

Students' Perception and Practice of One-to-Five Cooperative Grouping in Learning English Language: Borana Zone Preparatory Schools in Focus.

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Abstract: This study was aimed at exploring students' perception and practice on one-to-five cooperative grouping to enhance positive interdependence and sense of working together for a common goal and caring about each other's learning. Two hundred and eighty students from three schools in Borana zone, Oromia Regional State, Bulle Hora, Fincha'a, Yabelo and Malka Sodda. The data were collected using questionnaire, interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Close-ended questionnaire was analysed using SPSS version 19 whereas interview and FGD's qualitative data were analysed thematically. The results revealed that students have positive perception towards the grouping's benefits for getting knowledge, changing their life, improving education quality and relationship among them, making them competent and avoiding fear. However, it seems that the students did not have basic understanding of the grouping, and its successful implementations were not made significantly. Particularly, some students' unwillingness to shoulder their responsibility, overuse of mother-tongue and teaches' lecture method, few students' dominance and disturbance, lack of effective leadership skills and facilitation, fear of making mistakes, absence of practice to improve the target language, and hating English language were reported as serious factors affecting one-to-five cooperative practice. It is recommended that awareness on the goal, benefits, practice and principles of the grouping, encouragements of students to learn and use English, follow up and the necessary supports provision from directors, teachers and woreda education offices, respecting each other and making sufficient practice from students' side are imperative to alleviate the situation.

Key words: Cooperative Learning, One-to-five-grouping/networking, perception, Preparatory students', and practice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The history of education up to the mid of 20th century there had been a search for best method of teaching foreign language. This resulted in spate of methods like Community Language Learning, Cooperative Language Learning, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, and Communicative Language Teaching which emerged during 1960-1970s (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Each of these methods has its own theoretical foundation in education in general and language education in particular. Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) is mainly based on Piaget and Vygotsky's social constructivism view of learning who maintains that one builds one's own understanding of the world through social interaction with others – family, peers, and teacher (Brown, 2000). From the theories of language learning point of view, CLL is found on some basic grounds about the interactive nature of language and language learning; it is used to support both structural and functional models of language since CLL activities may be used to focus on language form as well as to practice of particular language function (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Conceptually, CLL is defined as group learning activity organized for learning to be dependent on the socially structured exchange of information among learners where each learner is held accountable to increase his/her own learning and the learning of members (Olsten and Kagan, 1992).

Scholars propose five principles for successful CLL. The principle of positive interdependence refers to a sense of working together for a common goal and caring about each other's learning (Olsen and Kagan, 1992; Johnson and Johnson, 1994). According to this principle, each member's efforts are required and indispensable for group success and had a unique contribution to make to the joint effort because of one's resources, role and task responsibilities (Johnson and Johnson, 1994). Having a single group product, assigning roles for each student and providing group reward foster positive interdependence. The second principle is quality group formation. Johnson and Johnson (1994) states that placing students in groups to work together does not guarantee positive interactions that promote learning. They should be clustered together in a fixed group, facing each other, in order to have promotive learning. This also requires deciding on group size depending on the tasks, learners' age and time; assigning students to groups heterogeneously on such variables as past achievement, sex, ethnicity; deciding students' roles in groups such as noise monitor, turn taker monitor, record or summarizer. Thirdly, individual accountability is the principle of CLL where each team member feels in charge of their own and teammates' learning and makes an active contribution to the group. The teacher can determine what each individual had learned as well as what the group had accomplished by random selection of student papers, by random oral or written examinations at the end of the work. Furthermore, Johnson and Johnson (1994) stress importance of Teaching Interpersonal and Small Group Skills as well as social skills such as, leadership, communication, trust and conflict resolution skills as the fifth principle of CLL for successful learning to occur.

These principles are crucial for having effective cooperative group learning though the significance of each principle may vary within the types of cooperative learning groups that Johnson and Johnson (1994) describe as follows:

1. *Formal cooperative learning groups:* These last from one class period to several weeks. These are established for specific tasks and involve students working together to achieve shared learning goals.
2. *Informal:* These are ad-hoc groups which last from a few minutes to a class period and are used to facilitate learning during direct teaching.
3. *Cooperative base groups:* These are long term, lasting for at least a year and consist of heterogeneous learning groups with stable membership whose primary purpose is to allow members to give each other the support, help, encouragement, and assistance they need to succeed academically.

