

Enfoques recomendados para la enseñanza de la gramática francesa a estudiantes de preparatoria en el Estado de México

Recommended approaches for French grammar teaching to high school students in the State of Mexico

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Abstract:

Grammatical knowledge guarantees successful and pertinent communication in any language. A diagnosis was carried out on thirty high school students, in the State of Mexico, for three years. It consisted of two parts; the teaching practice and the learning obtained by the students, to identify what are the methodologies used in the teaching of French as a foreign language and grammar, what are the recommended approaches, how and when to use them, and what complementary strategies guarantee learning. It was found that, before the diagnosis, the students perceived the French classes with difficulty and without dynamism, and preferred to develop their communication, social, and reading skills, over others such as grammar. The approaches that are recommended for teaching French grammar in high school are Communicative and the Notional-Functional, at the same time using a diary or log book and the weekly and annual didactic planning of the classes. It is recommended to teach grammar gradually, using the context of the students, relying on the similarities of the second language with their native language, and without deep explanations in the first years, but more specifically in the subsequent ones. Carry out a diagnosis before the selection of work material, use a diary book, and do didactic planning of classes, in the teaching of French grammar, facilitate teaching performance and guarantee the effective learning of high school students.

Keywords:

High School, Notional-Functional approach, Communicative Approach.

Resumen:

El conocimiento gramatical garantiza una comunicación exitosa y pertinente en cualquier idioma. Se llevó a cabo un diagnóstico a treinta estudiantes de preparatoria, en el Estado de México, durante tres años. Consistió en dos partes; la práctica docente y el aprendizaje obtenido por los educandos, con el fin de identificar cuáles son las metodologías utilizadas en la enseñanza de francés como lengua extranjera y gramática, cuáles son los enfoques recomendados, cómo y cuándo usarlos y qué estrategias complementarias garantizan el aprendizaje. Se encontró que, antes de la diagnosis, los alumnos percibieron las clases de francés con dificultad y sin dinamismo, y preferían desarrollar sus habilidades comunicativas, sociales, y de lectura, que otras como la gramática.

Los enfoques que se recomiendan para la enseñanza de la gramática francesa en preparatoria son el Comunicativo y el Nocional-Funcional, al mismo tiempo utilizar un libro diario o bitácora y la planeación didáctica de las clases, semanal y anual. Se recomienda

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enseñar gramática de manera gradual, utilizando el contexto de los alumnos, apoyándose de las similitudes de la segunda lengua con su lengua nativa, y sin explicaciones profundas en los primeros años, pero más específicas en los subsecuentes. Realizar un diagnóstico previo a la selección de material de trabajo, utilizar un libro diario y hacer planeación didáctica de las clases, en la enseñanza de la gramática francesa, facilita el desempeño docente y garantiza el aprendizaje efectivo de los estudiantes de preparatoria.

Palabras Clave:

Preparatoria, Enfoque Nocial-Funcional, Enfoque Comunicativo.

Introduction

One of the problems most mentioned by students of French as a Foreign Language (FLE) is grammar. In the written expression tasks, the confusion in the use of grammatical tenses and the little coherence between the noun and its adjectives.

Regarding gender (masculine or feminine) and number (singular or plural), they are the most frequent observations, the opposite situation in oral expression tasks.

Grammar has an unquestionable place in the learning of any foreign language since it allows to communicate, express, any message, objectively and assertively. However, internalizing the knowledge of this is a complex task in which the teacher plays an important role.

Schneuwly (1998) and Chiss (2002) stated that knowledge of grammar is an effective tool in the study of French; in the colloquia of the French Language Didactic Association (Lyon 1995 and Geneva 1997) it was accepted without question; that grammar favors writing, spelling, speaking, and other aspects of language.

Grammar has a direct relationship with teaching, "...any analysis of grammar in didactics implies jointly considering the dimension of teaching and learning, as well as the role of this discipline in the teacher/student interaction within the language class..." (Chiss, 2002, p.5).

It can be said that grammar is determined, and influenced, by the method of instruction applied. Some of the best-known approaches are:

Traditional method Grammar-Translation

Also, known as Grammar-Translation; Its fundamental principles are: a) the learning of grammatical rules, the memorization of rules and paradigms, b) the exclusive study of the written language, supported by literary texts and the practice of translation as a means of exercise. It is a method based on the means of teaching dead languages, essentially written (Delgado, 2003; Núñez, 2010; Puren, 1988).

