time), and feeling more comfortable there.

[...] convenience of managing the time that works for everyone, having classes from home;

Everything was prepared in advance (links for meetings, material needed etc);

[...] from the comfort of your home, it is less stressful to do a presentation or other demanding tasks. You feel comfortable and able to give yourself some more space and time to do the task.

The most frequently cited disadvantages were a lack of human contact or face-to-face interaction and technical issues. The vast majority (12) reflected on the technology dimension (e.g. Internet connection/access, audio/microphone issues), a lack of human contact and not being in an immediate learning community. Many students touched on the issue of being limited in moving around, not being able to perform certain activities as they could in physical classrooms, some raised the question of having different qualities of Internet connection.

[...] to be limited in options I could do in the real classroom, missing eye-to-eye contact with my students, not being able to use space but only sitting for half an hour and more;

Poor internet connection, troubles with microphone, troubles with hearing someone, echo that can be heard in some cases;

It is impossible to do some activities (such as when students have to [...] mingle [...]). [...] There were so many interesting activities, but it was impossible to carry them out;

[microteaching] [...] the possible problem with the technology. Even though I was prepared completely, something suddenly happened and my whole lesson needed to stop for a few seconds;

[...] students can't work on tasks together and learn together. Since students don't have to be physically present in the classroom, it might be more difficult (or nearly impossible) for them to get in touch with the other learners.

When asked to compare OT with in-person teaching, the majority (10) reported that OT is limiting in terms of a variety of options (to conduct activities) and interaction, human contact (making physical eye contact, working on rapport).

When it comes to face-to-face teaching, the teacher is better able to follow the students, there is eye contact, live communication, and the teacher can see if there are some unclear things to the students. [...] even though the teacher can check on the students, it is not really possible to see if they are confused through the camera. Then, when it comes to giving feedback, the teacher has to use communication tools frequently and provide a variety of assignments and ask more confirmation questions and review more often;

It differs in the way that we interact among ourselves, having in mind that this is not as lively interaction as it is when we are in a real classroom. [...] while doing the online teaching, there can be some distractors, or some problems that can damage the whole process;

We can't participate equally, sometimes there is a problem with listening to each other, and the interaction between us is different.

In sum, although the sample seemed open to embracing new teaching settings, and underlined some of its advantages, throughout the answers we can notice that OT is not fully accepted due to its 'distant' character, lack of physical human contact, inability to create a 'live' learning community.

3.3. Competences easing/impeding online teaching and the lessons learnt

The most frequently stated competences that the participants found helpful were their own flexibility, creativity and computer literacy, while they also reported some personal characteristics as audibility, enthusiasm, being able to tune in to other students' feelings and needs.

To adapt myself to various situations quickly and to try my best to make something work;

Having computer knowledge helped me prepare for microteaching and co-teaching and also in delivering both;

I managed to motivate students and raise their enthusiasm and also to use the media in an appropriate manner.

As for competences they lacked, therefore impeding their OT, the majority (11) reported a lack of self-confidence, anxiety and stress management.

Dealing with stress when it comes to technological issues;

I am nervous and I worry a lot. [...] I tend to speak too much and move my hands while talking, which could distract my students;

Bad internet connection that sometimes caused great stress to me, but also the level of my anxiety in these situations. It seems that I cannot stay calm when I have these problems, so it can reflect on my work.

Concerning the lessons learnt, the vast majority (12) realised that the teacher needs to adapt, improvise, be creative, and many highlighted preparedness (cf. lesson planning) as being crucial for this kind of teaching.

To be glad that you are in the situation that you are in, to make the best of the things that are at your disposal;

[...] no matter the situation I have to do my best to teach my students, I can still make them learn and have fun with not so many options. [...] be more creative;

[...] if we really want to do something, there are no obstacles. We managed to work together, meet online, help each other even though we were not together in a classroom or somewhere else. [...] it was worthwhile;

[...] when we are positive and stay calm no matter the circumstances, we can do a great job and reflect that positivity on our students. [...] the use of [...] technological tools can be very useful when it comes to making the learning process more successful and interesting to our students.

All the participants agreed on the fact that this experience was valuable to them, and many of them (8) pointed to the importance of technology that is rapidly developing and appreciated the fact that this was a real-life experience, which can facilitate their future teaching job, especially in the light of different platforms offering online lessons.

It is valuable because it prepares us for the future and gives us an insight into many other possibilities, and techniques that can be used in teaching. [...] no matter what happens, teaching must find its way;

As future teachers, we don't know if we are going to teach someone online [...]. It is a very valuable experience. And it was much easier for us to do it now when we are familiar with it and when we tried it ourselves. Even though I was sceptic at the very beginning because I had no idea how it would function, it turned out to be very successful. There are so many activities to do and so many things to learn and teach online, and it is surely something that amazed me.

