Swot Analysis and Setting Up a Virtual Professional Environment in ESP Teaching

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The Asian Conference on Language Learning 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This research is devoted to incorporating the Internet into pre-career ESP learning environment. Unlike GE, career-oriented ESP learning is not a mere goal of language study, but a tool of learning profession. This spells instructional consequences, the teacher needs content-focused competent resources, the student requires a well structured career-related guidance.

The main obstacle in pre-career ESP training is learners' completely inexperienced background, lack of knowledge of their future professional sphere, responsibilities and skills needed, and, as a result, lack of motivation.

One of the ways out may be early immersion in virtual professional environment. There can be no better tool for this than the Internet.

The Internet has been much featured lately as a teaching instrument, starting from designing e-textbooks and ending with social networking for EFLT .

Here is suggested another approach of setting up Internet-based "proto-professional" environment for the ESP course. As it was proved by L. Vygotski and other psychologists, personal cognitive capacity is best developed by interactive activities, thus the objectives of the research became

- working out a typology of e-resources, based on their ESP communicative value and interaction potential;
- designing an Internet links map for students of tourism and hospitality business of resources that develop interactive and productive work-related skills.

Presented are the results of the research, developed materials and recommendations for ESP teachers.

Key words: ESP teaching, e-learning environment, interactive approach, professional environment.

Introduction.

Teaching ESP to first and second- year students seeking a Bachelor's degree at a specialized university is faced with certain factors that complicate the process and reduce the end results. The main obstacle in pre-career ESP training is lack of students' knowledge of their future professional sphere (tourism and hospitality), their would-be responsibilities and the skills needed, completely inexperienced background and, consequently, lack of motivation they start their ESP studies with. However, the modern professional standard demands are high and students have to be shaped into competitive professionals. Apart from that the duration of the ESP course and the frequency of contact classes are rather limited. These factors lay certain requirements on the ESP course:

a/ it must be as future career-related as possible,

b/ it must be intensified,

c/ it must be attractive and convenient for users.

One of the ways out of the above situation can be shifting the teaching paradigm towards more autonomy of learners: they can be offered an organized off-class set of Internet-based activities on their computers as a means to improve the existing ESP course without costly renovations.

Another way to tackle the above situation is bringing ESP learning closer to the target ESP sphere: if plunged into their would-be professional environment at the early stages of the university course, students could benefit from career-oriented but workable tasks using English at out-of-class time.

There can be no better tool for a comprehensive immersion in ESP than the Internet. Here are some of the reasons making it an essential and indispensable tool for ESP teaching and learning.

- Internet is a comprehensive and multi-modal instrument of reproducing the professional environment.
- Internet is an inexhaustible source of modern topical authentic and diverse ESP materials.
- Internet is indispensable as a tool for communication with native and English-speaking non-native professionals without leaving home. It provides a real audience for communication.
- As a teaching tool the Internet allows to make course-designing a flexible and efficient process. D. Teeler and P.Gray rightly point out that with the growing number of specialized courses in demand, the published course books and textbooks cannot cater for the specific needs of particular groups of students, it is the Net that gives a more cost-effective and efficient means to adapt your materials to fit the students (Teeler, Gray, 2005, p. 81)
- As a learning instrument the Internet can become a productive tool for development of a self-designed course.
- Internet gives a unique chance for learners to interact actively with the professional environment.
- Last, but not least, the Internet is the living environment of 'the generation of digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) and today's tech-savvy students may be better motivated and respond more readily to ESP instruction mediated by the Internet.

The Web resources are boundless and it makes a problem even for an experienced teacher to select appropriate worthy materials and integrate them into the ESP course so that they both meet the course targets and prove to be affordances for students. Therefore the research was to give answers to certain questions.

Objectives of the research.

The main aim of the research was to explore the potential of the Internet as a simulator of ESP professional environment for tourism and hospitality students. This goal entailed setting two main objectives:

1/ looking for appropriate criteria and procedures of evaluation of e-resources;

2/ developing strategies, techniques and activities for the integration of selected e-resources into the ESP course.

This paper focuses mainly on the first of these tasks. To this effect the following questions attracted the researcher's attention:

1. What kinds of career-related web sites are available in the Net for students of tourism and hospitality?
2. How can Web resources be evaluated? Are there any objective criteria? Can the process be formalized?
3. What should the principles of selection be for Web ESP resources as a means of asynchronous out-of-class independent activities of students?
4. What is the attitude of students and teachers to EL Web-based activities?
5. What should the Web package profile be for setting up a more or less comprehensive environment for would-be professionals?

Literature review.

EFL specificity as a curriculum subject boils down to content-relativity, that is openness to diverse content. That is why the main characteristics of ESP, among other things, are using the activities of the discipline it serves and the language, skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities (Dudley-Evans, John, 1998). This implies a focused selection of skills to be taught and the materials to use. An ESP teacher cannot just 'rely on the language "emerge" from the natural exchanges with students' (Cornwell, 2011).

