

Benefits of including culture in English language teaching and learning

Beneficios de incluir cultura en la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés

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Abstract:

Understanding how expressions, idioms, people's behavior and culture influence communication has made that more and more language teachers include cultural aspects in their lessons. Even though, some students consider that culture is not related to language teaching and learning, for that reason a study was conducted to make students aware of the influence of culture in their English language learning. Learning a language can be a challenging activity for some people due to the skills and systems of the language that they have to learn. Besides that, learners have to face the reality when having authentic conversations. Real life situations with native speakers imply not only speaking the language but also knowing the culture. Culture is not only traditions or customs but also the social status, the gender, age and thoughts are involved. Therefore, culture should be taught while teaching a language to let learners have an idea about how to behave when facing a real-life situation. For that reason, culture takes more importance when teaching a language and each day, more textbooks, didactic material and teaching approaches are including it.

Keywords:

Culture, language, context, didactic material, activities

Resumen:

Entender la manera en que las expresiones, los modismos, el comportamiento de las personas y la cultura tienen influencia en la comunicación ha hecho que más y más profesores de idiomas incluyan aspectos culturales en sus lecciones. Sin embargo, algunos de los estudiantes consideran que la cultura no está relacionada a la enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas, por esta razón un estudio fue realizado para sensibilizar a los estudiantes acerca de la influencia de la cultura en su aprendizaje del inglés. Aprender un idioma puede ser una actividad desafiante debido a las habilidades y sistemas del idioma que se deben aprender. Además, los estudiantes tienen que enfrentar la realidad cuando tienen conversaciones auténticas. Las situaciones de la vida real que involucran personas nativas del idioma demandan que no solo se pueda hablar la lengua meta, sino que se conozca de la cultura. La cultura se entiende no solo como las tradiciones y costumbres, sino que también son el estado social, el género, edad o pensamientos que pudiera tener una persona. Por lo tanto, la cultura debe ser enseñada al mismo tiempo que se aprende un idioma para que los estudiantes tengan una idea de la manera de cómo se relacionarse o comportarse con una persona nativa. Por esa razón, la cultura toma importancia cada vez más en la enseñanza de un idioma y más libros de textos, material didáctico y enfoques de enseñanza la están incluyendo.

Palabras Clave:

Cultura, idioma, contexto, material didáctico, actividades

Introduction

Sapir (1962) states that people have an idea about how the world is according to the categories and distinctions make in their native language, and that the language used in a certain place might not exist in another place. Moreover, Bada (2000) states that when a language learner tries to have a conversation with a native speaker of the language, experiments problems when transmitting the message due to the lack of cultural literacy. Foreign language speakers face problems when trying to translate their ideas into English as they do not have the appropriate training of cultural literacy, so this may cause

confusion in the message sent. Learning a language is not only memorizing the grammar and having intelligible pronunciation; it is having knowledge of people's behavior in their daily lives, in a party or in a funeral. It is also about ways of thinking about politics, religion or education. The concept of culture is presented according to different authors; Mead (2002) defines it as

On one hand, "Culture means the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation" in other words "It can mean the forms of traditional behavior which are characteristic of a certain society, or of a group of

societies, or of a certain race, or of a certain area, or of a certain period of time” (pp. 17-18)”.

Matsumoto (1996:16) states that culture is “...the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different from each individual, communicated from one generation to the next”; while Carley (1991 in Birukou et al, 2013) considers “culture as the distribution of information (ideas, beliefs, concepts, symbols, technical knowledge, etc.) across the population and proposes a model for knowledge transfer based on interactions”, and Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2012) imply that in the language used every day, people consider culture and nations as similar concepts because nations have their own culture, religion and language. This shows that culture should be taught in every language classroom as it is how each native speaker communicates his or her ideas to others. So, if a non-native speaker does not have the necessary background knowledge to transmit his or her ideas or to understand what other people say, this may cause misunderstandings among them that could not lead to the main goal of speaking a language that is communication.