As for their perception of the usefulness of their ELT courses (i.e. whether they were able to apply their general knowledge and skills teaching-wise), all the participants were uniform in their answers and found the previously gained knowledge/skills valuable. Half of them underlined that they had to adjust either their activities or certain aspects of the classroom management. The vast majority (11) found the input and practice on giving instructions particularly useful, along with the pool of activities demonstrated in class that they could choose from.

I could give clear instructions. I knew a lot of activities, so I could choose the appropriate ones for my microteaching;

I was able to apply the knowledge and skills acquired in courses ELT1 and ELT2, but I had to adjust to the situation. It is possible to perform various activities, use everything we would use in the classroom, such as music, flashcards, etc. I had to be creative to make it fun for them as they learn.

To conclude, the sample seemed to cherish their own creativity, which was hopefully encouraged and inspired in their ELT courses, as the main competence facilitating this process. On the other hand, stage fright and calmness were something they believed they still needed to work on. They also appear to have learnt that at the end of the day the teacher needs to do the teaching regardless of the format, and were able to apply the previously acquired knowledge/skills. The participants were familiarised with different ways of using technology in the classroom in their ELT courses, but the underlying principle was always that technology is just a tool that cannot do the teaching (the teacher does).

3.4. Suitability of online teaching for giving feedback, checking on students' progress and engaging students to learn and interact

As regards feedback, the majority of the participants did not provide to-the-point answers and rather enlarged on its importance. Some participants emphasised that it should be given in or is more appropriate for face-to-face interaction, whereas only one participant explicitly stated what they found useful.

[hot feedback] I think that more detailed feedback should be reserved for face-to-face interaction, since students may be more focused on the very online process, or be distracted by something or someone in their room, or be frustrated by some technological problems in the midst of giving feedback;

After delivering their microteaching or group presentations, students may listen to the comments. [...] I found all the comments very useful [...] after delivering my lesson [*the sessions were recorded*].

As for the learning outcomes, the situation was similar. Although the vast majority pointed to the ability to check on students' progress, these were mostly general, only sporadically addressing how it can be done or else why OT is not appropriate for it.

Teacher can meet online with students and check on their progress. Teacher can talk to students, see if there are some problems, etc. [...] teacher can give some tasks to students to do and through it to check on their progress;

Because it resembles the real classroom, where feedback is often on the spot;

[...] we cannot evaluate in the same way this kind of teaching, as the real one, or when we are in a real classroom, where students can ask as many questions as possible, or where interaction is livelier and freer.

Concerning the aspect of engaging students in the learning process, the sample predominantly reported that students must be engaged in order to learn, which was constantly underlined in their ELT courses. This is why they seemed to take pride in their own success to engage their students.

I tried to give creative and interesting activities [...]. I tried to make them my helpers, an active part of my teaching and presentation;

[*microteaching*] I was very much satisfied with their cooperation, so I think it is possible to have a successful interaction [...], only if the teacher knows how to approach students and organise the whole learning process;

[*student engagement*] it was mostly individual, and it worked. [...] a small group up to three people using a chat box or forming personal group chats (phone apps);

[*group presentation*] we had a part where students were supposed to act out a dialogue in pairs. They were great. However, [...] it was a bit difficult for them to prepare while having an online meeting because we were limited in time, and they could agree on it just via messages;

I tried to engage as many students as possible with various activities and tasks. Pair or group work is not exactly the same as in the classroom, but it is still possible to carry out various activities.

In conclusion, predominantly vague answers regarding feedback and students' progress may signal that these teachers-to-be are still making their way towards this important aspect of teaching. Most likely, they kept their focus on themselves and their own teaching and not learning outcomes, as they would in real classrooms, where they feel more confident and relaxed. As for engaging and prompting students to interact, they appeared quite satisfied that they had managed to fulfil this goal. Many participants started their answers with a misconception that OT can only be done individually or whole class, but since they were encouraged to shift the focus on their students, and had some ways how to include the others demonstrated, they tried them out themselves.¹

4. DISCUSSION

In a nutshell, most participants reported OT to be a new (valuable, real-life) experience. In a large-scale US study, for example, tertiary students described EOT as “unengaging” (*Top Hat*). Our sample, however, were actively involved in the implementation of the course and reported to be mostly satisfied with the way of completing their tasks and putting the planned into practice. Numerous studies into online learning support the connection between active engagement and achievement (Baum, McPherson, 2019), positive course experience (Leslie, 2019) and satisfaction (Bernard et al., 2009). In addition to student engagement, the practical orientation of the ELT2 course might also be the reason for such results. The value and relevance of content are often found to be a significant determinant of student motivation to learn (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). The existence of a community of practice (CoP), which may have been created during the ELT1 course, can also account for such results. CoPs are important for learning success (Crawford, Cook, 2008), crucial for social interaction (Li et al., 2009), lead to a good rapport (Grubor, 2021) and meaningful interactions, thereby reducing the feelings of isolation, which are typically associated with OT (Studente, Ellis, 2020).