Ethiopia has implemented one-to-five networking co-operative learning, in education sector, aiming at achieving General Education Quality Implementing Program(GEQIP) goals by establishing forces that have strong connection for solving problems. It has been seen at different academic points, management and school community levels. The ultimate goal of one-to-five grouping is to enhance all students' achievement (gifted, or handicapped) so as to create problem solver, committed and competent citizens who strive to maintain sustainable development in the country (OEB, 2011). As per in literature, Ethiopia has actually applied one-to-five group learning to all subjects because "cooperative learning serves both language and content curriculum goals" (Bernand, et al, 1998: 47).

Particularly, research finding on the merits cooperative learning provides language learners have been well documented. CLL maximizes TEFL as it provides more opportunities to practice English and engage in direct interaction (Bernand, et al, 1998), more relaxed atmosphere or learners' autonomy, greater motivation, more negotiation of meaning (Nunan, 1992; Ur, 1996), increased comprehensible input as well as increased and more varied talk or output, better performance on an overall measure of English proficiency(Krashen S., 1982).

These benefits of CLL can be seen from social, psychological, achievement and assessment perspectives. In CLL learners are encouraged, even explicitly taught, to develop their social skills such as oral communication, decision-making, conflict management and social behaviour including skills of supporting each other and taking responsibility for one's and others learning. These are crucial skills to function better at work place as well. In CLL classes, teachers have the opportunities to use more authentic and continuous assessment techniques like observation, peer-assessment, reflections and others that enhance students' achievement. Besides, CLL maximizes SLA achievement by providing more opportunities for both language input and output (Bernand, et al, 1998). Success in learning will in turn lead to psychological motivation (Jacobs and Hall, 2002).

These potential advantages of CLL are not, however, always realized (Ur, 1996) because of some problems attributed to it. First, teachers fear that they may lose control in CLL classroom: this may result in too much noise, over-use of mother tongue or doing tasks badly or not at all. In situation where students go around the class it would undoubtedly time taking, and if the seats are fixed applying CLL will be impossible. Second, field independents or introverts will be affected greatly if CLL is used constantly. Within the field dependents students itself studies indicate that brilliant students complained that they were held back helping the weak ones who also complained of being belittled by high achievers and don't like to be criticized by peers.

A research reviews made by Liang indicate findings where there was a case in which almost no participants chose cooperative learning as a major learning preference (Carroll's 1994) reported in (Ur, 1996). There were a

significant number of students with negative responses to cooperative learning. According to the research findings, not all ESL students embrace collaborative learning and they felt uncomfortable being judged by their peers (Richards J.C. and Rodgers, T.S. 2001).

How do these reports relate to the positive findings on effects of cooperative learning presented in the studies reviewed? What are the reasons for EFL students' negative responses to cooperative learning? Research needs to be carried out to understand better how students perceive cooperative learning. Perhaps, most of the limitations might mainly relate to ineffective implementation of CLL principles. Studies in Ethiopian context confirm this point.

Concerning one-to-five networking, though it has been planned and implemented to ensure education quality, some reports indicate that it has not brought much changes successfully "because it was not implemented as it was planned: we have remained without seeing many changes of education quality assurance package" (OEB, 2011:21). Since students' beliefs may be one of the factors that influence the implementation and success of cooperative learning in language classrooms, this study is intended to explore students' perception and practices of one-to-five group in improving their language proficiency.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Currently, one-to-five grouping is one of the major agenda in Ethiopia. Since its introduction two contradictory reports are being made. On the one hand, dramatic effects of one-to-five cooperative groups in general and in education sector in particular are being reported in government media. Teachers are hearing multi-level and consecutive reports that reveal school communities' appreciation of one-to-five grouping in improving students' achievement and competencies in general education. On the other hand, rumour about the grouping has been heard widely among students. Even teachers are hearing some students complaining that learning in permanent one-to-five groups has raised conflict among some students.