Direct Method

Known as the "natural" way of learning languages. In this method, the mother tongue is excluded from the

classroom and grammatical learning adopts an inductive and implicit approach (Brown, 2001; Puren, 1988). Another of its principles is the learning of vocabulary through the visualization of objects and situations, and the teaching of grammar, through communication-oriented structures (Delgado, 2003).

The development of the Direct Method was a step towards the following approaches, which are already considered as methods based on scientific learning theories.

Audio-Oral Method

In this approach, the influence of structuralism in language teaching is identified. It comes from the United States of America (USA), coexisted with the British situational proposal, and is based on Skinner's behavioral conception and Bloomfield's linguistic theory (Delgado, 2003; Puren, 1988).

In this method, grammar does not consist of a system of rules that govern isolated elements, but rather a set of structures that should be taught in the foreign language, especially those that are different from the student's mother tongue (Delgado, 2003; Brown, 2001).

The Audio-Oral Method is opposed to the grammatical teaching of the language, giving priority to the oral aspect, the learning of grammatical rules is done intuitively through practice and the student is expected to be able to deduce the grammar. Although, when clarification is required from the instructor, it is done in the mother tongue, resorting to comparison when necessary (Núñez, 2010; Delgado, 2003).

Structural linguistics, in its application to the teaching of languages, gave rise to two differentiated systems. In the United States, the audio-oral model originated and in France, the audio-visual model was chosen. (Delgado, 2003; Brown, 2001).

Structural-Global-Audio-Visual Method (MEGAV)

Although developed in France, it is based on the European version of structuralism where the role of the Center de Recherche et d'Étude pour la Diffusion du Français (CREDIF) and also of the École Normale Supérieure de Saint Cloud (Delgado, 2003; Puren, 1988). The MEGAV, initially avoids the translation and the mother tongue of the group, the progression is organized according to the criterion of increasing complexity of the

structures presented, in addition to the systematic use of visual material; starting from the idea that the image greatly helps to "set the scene" and to understand the message.

It presents as a novelty the use of sound and image during almost the entire development of the lesson. The interest in creating a context, minimal, in order to approach the meaning, is the main feature that separates it from the US version (Delgado, 2003; Núñez, 2010).

Communicative Approach

All versions of the Communicative Approach to teaching foreign languages, have in common a didactic theory that starts from a model of language as communication and use. The didactics of languages, received in terms of methodological order, a notable boost with the work of Wilkins of 1972, which is an attempt to organize and structure the contents of learning, based on the analysis of language as a communication instrument (Delgado, 2003).

Wilkins distinguished two approaches to language teaching: the synthetic and the analytical. In the Synthetic Approach all the methods that had been developed until then are considered; in this approach, it is intended that the student re-synthesize the different elements of the language that were supplied to him, as parts resulting from an analysis that the author of the book and methodologies had carried out, and that the student had studied and analyzed; the student learns, step by step, the different components of the grammatical structure of a given language (Wilkins, 1972).

Functional-Notional Approach

The Analytical Approach is one in which the language has not been previously broken down into pieces that are then offered for learning in cumulative progression.

The student's task is to progressively approximate their linguistic behavior to the global language. It is called analytical, because by presenting his material, he invites the student to recognize the components of the linguistic behavior that he is acquiring, so the learning process is based on his analytical capacity.

The definition of objectives is done through what Wilkins cited by (Delgado, 2003) calls "operational definition", which, as its name indicates, defines the operations that the student must be able to do.

The proposal of this approach is known as "notional or functional", which has three types of components: semantic-grammatical, modal meaning, and communicative function; the latter is about the use and intention that the speaker makes of the language.

In addition to Wilkins' work, Halliday's (1975) was also influential, especially in his definition of the seven basic functions of language. These views received official confirmation with the publication of the Threshold Level

English (Van Ek and Alexander 1977) and the corresponding French version, Un niveau Seuil (Coste 1976).

The techniques, materials and programs that they proposed are those that would correspond to the teaching derived from the communicative approach; characterized by its flexibility in accepting various methods and techniques; what leads to the proposed objectives is considered good (Delgado, 2003).