ESP learning is content-based and thus relies more on language as a vehicle of instruction rather than the object of instruction (Brent, A. et al., 2012)

This necessitates rather early language specialization (Крупченко, 2004) as the content disciplines introducing the categories, concepts, notions and techniques of professional interaction, are started later than the foreign language, not from the first weeks of the first year. Besides, as it has been mentioned, the situation is aggravated by lack of students' knowledge of and experience in the professional field. Students do not understand professional lexis and translation dictionaries are of little help (e.g. *silver service* at restaurants, *European plan, junior suite*, *table d'hôte* menu etc. do not ring a bell). Students do not have proper discourse competence and violate the register and social norm or the professional discourse norm when they role-play ESP situations without due knowledge of proper professional communication strategies. The problem of professional knowledge deficit can be solved in an ESP course by means of introducing field-related Internet resources to students and involving them into special activities.

It is no wonder that ESL and ESP teachers today turn to the Web to respond to various pedagogical issues. Many researchers use the Internet as a mediating environment to develop some particular skills of learners, e.g. reading (Damronglaohapan, S. 2012), voice or written chatting, teaching skills (Hauck, Guichon, 2011) or some particular teaching techniques (Shu-Fen Tseng, Chien-Lung Chan, 2012). There are considerably fewer papers offering general holistic approaches to development of teaching materials. One of such valuable works is the monograph by B. Tomlinson highlighting the principles of teaching materials development (Tomlinson, 2010). They are as follows:

1 Provide many opportunities for the learners to produce language in order to achieve intended outcomes.
2 Make sure that these output activities are designed so that the learners are using language rather than just practising specified features of it.
3 Design output activities so that they help learners to develop their ability to communicate fluently, accurately, appropriately and effectively.
4 Make sure that the output activities are fully contextualised in that the learners are responding to an authentic stimulus (e.g. a text, a need, a viewpoint, an event), that they have specific addressees and that they have a clear intended outcome in mind.
5 Try to ensure that opportunities for feedback are built into output activities.
All these principles of B. Tomlinson can be applicable to Internet materials.

There are diverse resources to stimulate both language perception and production in similar or contrastive contexts. It is easier to find communicatively valuable materials in the Internet than elsewhere. The variety of contextualisations found with the help of the Web is boundless, starting from photos of realia and ending with networking in English with e-pals. The most important general principle of B. Tomlinson is that materials need to be made in such a way that they can be used as a resource, but not to be followed as a script. In other words teaching materials must leave room for thought and creation, they must be a springboard, rather than a chute. That leads us to the idea that ESP teaching materials must have not so large constant component, but Internet-based variable components in addition to every module of the ESP syllabus.

The next question was how e-resources should be selected for an ESP course. Of special interest for this ESP research was a set of characteristics, that an effective technology-enriched learning environment need to have. They were proposed by Butler and Wiburg (Butler, Wiburg, 2003). The most important for an ESP Internet-supported vocational course are the following Butler and Wiburg's characteristics that could be regarded as selection principles for Web resources:

- The resource utilizes authentic materials from specific disciplines and occupations.
- The resource supplies authentic audiences including outside experts in specific fields.
- The resource facilitates focused practice in development of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.
- The resource addresses specific needs of students.
- The resource uses multiple modalities to support different learning styles.
- **The resource provides interaction and communicative activities representative of specific professional environments.**
- **The resource provides comprehensible field-specific input and facilitates students' output.**

The last two characteristics are of top priority for students of tourism and hospitality service because they are trained for people jobs, for servicing, which is interaction with customers and team-work with colleagues on the one hand. On the other hand, as far as students' production is concerned, 'field-specific input' makes no sense without field-specific output, and the more productive and creative student's ESP output is the better. The afore mentioned principles do not exclude the unquestionable principles of professional themes-relation, communicative value and authenticity, but complement them. The short review above leads us to the inference that ESP e-resources cannot be left to students to choose at random. They need to be properly selected and integrated with the classroom syllabus in order to become its efficient out-of-class supplement. This calls for

ability not only to find, but evaluate the teaching potential of the resource, its advantages and disadvantages, its strengths and weaknesses. This led the researcher to the possible utility of the SWOT analysis to be applied for evaluation of e-resources in ESP teaching. This technique was borrowed from management, because it applies to complex processes and objects, like company operation or personal potential. It might serve teachers for evaluation of worthiness of such teaching tools as Web resources.

Methodology.

This research was made at the Moscow State Institute for Tourism Industry named after Yu. Senkevich. There were two focus groups of students, aged 18-20, studying for the Bachelor's degree. One group had first-year students specializing in management and the other group included second-year students majoring in hospitality service. The initial language level of both the groups was lower intermediate.

The choice in favour of the out-of-class format of e-tools was made due to several reasons. First, not all the language classrooms are yet equipped with PC workstations with access to the Internet, which does not allow full-fledged in-class Internet-supported teaching.