Brihanu (2000) as reported in Eshetu (2011) has made study on the practice CLL in grade 11 particularly focusing on group work organization. He concluded that grade 11 vocational English classes used traditional teaching methods. Specifically, he reported teachers' weak awareness regarding the professional competencies of cooperative language learning. Eshetu (2011) also explored the practice of cooperative learning method in EFL classes at two secondary schools in Arsi Zone. The results revealed that the method is not yet fully implemented because of lack of enough teaching materials and students' reluctance in shouldering their responsibilities.

Perhaps, this program was basically implemented without due attention to learners' beliefs and perception although the principles requires that changes in new method of teaching and learning to be in line with changes in learners' behaviour. Besides, to the researcher's knowledge, no published study has addressed the issue of learners' perception and practice of one-to-five grouping yet. Thus, controversy about whether this program is being implemented with the interest of students (which fosters effective implementation) or without their interest (which impede the success of program) is still unclear. Hence, this study intends to explore students' perception and practice of one-to-five cooperative learning in improving their English language proficiency. The study was also delimited to what students think about the contribution of one-to-five grouping in improving students' English proficiency, factors that hinder successful implementation of cooperative learning, and possible suggestions to overcome the problems. It did not intend to emphasize on correlation (comparing students' achievement and perception).

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of the study is to explore secondary school students' perception and practice of cooperative grouping in improving their English proficiency. The specific objectives of the study are:

- to explore secondary school students' perception of one-to-five grouping in improving their English language proficiency;
- to assess the extent to which one-to-five grouping is practiced in the selected schools
- to assess constraints that affect the implementation of one-to-five grouping

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design, Setting, Population and Sampling

This study, which is descriptive in design, was conducted on four preparatory schools in Borana Zone of the Oromia Regional State (Bulle Hora, Fincha'a, Yabelo and Malka Sodda) because of their closeness to researcher's works environment. The total number of preparatory students of the Zone is 2499 in the year 2006 E.C. Two sections were selected using simplerandom selection method (one grade 11 and one grade 12) 68 students were involved in the study from each school to collect data. Totally, 260 and 20 students were participants of the questionnaire and interview respectively.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The instruments used to collect data were questionnaires, focus group discussion, and interview. Questionnaire was the principal instrument of the data collection through which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected after pilot test was made on 20 subjects. The main objectives of the pilot study were to check up the research tools, the research procedures and the instruction materials prepared for the study. The instruments were also tested for validity, reliability and usability.

The close-ended items were developed with five points Likert scales and translated into Affan Oromo. The researcher first explained objectives of the study to participant. He also interviewed the participants by grouping them into eight focus groups containing five members in each session. The purpose of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was to produce qualitative data that provide insights into the perceptions and opinion of participants, and to cross-examine the reliability of data obtained through questionnaires. The data collected through close-ended questionnaire were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics while qualitative data gathered through interview were analysed thematically.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the questionnaires, FGD and interview results are made complementarily —for triangulation. In discussing the results of the questionnaire the scales strongly disagree and disagree are reported as disagree by adding the figures of the two while agree and strongly agree are reported as agree for simplicity of discussions. The number of respondents to the questionnaire is 260. In collecting the data for this study, emphasise was given to students' awareness, preference and perceptions of one to five cooperative learning, their practice of the grouping and factors affecting effective implementation of the grouping. The results are provided in turn.

4.1 Students' awareness of the goal of one-to-five networking and its benefits

The results in Table 4.1 show that more than half of respondents agreed that the goal 1to5 CL is to help students understand texts deeply (60.8%), help students develop soft skills (63.9) and help students to remember what they have learned (67.7) while the second portions of the respondents were unsure about it.

Table 4.1 Students' awareness of the goal of one-to-five grouping

NO	The main purpose of one-to-five CL is to help students to:	SDA		D(2)		UD(2)		A (4)		SA(5)		M
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
1.1	understand texts deeply	16	6.2	34	13.1	48	18.5	86	33	72	27.7	
1.2	develop soft skills	16	6.2	34	13.1	44	16.9	66	25	100	38.5	
1.3	remember what they have learned	10	3.8	38	14.6	36	13.8	104	40	72	27.7	

Note: The abbreviations SD= Strongly Disagree, D= disagree, UD undecided A=Agree, and SA = Strongly Agree are used throughout this chapter. The decimal points are rounded to the tenth.