The materials used for the instruction of a foreign language, books, printed and digital, web pages, and other electronic resources, include one or several approaches that teachers use within educational centers, most of them are assigned resources and only some are chosen by themselves.

Therefore, this paper analyzes the teaching methods of French grammar and those used in high school, in the State of Mexico; examines the reasons for the low interest of students in it, proposes some approaches to instructors, FLE, and other languages, and discusses the relevance, in time and form, of its application towards an assertive and successful teaching work.

Methodology

The main author and collaborators, proposed this project to analyze the resistance of high school students to learn French grammar, and methods of teaching, and propose approaches and strategies to redirect the way of instructing it.

The students in this work, belonged to a private institution complex (elementary, high school and university included) in the State of Mexico, with typical signatures as curricula plus English and French languages taught. Since most of them were studying English during elementary school, the most popular foreign language taught in Mexico, obtained at least an A1 certification and then, became part of the French course. Although, some students came from different high schools and backgrounds.

This private school experimented with teaching English exclusively using books and the methodologies included there, the same case of French. The lessons were three times per week for a minimum of around two hours each. Instructors for foreign languages had at least a B2 certification or a bachelor's degree in any of both languages, always having a superior grade to the teaching group, and experience in private and public institutions.

To delimit this study, research questions were formulated and the teaching practice for three years was considered:

1. How grammar is placed in the different approaches to language teaching?
2. What is the approach used in the teaching of French grammar?

3. What approaches are recommended, and how and when applying them?

4. How to measure the effectiveness of the approaches used?

5. What other strategies can be considered for effective teaching?

To answer the first question, materials, books, and instructional and methodological articles about teaching French grammar were searched, discarded, and discussed. The peculiarities of each approach were analyzed and compared to this investigation.

To answer the second and third questions, an academic diagnosis was suggested and made to 30 first-semester high school students. It is a tool that analyzes situations or states from an individual or organization (small and big) with multiple applications; educational, social, economic, technical, biological, and others. The results can be positive, negative, or partially positive and is a previous step to making decisions and improving, starting, or canceling academic projects, programs, plans, or similar. In this case, the diagnostic consisted of a questionnaire with two parts and a section for additional notes.

The first part was related to the teaching practice in grammatical issues, with interrogations such as: Did you find the teacher's explanations dynamic? Did you understand all the exposed topics? Did you have any difficulties with the themes? What additional activities would you like to see included?

The second part was about the student's progress in grammatical structures, oral expression (language production), and reading. It is essential to mention that this group had already taken half of the lessons of their semester program with a different teacher.

After the diagnosis, the approach to teaching French grammar was identified, and the methodology and techniques for the subsequent educational levels were defined, from the second to the sixth semester.

To answer the fourth question, five extra evaluations were carried out on the same group, one per semester, with the same type of interrogations included in the diagnosis, but with a higher degree of difficulty, to measure their progress in the language by applying the previously recommended strategies.

To answer the fifth question, seeking more efficiency in the approaches selected, it was decided to apply simultaneously didactic planning of the classes, weekly and annually, and a teaching reflection through the use of a diary book or logbook.

Results were obtained, and frequencies and graphics were elaborated.

Finally, the conclusions and recommendations of this work were established.

Results

Grammar in different language teaching approaches

A review of the most popular foreign language teaching methodologies showed how they have evolved and the role of grammar in them. Although some approaches do not emphasize it and privilege one skill over another, grammar does not cease being considered in the teaching-learning dynamics.

The Traditional Method of Grammar-Translation was one of the first approaches to be used for learning foreign languages and was very successful at the time. One would think that it is a method that is no longer used; however, it is at various educational levels, from initial to university, and is very present in Latin America. It facilitated the first contact with a new language because of the practicality of having dictionaries and was one of the first materials to learn.

The Direct Method involves the total immersion of the student in the context of the language they are learning. It is a disadvantage for Latin American language schools since the contact is only during the sessions, which generally do not exceed three hours per week in public high schools and six or eight hours per week in private high schools. At the university, the exposure decreases unless is a career related to languages.

Recently, some institutions offer other interaction alternatives such as camps or residences in homes with the native language of interest for weeks, months, or even years. This form implies additional costs for learners but with better results in the short term and for some abilities such as listening and speaking.