In the first decades of 1900, researchers proposed to incorporate topics related to culture in the language programs (Sysoyev y Donelson, 2002). In 1998, Byram and Flemming proposed that culture should be taught in English language classroom; otherwise, learners will speak the target language without understanding the social context that it involves; additionally, knowing only the grammar does not lead to effective communication (Silberstein, 2001). Social contexts in every country are different, they are even different within the same country; the same words could have different meanings from country to country which could result in a misinterpretation of a message or the definition of a word. Individuals transmit their ideas in different ways depending of the are they are of the emphasis they use for each message; people from other countries may not be aware of those details of the language.

Sysoyev y Donelson (2002) argue that discourse varies from one place to the other and it depends on the age, social status, nationality and gender based on the role that the person has in a conversation; for that reason, selecting appropriated material that includes not only a textbook but authentic or adapted material with culture is relevant for English language teachers as they could have not only culture but stereotypes (Morales & Escobar-Cristiani, 2024) because every region may be known worldwide by dressing certain clothes which may not be the clothes they wear every day but this stereotype could send a wrong idea about them. For that reason, the selection of material should have information that helps students to develop a positive attitude and a balance of

cultures, having all the possible English-speaking countries included.

Later, people understood the relationship between culture and language teaching and learning (Pulverness, 2003).

More and more often, learners and teachers of a foreign language are aware of the role that culture plays in the classroom (Sowden, 2007); previous studies have shown that culture and learning a language are linked together (Zhao, 2011).

Methodology

Culture has taken importance when teaching and learning a language; for that reason, a study about the benefits of culture in an English classroom was conducted to make students aware of the importance of its influence in their language learning.

This action research took place at the Language Center Orizaba that is part of the Universidad Veracruzana; there were two groups involved in the study, those groups take English as a mandatory subject, English 1 and English 2 that correspond to the level A2- according to the Common European Framework of Reference.

Table 1 named “participants” show the information related to the participants of the research. There were 24 students in English 1, this group had 15 men and 9 women; they were between 18 and 23 years old. English 2 group had 21 students in total with 9 men and 12 women between 18 and 24 years old.

Table 1. Participants.

	English 1	English 2
Number of participants	24	21
Male	15	9
Female	9	12
Age	18-23	18-24
Days of class	Twice a week	a Twice a week

Note: Direct

Both groups (English 1 and English 2) had classes twice a week for 2 ½ hours but they had one hour during the week to ask questions to the teacher or to have a deeper explanation of the topic.

Questionnaire 1 was used at the beginning of the semester and it was administered by using Google Forms with 20 questions. There were 4 dichotomous questions, 4 questions with Likert scale and 12 open questions; the objective of this questionnaire was to get information about their previous courses to know how culture was included in their English classes.

Questionnaire 2 was administered at the end of the semester with 20 questions. There were 3 dichotomous

questions, 5 questions using the Likert scale and 12 open questions. The objective of this questionnaire was to get information about the benefits of including culture in the current English course.

Content analysis was used to analyse the answers of the participants. This type of analysis helps the researcher to determine the possible categories that emerge from their answers.

To develop students' awareness of the influence of culture in the language classroom, the teacher designed some activities that included not only topics from the course but also culture such as traditions, expressions, idioms, clothes, food, etc.; in other words, the type of activities implemented included information related to the content of the program and culture of the English-speaking countries. Every two weeks, one activity related to culture was part of the class.

As the participants were from two basic level groups, the type of things presented were related to family, habits, food, abilities and preferences for English 1; for English 2 the topics were the same plus events in the past and plans for the future.

Table 2. Time table.

Month	F	M	AP			MA							
Week	4	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Questionnaire 1													
Activities related to culture (English 1 group)													
Activities related to culture (English 2 group)													
Questionnaire 2													

Note: Direct. F: February; M: March; AP: April; MA: May.

Table 2 named "time table" presents the activities done during the study. The fourth week of March was the first week of the study, the fifth week of May was the last week of the study. In total, each group of students worked in class with activities related to culture for five weeks.