Data from semi-structured questionnaire indicate that students have varied understanding about the concept of one-to-five networking and its goal. It is almost only about one-fourth of respondents who appropriately defined and stated the goal of this program as per guidelines. Most of them provided only their view of the grouping. It is only about less than half that conceptualized one-to-five CLL more or less appropriately. Others conceptualizations of the grouping are not related to common definition of one-to-five grouping. Even about 60 respondents did not provide the definition at all. Similar results are found from interview: it is found that out of 20 students interviewed only six defined one-to-five cooperative learning appropriately. Others have mentioned points which can be considered as its advantages such as stimulating students' knowledge acquisition, studying in groups, helping each others for by studying together, and learning from each other. This shows that there is a big gap on students' awareness of one to five CLL.

Responses on the goal of one-to-five grouping in semi-structured questionnaire are not promising. Majorities of respondents have provided indirect specific goals of grouping, such as sharing experience, exchanging ideas and understanding and increasing students' achievements which were repeatedly stated by 74, 74 and 68 respondents respectively. Considerable numbers of respondents (76) were unable to state the main goal of the grouping at all. In the interview and FGD, all students except one agreed to the importance of the grouping and mentioned different specific roles of the grouping such as developing culture of working together, improving all types of students' achievements, making low achievers active, changing students' attitudes towards schools, encouraging students to compete to bring similar or equal mark, and providing

competent and confident citizens. Instead of providing advantages of cooperative learning one interviewee expressed his grievance saying,

In my stay so far in the school, I found that students have wrong perceptions about one-to-five grouping. They think that all responsibilities should be held by the leader. For instance, when assignments are given, it is supposed that the leader has to do at home alone. The majorities do not understand. It is considered as his sole responsibility. It is possible to conclude that there is no effective grouping [in our school].
Student from Yabelo.

4.2 Students' perception of one-to-five cooperative grouping in their schools.

The results indicate that students have positive perception towards one-to-five grouping's benefits (Item 2.8 and Item 2.9 which were conversely stated to see reliability of responses). The respondents have also agreed to specific benefits of cooperative learning listed in questionnaire. That is, 74%, 75.1%, 57.7%, 53.8%, and 70.8% of respondents agreed that one-to-five grouping helps them to grasp more key ideas from the text, reminds them of neglected key points in the text, brings more motivation to learn, helps them improve their exam scores, gives them opportunities to practice using English and increases their classroom participation respectively.

Table 4.2 Students' perception of the benefits of 1-to-5 grouping

2	Compared with working individually, working in one-to-five grouping :	SD(1)		D(2)		UD(3)		A (4)		SA(5)		M
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
2.1	helps me grasp more key ideas from the text.	16	12.3	20	15.4	20	15.4	48	36.9	26	20	
2.2	reminds me of neglected key points.	9	6.9	11	8.5	11	8.5	36	29.2	61	46.9	
2.3	brings more motivation to learn	8	6.2	10	7.7	25	19.2	46	35.4	41	31.5	
2.4	helps me improve my exam scores	11	8.5	8	6.2	15	11.5	47	36.2	43	33.1	
2.5	gives me opportunities to practice using English	13	10	19	15	15	11.5	42	32.3	33	25.4	
2.6	improves my overall English language proficiency.	10	7.7	17	13	33	25.4	38	29.2	32	24.6	
2.7	increases my participation	7	5.4	12	9.2	19	14.6	40	30.8	52	40	
2.8	is effective	10	7.7	13	10	22	16.9	41	31.5	44	33.8	

Interview's results also indicate students' positive perception of one-to-five cooperative learning. Nineteen students of 20 interviewees responded that they thought that the grouping help them to get different knowledge, change themselves, improve education quality, become competent and confident, to have smooth relationship with others and to give chance for students to ask for clarity. This approves ideas in literature about CLL.