Grammar in this case, with some deduction, is still incipient and students have to get back to the basics to confirm ideas, but with less pressure.

The Audio-Oral Method and the Direct Method use deduction to teach grammar, with an inclination toward oral and written communication. In the beginning, exposure to sound material was incipient since the only technological resource was the phonograph.

Currently, this method has access to more versatile and specialized devices. Here, the intervention of the instructor is allowed to clarify doubts. These methods are preferable for students who want to communicate, mainly for businesses and academic exchanges.

The EGAV Method includes materials with sound and images that allow the student to be in context with the target language. It is not surprising that this method was developed in France with the invention of cinema, and later influenced by television, which facilitated its dispersion.

Lately, the availability of the internet and electric gadgets has made it even more accessible. The preference for this method for young people is notorious and can be a tool that facilitates teaching grammar.

The Communicative Approach implies the concentration of previous and current knowledge from learners,

grammar, and other didactic elements, that result in the use of the language. Sometimes it is found combinations of this with the Audio-Oral Method whose ultimate goal is also communication.

The Functional-Notional Approach expects the student to develop an analytical ability that allows him to understand new knowledge and apply it to meet his objectives, particular needs, or interest in the language. This method requires learners' time and its effectiveness per se is for the long term.

The latest approaches, Communicative and Functional-Notional, surged from the limitations of the initial methods with redundant mechanization in activities, with low results and little acceptance by students.

Approaches used in teaching French grammar in high school

According to the diagnosis made, in Figure 1, 60 percent (%) of the students considered that the grammatical methodologies used until that moment lacked dynamism since they were based on the translation and mechanization of rules. 70 % did not understand the topics and the majority considered them difficult. In the additional notes, they expressed that it was tedious to study grammar with instructions only in French and that they used it little in their secular life.

Those most interested in the topics used the language to make foreign friends online.

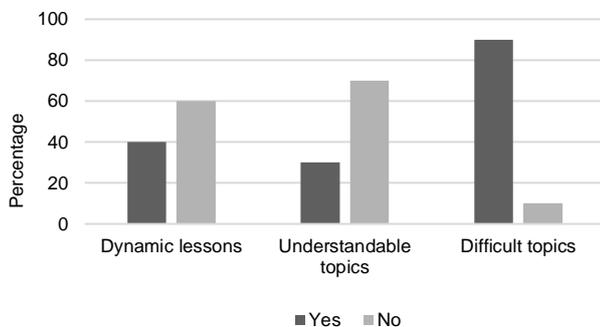


Figure 1. Diagnosis of grammar teaching methodologies.

Regarding the use of grammatical structures, in Figure 2, more than 80 % of the students achieved a poor evaluation and the remaining 20 % reached acceptable knowledge corresponding to that level of study.

In oral expression they achieved better performance, due to the relationship between French and Spanish, although their language production was basically in isolated articulation of words. In reading, approximately 60 % were deficient and the rest were acceptable.

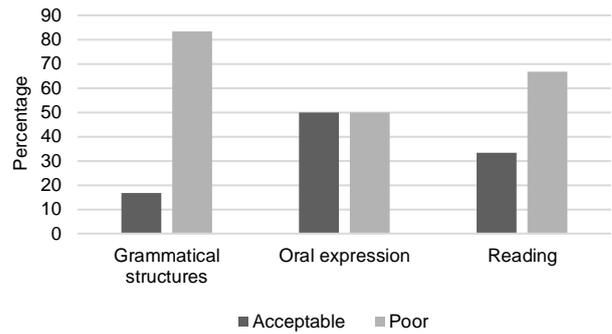


Figure 2. Diagnosis of grammatical learning.

Based on the diagnosis, the approaches identified for the teaching of French grammar were the Traditional Grammar-Translation Method and the Direct Method and consisted, among other things, in learning structures in a mechanized way, complex and completely emitted in a foreign language, which confirmed the aversive attitude of the students towards these methods.

In the teaching of FLE, the Communicative Approach and the Notional-Functional Approach were recognized, present in the books assigned by the educational institution; Adosphère 2 (Himber and Poletti, 2011), Adosphère 3 and Adosphère 4 (Gallon, et al., 2012). These contemplate the skills of writing, reading, speaking, and listening, with different magnitude, in the case of grammar it is addressed in a reduced way.