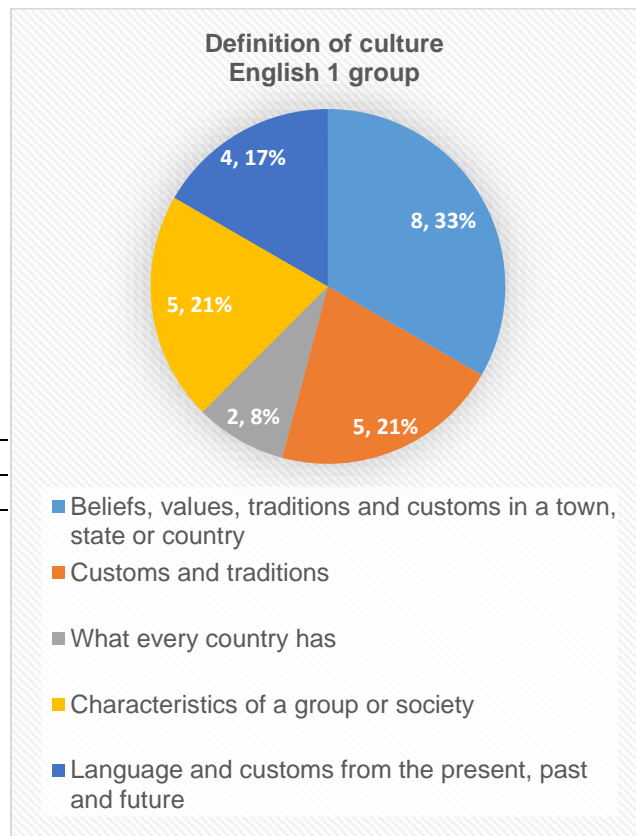
Findings and discussion

This section summarises the findings and contributions made. Firstly, participants gave a definition to what culture was; the definitions given are presented in two figures

(figure 1 and figure 2) to have an understanding of what each group thought.

Then, figure 1 shows that the highest number of students was 8 (33%) with the definition of "culture is a group of beliefs, values, traditions and customs in a town, state or city". Figure 2 shows something different because the highest number of students was 6 (28%) with the definition of "culture is language and customs from the present, past and future".

Figure 1. Definition of culture - English 1 group



Note: Direct

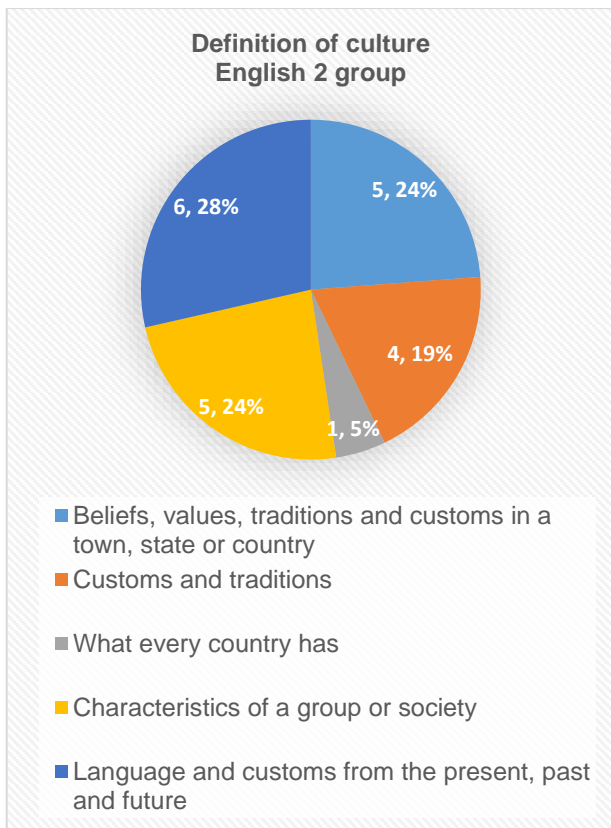
Secondly, figure 1 shows that 5 students (21%) gave the following definition "Culture is customs and traditions", while other 5 students (21%) think that "culture is language and customs from the present past and future".

Figure 2 presents that 5 participants (24%) think that "culture is a group of characteristics of a group or society" and other 5 participants (24%) believe that "culture is a group of beliefs, values, traditions and customs in a town state or country".

Thirdly, figure 1 presents that 4 participants (17%) think that "culture is language and customs from the present, past and future"; additionally, figure 2 shows that 4 students (19%) believe that "culture is a group of customs and traditions".