The respondent reacted his disagreement saying that *"since this grouping has been established in our school, I have not seen any change on students' achievements. The situation on matrix exam is also not promising. We are seeing many students failing. Therefore, it is better, in my view, if students work by their own efforts."*

4.3 Learning preferences

Respondents were also asked to rate their learning preferences in questionnaire (Table4.3). The results show that majorities of students prefer to learn in group (55.9%) and if someone tell them how to do (56.2%) while only 33.8% of them preferred to read by themselves. Thus, students' perception towards one-to-five grouping is favourable.

Table 4.3 Students' learning preference

3	I learn best	SD(1)		D(2)		UD(3)		A (4)		SA(5)		M
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
3.1	By reading myself rather than by listening	25	19.2	24	18.5	37	28	19	14.6	25	19.2	

3.2	When I study with a group.	11	8.5	16	12.3	29	22.3	44	33.8	30	23.1
3.3	When someone tells me how to do something.	18	13.8	17	13.1	22	16.9	37	28.5	36	27.7

To the contrary, students' belief and unwillingness are reported as one of the challenges to work in one-to-five grouping in interview and semi-structured questionnaire.

4.4 Results on the practice of one-to-five grouping

Table 4.4 represents responses on the principles of cooperative learning practice whose successful implementation is not reflected greatly. Specially, the principles of quality group processing and explicit teaching of small group and social skill like conflict resolution, leadership, conflict management and others were poorly implemented.

The results from structured questionnaire indicate that most principles of cooperative learning are fairly implemented in the groupings. It reveals that only the principle of quality group processing was unsatisfactorily implemented. About 52%, 64%, and 43% agreed that there were principles of positive interdependence, individual accountability and explicit teaching of social and small group processing skills respectively.

Table 4.4 Students' response on the practice of 1-to-5 cooperative networking

S No	In our one to five cooperative learning group there is :	SD		D		UD		A		SA	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
4.1	Clear positive interdependence	14	10.8	19	14.6	29	22.3	43	33.1	25	19.2
4.2	Culture of reflecting on how well our group functions.	24	18.5	28	21.5	31	23.5	28	21.5	19	14.6
4.3	Role division among members	16	12.1	30	22.7	16	12.1	34	25.8	36	27.3
4.4	Individual accountability	15	11.4	12	9.1	20	15.1	42	31.8	43	32.6
4.5	Teacher taught us required social skills	29	22	15	11.4	28	21.2	26	19.7	32	24.4
4.6	Teacher observes students' interaction	12	9.1	24	18.2	21	15.9	38	28.8	35	28.5
4.7	Members share resources and encourage, and praise each other	12	9.1	24	19.2	21	15.9	38	28.8	35	26.5
4.8	Competition between 1to5 and other 1to5.	21	15.9	15	11.4	19	14.4	32	24.4	43	32.6

However, more work will be needed to have successful implementation of the grouping. Particularly, the principle of quality group and face to face interaction need to be considered seriously.

4.5 Factors affecting the success of the one-to-five grouping

Respondents were also asked to rate to what extent factors listed affected one-to-five grouping implementation (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5 student response on factors preventing the success of the grouping

SNo.	Item	Not serious		less serious		Undecided		Serious		Most serious	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
5.1	Shortage of time to practice in 1-to-5	19	14.4	46	34.8	28	21.2	26	19.7	11	8.5
5.2	Members' unwillingness to shoulder their roles	18	13.8	37	28.5	26	20	43	33.1	6	4.6
5.3	Instructors' tendency to use lecture.	20	15.4	37	28.5	25	19.2	34	26.2	14	10.8
5.6	Lack of resources	19	14.6	19	14.6	14	10.8	48	36.8	30	23.1
5.7	Large class size	56	43.1	23	17.7	8	6.2	31	23.8	12	9.2

5.8	Diversity of group members' interest	42	32.3	23	17.7	26	20	32	24.6	7	5.4
5.9	Negative students' perception	37	28.5	26	2.	28	21.5	32	24.6	7	5.4
5.10	Teachers' belief and reluctance.	35	27	40	30.8	15	11.5	31	23.8	9	6.9
5.11	Some students' dominance	25	19.2	18	13.8	25	19.2	41	31.5	21	16.2
5.12	Overuse of L1 in discussion	36	27.5	18	13.7	13	10	38	30.1	24	19.5