Apart from engagement, satisfaction and a sense of community, another dimension is naturally dominant in the participants' answers – technology. On the one hand, they stated their computer literacy to be a competence easing their teaching, which is in line with research indicating that computer literate students tend to be more satisfied with online courses (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). On the other hand, they pointed to

¹ The professor had Zoom's basic licence, and was thus unable to use breakout sessions, as with Cisco Webex's full version during the next term.

technology as being a drawback, due to its unpredictable character, which is an issue typically raised in connection with OTL (Ferguson et al., 2015). Another feature pertaining to OTL that many participants qualified as disadvantageous is its distance character (a lack of immediate eye contact and human interaction). It has been suggested that physical distance reduces accountability for learning, hence hampering student engagement, while psychological distance can be overcome by personalising the learning experience (Metcalfe, Haugen, 2018). In addition, the said feelings of isolation can also be ameliorated by reducing psychological distance in OTL through student active engagement, purposefulness and a positive group rapport.

Another interesting finding is that the participants were grouped into three categories according to their answers: the new-experience group, who embraced a “new way of teaching” and were actively engaged, the no-difference group, who reported the same level of engagement as in in-person teaching, and the clear-difference group, who lacked focus and motivation to maintain their attention. This finding may be indicative of different types of personality at work, which may be pursued in future research (e.g. Big Five – openness to experience), along with the appropriacy of OT for giving feedback and constantly monitoring students’ progress since the participants’ responses were not highly revealing.

A promising finding, though, is that the participants found the knowledge/skills gained in in-person classes valuable, especially the input and practice on giving instructions as well as the demonstrated activities. Furthermore, they realised that the teacher needs to be flexible, creative, and prepared, regardless of the format, which is a particularly important lesson to be learnt. As frequently emphasised in the literature, the bottom line is that technology is just a tool that cannot do the teaching in place of a teacher because teachers will not be replaced by technology, “rather, their effectiveness will be extended *through* those technologies” (Wilson, 2008: 65).

Nevertheless, we need to urge caution that these results are not definite, so further research is needed due to the nature and sample size, which are the main *limitations* of the current study.

5. CONCLUSION

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Even though the sample is small and qualitative studies cannot offer tendencies in behaviour or some more definite conclusions, this study provided some insights into OT, as seen by PSTs.

On the positive side, they reported comfort from working from home, flexibility and creativity, and on the negative, being too technology-reliant, lacking physical contact and/or interaction. The participants appeared keen on embracing this format of teaching as a new, valuable experience. However, we could notice that it is not still fully accepted for having a distant quality and limiting student movement. Although these PSTs were completely unprepared for such a classroom context and/or format, they succeeded in their attempt to complete the set tasks the best they could at a given moment.

Finally, ELT professors and teacher trainers should consider incorporating a module into the existing curricula and/or new university courses in the field of digital learning. As our participants remarked, this teaching format is a reality, and research highlights the importance of ongoing, constant teacher training as part of lifelong learning, as well as the need for pre- and in-service teacher training both in ICT and corresponding pedagogies (cf. Hampel, Stickler, 2015). What some prospective studies may shed more light on is whether the type of personality plays a significant role in students’ perceptions of OTL, as well as its suitability for giving feedback and enabling dynamic engagement, as part of the learning-as-participation paradigm (cf. Zappa-Hollman, Duff, 2015).

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ONLAJN OBUKA 2020: ISKUSTVA BUDUĆIH NASTAVNIKA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA

Rezime

Glavni cilj istraživanja je da se ispita kako su 2020. za vreme pandemije studenti doživeli onlajn nastavu iz predmeta *Metodika nastave engleskog jezika 2*, u toku grupnih prezentacija i mikronastave u kojima su podučavali druge, i kao studenti koji su pohađali onlajn nastavu. Uzorak je činilo N=14 ispitanika koji su popunjavali *Upitnik nastavničke onlajn obuke*, radi ispitivanja njihove percepcije o onlajn obuci budućih nastavnika engleskog. Uopšteno govoreći, svi ispitanici su smatrali da je iskustvo bilo dragoceno, većina je u početku bila nervozna i zabrinuta, i iznenađena da je „sve ispalo kako treba“ na kraju, osećali su se prijatno u toku nastave koju su izvodile njihove kolege, bili su uključeni u proces učenja. Glavne prednosti koje su ispitanici naveli su rad od kuće, fleksibilnost i kreativnost, a mane, nedostatak ljudskog kontakta i neposredne fizičke interakcije, kao i tehnički problemi. Iako je onlajn nastava nametnuta ovim studentima, oni su uspeli da izvuku pozitivne lekcije i da uspešno primene svoja prethodno stečena znanja.

Ključne reči: angažovanje studenata, budući nastavnici engleskog jezika, obuka budućih nastavnika, onlajn nastava

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