Finally, figure 1 presents that 2 students (8%) believe that “culture is what every country has”; figure 2 shows 1 participant (5%) with the same definition. The results suggest that participants in both groups have the understanding that culture is all that is involved in a place, it can be local or national and some of the features related to it are customs, beliefs, values, traditions and language no matter the time. As language is conceived as part of culture, it should be included in the different lessons during an English course to make students aware of the diverse behaviour that people could have in real life situations.

Figure 2. Definition of culture - English 2 group.



Note: Direct

As it can be seen in both figures, the definitions of the participants of the study are similar to those given by previous researchers. The concept of Mead (2002) is “It can mean the forms of traditional behavior which are characteristic of a certain society, or of a group of societies, or of a certain race, or of a certain area, or of a certain period of time” (pp. 17-18)” is similar to the concept of culture “language and customs from the present past and future” and “beliefs, values traditions and customs in a town, state or country”.

The previous definition is similar to two concepts by previous studies. One is from Matsumoto (1996:16) in which he states “...the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and

behaviors shared by a group of people, but different from each individual, communicated from one generation to the next”. The second is given by Carley (1991 in Birukou et al, 2013) that considers “culture as the distribution of information (ideas, beliefs, concepts, symbols, technical knowledge, etc.) across the population and proposes a model for knowledge transfer based on interactions”.

The results of questionnaire 1 are shown in table 3, table 4, table 3 and table 5. Table 3 shows the participants’ thoughts about the importance of English for them. This information is presented in table 2 named “The importance of English”. It shows the different categories that emerged from the questionnaire.

On one hand, for English one group, the highest frequency was with 10 students (41.66%) job opportunities, communicate with others got 5 students (20.83%), another aspect was about aspects of life, to study and to know more with 3 students each (12.5% each). On the other hand, for English 2 group job opportunities got 10 students (47.61%), communicate with others and for studies got 4 students each (19.04% each), to know more got 2 students (9.52%) and for all aspects of life one student (4.76%).

Table 3. The importance of English.

	E1		E2	
	fr	%	fr	%
Job opportunities	10	41.66	10	47.61
To know more	3	12.5	2	9.52
Communicate with others	5	20.83	4	19.04
For my studies	3	12.5	4	19.04
All aspects of life	3	12.5	1	4.76
Total	24	100	21	100

Note: Direct. E1: English 1 group; E2: English 2 group; fr: frequency; %: percentage.

This may mean that university students care about their future and for that reason, they consider that English will give them more opportunities to get a better job and as part of it, the communication with other people is important in a job and that is why it was the next category with high frequency. As a result, university students need learning English for their future jobs.

Table 4. The importance of culture when learning a language.

	E1		E2	
	fr	%	fr	%
Very important	23	95.83	21	100
Important	1	4.16	0	0
Low importance	0	0	0	0
Not important	0	0	0	0
Total	24	100	21	100

Note: Direct. E1: English 1 group; E2: English 2 group; fr: frequency; %: percentage.

Table 4 presents the importance of culture when learning a language for students. In English 1 group, 23 participants (95.83%) mentioned that culture was very important while, 1 participant (4.16%) said it was important. Similar results were obtained in English 2 group; the 21 of the participants (100%) mentioned that culture was very important. Almost the 100% of the participants know that culture is relevant when learning a language. This might be because of the different information they get from movies, songs, pictures, internet, this input makes them find a relationship among those aspects and learning a language.

Table 5. Reasons of the importance of culture.

	E1		E2	
	fr	%	fr	%
It is part of my personality	5	20.83	4	19.04
It is necessary to coexist with others	4	16.66	5	23.8
It helps us to know where I come from	3	12.5	2	9.52
It helps us to know more about others	5	20.83	4	19.04
It represents us as Mexicans	5	20.83	5	23.8
It helps to learn more	2	8.33	1	4.76
Total	24	100	21	100

Note: Direct. E1: English 1 group; E2: English 2 group; fr: frequency; %: percentage.

Table 5, named "the reasons of the importance of culture" demonstrates that in English 1 group, 5 students (20.83%) corresponds to "it is part of my personality", "it helps us to know more about others", and "it represents is as Mexicans". Other 4 students (16.66%) mentioned that "it is necessary to coexist with others"; 3 students said "it helps us to know more about others", and 2 students (8.33%) said "it helps us to learn more". This table shows that culture is important to interact with others; not only by knowing their culture but for getting to know themselves

better as aspects such as personality and understanding others are included.