Students' lack of interest to work in the grouping, dominance of few students, teachers' tendency to overuse lecture and unwillingness of students to shoulder their responsibility are the most serious factors affecting the implementation of collaborative learning. In learning English factors such as disturbance, shyness and fear, lack of interest to learn in groups among some students, fear of making mistakes as other laughs at each other's, use of L1, lack of motivation due to lack of ability of using the English language, lack of effective leadership skills and follow up, lack of speaking ability, absence of practice to improve the language, and hating English language due to lack of English Language competency.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The study was aimed at examining preparatory students' perception and practice of one-to-five grouping that Ethiopia has currently implemented at all educational levels. In this study it was found that although subjects' perceptions of one-to-five CLL was fairly favourable, still there are some dissatisfaction emerged from the subjects which were mentioned as factors affecting effective implementation of the grouping, and successful implementation of one-to-five grouping was not made perfectly according to its basic principles.

First of all, it seems that the grouping is implemented without appropriate orientation, and the majorities of the respondents did not have clear and commonly shared understanding about the grouping and its main goal. On the other hands, the finding on students' perception towards one-to-five cooperative learning benefits is fairly favourable. As to the practice, the results reveal that successful implementation of one-to-five CLL were not made greatly. Specially, the principles of quality group processing and explicit teaching of small group and social skill like conflict resolution, leadership, conflict management and others, which are crucial, were not in place. Hence, students' lack of interest to work in the grouping, , dominance of few students, teachers' tendency to overuse passive methods and unwillingness of students to shoulder their responsibility were mentioned as the most serious factors affecting implementation of one-to-five grouping in the schools. With particular reference learning English using one-to-five grouping impediment such as disturbance, shyness and fear, lack of interest to learn in groups among some students, fear of making mistakes as other laughs at each other's, use of L1, lack of motivation due to lack of ability of the language, lack of effective leaders and follow up, lack of speaking ability, absence of practice to improve the language, and negative perception toward English language, which need to be resolved.

Implications

The research finding showed that the perceptions of students towards one-to-five CLL was fairly favourable. However, still there are some dissatisfaction emerged in materialization of grouping students into one-to-five. Both students and teachers were not proactively oriented the CLL grouping and the benefits of it. The previous study reported manifested teachers' weak awareness regarding the professional competencies of cooperative language learning. The results revealed that the method is not yet fully implemented because of lack of enough teaching materials and students' reluctance in shouldering their responsibilities (Eshetu, 2011). This study also shares the previous finding in Ethiopian context that the program has been implemented without due attention to learners' beliefs and perception although the principles requires that changes in new method of teaching and learning. Students' perceptions were paradoxical that their belief and unwillingness were reported as one of the challenges to work in one-to-five grouping in interview and semi-structured questionnaire. However to change the present classical/traditional method of pedagogy into collaborative learning approach, method, procedure and techniques the following recommendations have been mentioned to make use of the new method:

VI. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the finding, the following recommendations are forwarded.

- There should be adequate awareness creation mechanism that different stake holder, school community in the institution and in the society, have to use to develop students'
- Understanding of the goal, benefits and principles of the grouping; the five principles of cooperative learning should be communicated to students;
- Teacher should provide explicit teaching of interpersonal and small group skills like oral communication, conflict resolution, and leadership, etc. that helps to have quality group product. And thereby there should be effective follow up.
- Group members should develop the culture of individual accountability, listening to one another, feel confident and get support from teacher;
- Group leaders should not dominate and do activities alone, at home. Instead, awareness should be given to them to support and encourage members to make their own learning;
- Members should be encouraged to shoulder their responsibilities to improve their own learning, specifically to improve their English skills;

As we are uncertain about whether the slightly favourable perception of the subjects affected successful implementations of the grouping, future work will be devoted to examine the impact of subjects' perception on their practice of one-to-five group formation.

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