Recommended Approaches for Teaching French Grammar in High School

The diagnosis carried out showed that including grammar in the first years of FLE instruction, in a mechanized way, without considering the context and in some extreme cases with instructions only in the foreign language, limited the creativity of writing and the communicative fluency of the students. This agrees with the contribution of Cortes (2005), regarding that explicit grammatical teaching should be reserved when students already have an intermediate or advanced level of the foreign language. Likewise, the works of Cortes (2005) and Núñez (2010) were taken into account, and it was established that grammar will always be taught, regardless of the age of the students or their level of language proficiency, which will change is the form of instruction.

For children, it will be done without extensive explanations, and for adolescents and adults, the explanation will be done according to their conceptual knowledge of the grammar of their mother tongue.

Based on the works of Núñez (2010) and Chiss (2002), grammar must take into account the contextual and discursive aspect, gradually and progressively adapting to the level of the learners and their degree of communicative competence.

So, grammar will be considered in all FLE course programs, regardless of the level of knowledge of the learners, but in a simple way for beginner groups and in a more developed way for advanced groups, always establishing a relationship with grammatical structures of their native language and considering the objective of the learners.

For high school students, and according to the results of the diagnosis, the Communicative and Notional-Functional Approaches were maintained, since their interests were to improve their verbal and social skills, in this sense the grammatical teaching was adapted.

In addition, extra resources were implemented to compensate for some existing lack in the bibliography used, their grammatical knowledge of Spanish was considered, and those similarities between both languages were taken up to deduce the grammatical functioning of French.

Effectiveness of the Approaches proposed for the teaching of French grammar in high school

As shown in Figure 3, the approaches and recommendations proposed and used were reliable, and a gradual advance in the skills of the students was recorded.

In this case, their progress in grammatical structures was discreet, since the main interest of this audience is communication, and it was more noticeable from the fourth semester.

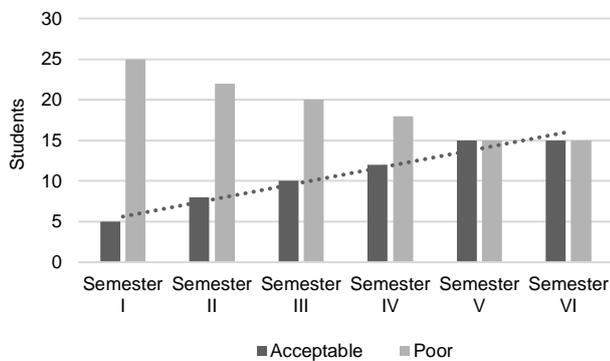


Figure 3. Effectiveness of the proposed French grammar (Structures of grammar).

As Figure 4 shows, the performance in oral expression was acceptable throughout the semesters studied and was more outstanding than the rest of the skills (grammatical structures and reading).

It is the favorite skill of high school students due to the relationship with their native language, although it is about producing language, in the first semesters the students did it with isolated vocabulary and in a formal way in the subsequent ones.

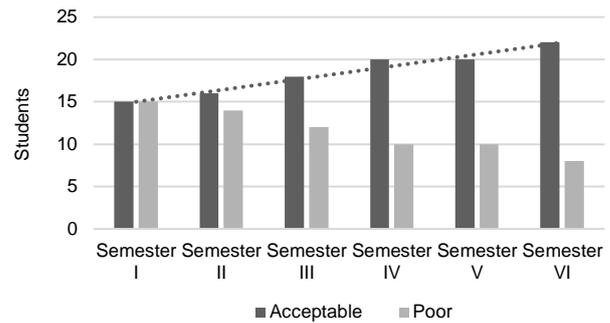


Figure 4. Effectiveness of the proposed French grammar (Oral expression).

After speaking, reading is the skill that most appeals to learners. Figure 5 shows moderate growth throughout the semesters studied, but more notable from the fourth semester.