Table 6. Areas or situations involving culture.

	E1		E2	
	fr	%	fr	%
Traditions	11	45.83	10	47.6
Language	4	16.66	3	14.28
Food and typical clothes	3	12.5	3	14.28
Famous places	2	8.33	1	4.76
Music	1	4.16	2	9.52
Beliefs	3	12.5	2	9.52
Total	24	100	21	100

Source: Direct. E1: English 1 group; E2: English 2 group; fr: frequency; %: percentage.

The results of the second questionnaire are included in the following tables. Table 6 named "areas or situations involving culture" shows for English 1 group, 11 participants (45.83%) said that traditions are the situations how they see culture in the classroom, 4 participants (16.66%) mentioned language as something seen cultural, 3 participants (12.5%) mentioned food and typical clothes and believes, 2 participants (8.33%) said famous places, and 1 participant (4.16%) mentioned music. This may mean that participants suggest that language teachers should include more culture in the classroom as it might have been the way, they learnt about culture in class.

Table 7 named "culture in my English learning studies" suggests that for most than a half of the participants, culture was not taught before this course because 14 of them (58.33%) did not have that experience while 10 participants (41.66) mentioned that culture had been taught before.

These results may be because now, they know how culture is presented in a language classroom and they can notice when a teacher introduces cultural aspects along with the language. In the case of English 2 group, the results are similar with 12 students (57.14%) mentioning that culture hadn't been taught before the course and 9 students (42.85%) saying that culture had been taught previous to the course.

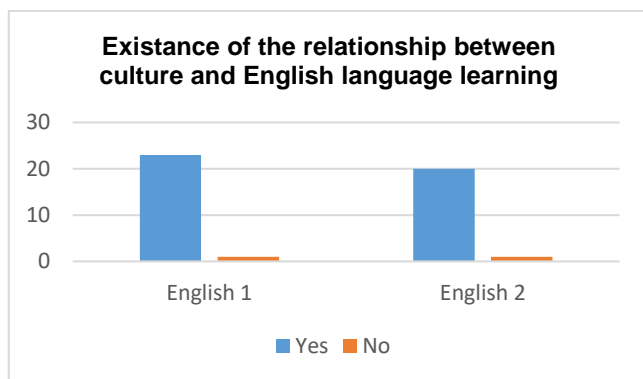
Table 7. Culture in my English learning studies.

	E1		E2	
	fr	%	fr	%
Culture had been taught in my previous English classes	10	41.66	9	42.85
Culture had not been taught before	14	58.33	12	57.14
Culture should be part of my English classes	24	100	21	100
English shouldn't be part of my English classes	0	0	0	0
Teaching culture in my English classes benefits learning	24	100	21	100
Teaching culture in my English classes does not benefit learning	0	0	0	0
	n=24		n=21	

Note: Direct. E1: English 1 group; E2: English 2 group
fr: frequency; %: percentage; n=total of students.

A total of 24 participants (100%) of English 1 group and 21 participants (100%) of English 2 group agreed about having culture as part of the English classes as well as, teaching culture in English classes benefits learning. This information should make language teachers consider using some information about other English-speaking countries in their lesson plans to let students learn not only the language but the culture.

Figure 3. Existence of the relationship between culture and English language learning.



Note: Direct

Figure 3 presents that existence of the relationship between culture and English language learning in which 23 participants (95.83%) of English 1 and 20 participants

(95.23%) of English 2 group agreed that they are related but only 1 student of each group did not agree.

Table 8. Relationship between culture and English language learning.

	E1		E2	
	fr	%	fr	%
Language defines culture and the origin of the country	3	12.5	2	9.52
It is necessary for tourists when visiting the country to understand the habits	3	12.5	3	14.28
It is related to food and traditions	5	20.83	4	19.04
People can learn more vocabulary when talking about culture	3	12.5	3	14.28
The vocabulary in each country has culture	3	12.5	3	14.28
Culture helps people to communicate and to understand others	7	29.16	6	28.57
Total	24	100	21	100

Note: Direct. E1: English 1 group; E2: English 2 group;
fr: frequency; %: percentage.