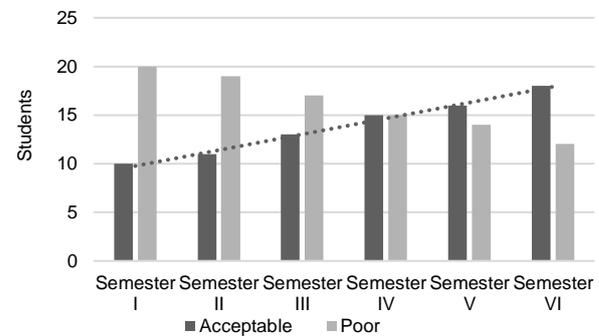


Figure 5. Effectiveness of the proposed French grammar (Reading).

Other applied strategies

The importance of learning grammar lies in the fact that it enhances the communicative and cognitive abilities of a language, and if it is attended to partially, erroneously, or not at all, there is little or no learning. However, it depends on the approach and techniques used in teaching it.

Along with the recommended approaches, other strategies were suggested and applied; weekly and annual planning of classes and teaching reflection through a daily book or log.

Weekly and annual planning allowed activities to be scheduled during the time assigned to each class and enabled the instructor's preparation in advance and the visualization of possible setbacks. Improvisation in the sessions and confusion in the students decreased. Also, it facilitated to define additional activities to those established in their books.

The permanent teaching reflection, through a daily book or log, helped to record everything that happened in the classroom, evaluate the teaching techniques used, to improve or change them, as well as to know the response of the students to them. Likewise, it facilitated the knowledge of the audience, their learning interests, and their distractions.

Conclusions and recommendations

There are different FLE teaching methodologies, these cover some or all of the skills; speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The resources used for teaching French, books, generally contain the grammar section to a lesser extent, since it is an overwhelming task for those involved. Eliminating it is not the best option, but it is suggested to use the appropriate approach to the type of audience with which you are working, even if it is not the same for the rest of the skills.

When a diagnosis is not made to determine the academic characteristics and personal interests of FLE students, they see classes without dynamism and the content and techniques used as incomprehensible which lead to insufficient learning.

To establish what kind of approaches to use in the teaching of French grammar, it is recommended to carry out an initial diagnosis that determines the level of knowledge, the learning style and the personal interest of the students.

Diagnostic evaluations allow the instructor to measure the level of satisfaction, learning of his audience and of the courses taught, these can be at the beginning, during and at the end of the course, they can be an intimidating exercise, but it is an objective way of knowing the teaching performance and make the necessary adjustments in future courses.

High school students prefer to develop their communication skills, therefore, social and reading first, then others such as grammar, and it is in this sense that instructional methodologies are selected. It is recommended to teach grammar gradually, using the context of the students, relying on the similarities of the second language with their native language, and without deep explanations in the first years, but more specific in the subsequent ones.

The approaches that are recommended for the teaching of French grammar in high school are the Communicative and the Notional-Functional, in these, the teacher has the flexibility to use techniques that allow him to convey knowledge and develop communicative competence, giving greater relevance to those structures most used in French, and that students can use them in any francophone environment.

It is common for the educational institution to select the foreign language study books before making a diagnosis to the interested parties, therefore, the teaching methodologies in the case of FLE are influenced firstly by these resources and secondly by the teachers. In turn, instructors tend to resort to very traditional or direct methods, generally those that influenced him in his basic training and not in his professional training (in languages).

Given this fact, it is recommended permanent teacher reflection on the teaching techniques used, which can be done through a diary or log book of everything that happened in class and make more accurate choices of instruction.

The bibliographic material regarding the teaching of grammar can be extensive; It is up to the teacher to identify the material that allows him to do it effectively. In this work, it has been suggested to use the sequence of books, assigned or selected by the institution, and to include some additional strategies of specialists.

It is recommended to prepare activities related to grammar, and other skills, in advance. Knowledge can be clear, but improvised exercises can lead to confusion and boredom for students. To avoid these events, weekly and annual didactic planning is recommended, will allow the teacher to schedule activities when appropriate and with the corresponding follow-up of them.

When you venture into the teaching of FLE, the development of planning can be seen as unnecessary; however, it helps improve the teaching task in terms of time management, topics, and the course program in general.

Through didactic planning, it is possible to cover certain content in a given time, especially in situations where students seek a French language certification.

Carrying out a diagnosis prior to the selection of work material, using a diary book and doing didactic planning of the classes, in the teaching of French grammar, facilitates the teaching performance and guarantees the effective learning of high school students.

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