Table 8 named "relationship between culture and English language learning" shows how the participants relate them, for English 1 group 7 students (29.16%) and 6 students (28.57%) from English 2 group think that culture helps people to communicate and to understand others. The results also suggests that 5 students (20.83%) from English 1 group and 4 students (19.04%) from English 2 group think that culture is related to food and traditions. Other 3 students (12.5%) from English 1 group and 3 students (14.28%) from English 2 group think that culture is necessary for tourists when visiting the country to understand the habits, they also think that more vocabulary can be learnt when talking about culture, and that the vocabulary in each country has culture. Finally, 3 students (12.5%) from English 1 group and 2 students (9.52%) from English 2 group mentioned that language defines culture and the origin of the country.

Table 9 named "benefits of culture when communicating in English" presents for English 1, 9 students (37.49%) and for English 2 group, 9 students (42.85%) agreed that "it allows students to know how English speakers think and behave". Other 5 students (20.83%) of English one group and 4 students (19.04%) mentioned that culture benefits because "it is interesting"; other 5 students (20.83%) of English 1 group and 4 students (19.04%) mentioned, "it

helps to learn easier". In English 1 group, 2 students (8.33%) said that "it is meaningful" as well as 2 students (9.52%) from English 2 group. Other 2 students (8.33%) from English 1 group and 1 student (4.76%) from English 2 group mentioned, "it allows them to share their Mexican culture". This suggests that participants care about how to native English speakers think and behave; this may help them act and say the most appropriate way".

Table 9. Benefits of culture when communicating in English.

	E1		E2	
	fr	%	fr	%
It is motivating	1	4.16	1	4.76
It is meaningful	2	8.33	2	9.52
It is interesting	5	20.83	4	19.04
It helps to learn easier	5	20.83	4	19.04
It allows me to share my Mexican culture	2	8.33	1	4.76
It allows students to know how English speakers think and behave	9	37.49	9	42.85
Total	24	100	21	100

Note: Direct. E1: English 1 group; E2: English 2 group; fr: frequency; %: percentage.

Table 10 named "benefits of including culture in English language teaching and learning" demonstrates that 12 students (50%) from English 1 group and 10 students (47.61%) from English 2 group think culture benefits learning. On one hand, 6 students (25%) from English 1 group and 6 students (28.57%) from English 2 group feel that culture has a positive impact on teaching and learning. On the other hand, 3 students (12.5%) from English 1 group and 3 students (14.28%) from English 2 group consider that culture helps with the comprehension and development of the four skills; 3 students (12.5%) from English 1 group and 2 students (9.52%) from English 2 group assume that implementing activities related to culture helps to learn more.

Table 10. Benefits of including culture in English language teaching and learning.

	E1		E2	
	fr	%	fr	%
Comprehension and developing of the four skills	3	12.5	3	14.28
It helps to learn more when having activities related to culture	3	12.5	2	9.52
It has a positive impact on teaching and learning	6	25	6	28.57
It benefits learning	12	50	10	47.61
Total	24	100	21	100

Note: Direct. E1: English 1 group; E2: English 2 group; fr: frequency; %: percentage.

Conclusions

This paper demonstrates that in both groups, the results are similar so that students have the same considerations about culture and English language teaching and learning. The findings of this study can be understood as culture having a positive effect on students' learning as they feel motivated and activities are interesting and meaningful for them.

Culture can allow students to share their own culture with their peers but also, it gives them the opportunity to have practice when talking about traditions, food, famous places, typical clothes, music, and beliefs; consequently, they have the training in class to have a conversation with a foreigner in real life. The present findings confirm that working in class with activities related to culture makes students understand the behavior or people from other cultures.

Concerning English teaching and learning, culture is not only motivating but also it allows students to comprehend more about others and to develop the four skills to have an effective communication. Silberstein (2001) stated that in order to communicate effectively, they have to know about culture and it can be learned by incorporating the social contexts in the language classes (Byram and Flemming, 1998)

Pulverness (2003) and Zhao (2011) argue that there is a relationship between language and culture; for that reason, teachers and students are aware of the importance of culture in the language teaching and learning (Sowden, 2007). In conclusion, participants claimed that their English language learning improved because of the positive impact of including cultural aspects in their classes.

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