Second, the course syllabus is well loaded and one 3-hour contact class per week is far from being enough for acceptable achievement. Third, I suspected that quite a number of ESP teachers are not prepared and even reluctant to conduct Internet-based classes today as they do not have proper techno-pedagogical competences. Fourth, I supposed that our students are advanced enough and willing to use the Internet as a source of materials and a learning tool.

The research was of a qualitative character and applied some of content analysis techniques, interpretative techniques and to some extent quantitative techniques (percentage transformations of the questionnaire data).

Apart from literature review the research called for the following methods and procedures:

- study of tourism and hospitality professional environment, insight into standards and qualifications, job descriptions and job requirements, exploration of typical professional situations (throughout my 30 odd-year teaching career and several years of 'inside' experience as a guide);
- observation of students at work with the Internet during contact classes;
- search for and preliminary survey of potentially relevant ESP e-resources that might benefit students of tourism and hospitality; making a set of bookmarks;
- application of the SWOT-analysis to the resource(s) meant for homework in order to select the most suitable and to pinpoint the necessary pedagogical procedures and adjustments to ensure their successful out-of-classroom usage (recommending particular e-resources, thinking out proper instructions, making special explanations in classroom beforehand or by email message to the group's email box if necessary, giving warnings to exclude frustration while doing the task, working out a task or a set of tasks the resource can be the most optimal for, preparing hand-outs, thinking out the manner of checking the results of this out-of reach activities and the criteria of their evaluation etc.);
- surveying students and teachers and making inferences for the future.

Stages of the research

Reflection on students' failures and slow progress urged looking for alternative ways. One of the solutions would be adding directed out-of-class Web-based activities aimed at creative productive language work done with the help of an interactive e-tool or a set of potentially productive e-Resources. The following stages of research followed.

1. Publications on learning management, ESP and e-learning were studied.

2. The Internet was explored for relevant materials and a list of professionally meaningful e-resources was made. It consisted of bookmarks grouped according to the specializations of the students ("Hospitality service", "Management").
3. A SWOT analysis checklist for Web resources was made on the basis

of the ESP and CALL literature review, my colleagues' and my own experience with the Web. SWOT analysis implies pooling and sharing knowledge, that is why additional contributions were required from both the teacher colleagues and the students. They were obtained by means of a questionnaire survey.

4. A questionnaire was compiled for ESP teachers and the focused student groups to clear up their attitudes to the Internet as a teaching tool. The surveys were conducted. One probed into the attitudes of the ESP teachers towards the role of Web materials in their work, the other revealed the students' opinions of the Internet activities and preferences.

5. The SWOT analysis was applied, which shortlisted the resources for the ESP out-of-class activities. The format chosen was a classical 2 by 2 matrix, but the application procedure was different. Instead of brainstorming and filling in the 4 sectors of the SWOT matrix, the previously elaborated 4-part checklist was superposed onto the resources under study. The list of recommended ESP resources was finalized in the form of an electronic catalogue for tourism and hospitality student out-of-class activities.

6. Monitoring and scaffolding techniques and strategies were developed for activities with the types of resources mostly suitable for starters in pre-career ESP learning.

Findings and data analysis.

For lack of space only the main findings of the questionnaire survey (see the questionnaire sample in the Appendix) are mentioned in this paper.

The total number of respondents was 68, 49 first and second-year students and 19 EL teachers. The same questionnaire was offered to teachers and students.

The purpose of the survey was to find out about

- the reasons to use the Internet
- the preferred types of activities done on the Net
- the readiness of respondents to deal with virtual professional environment
- probable barriers and threats of using professional Internet sites.

53% of the student respondents claim to use the Net to learn English, while only 36% of the teachers use it to teach English.

77.5% of the students use the Internet to get entertained, but only 26% of the teachers.

The data gathered show that the students spend a lot of time on communicating and entertaining in the Net and could probably benefit from turning their effort into professional directions.

The types of preferred Net activities more or less coincided with a few exceptions.

26% of the teachers set grammar or lexical tasks on the Internet, but only 14% of the students do I-based tasks.

47% of the teachers ask the students to watch or listen to Internet materials, but only about 31% of the students prove to be engaged in these activities. A two-fold explanation can be offered: either the teachers were exaggerating or the students did not always do the

tasks given to them. Anyway the fact that not more than one third of the students do Internet-based home tasks proves there is a lot of room for improvement in this respect.

32% of the teaching staff use the Net for communication with students, but only 16% of the students confirm communicating with teachers via the Internet. Students use the Net more actively for oral communication (26.5%) than teachers (16%).

It was especially interesting to reveal the role of career-related web sites in students' and teachers' life. The most eye-opening discoveries were the following.
a/ Every third EL teacher never used tourism and hospitality periodical sites in English (32%) and never used Internet videos in English (32%).
b/ Quizzes in profession-related subjects are more interesting for students than teachers. 18% of students do them regularly and 61% sometimes, whereas no teachers do quizzes regularly and 42% never do them at all.
Lack of the teachers' interest in tourism and hospitality sites is a worrying sign, because it may spell their inadequate special subject competence which is part and parcel of efficient ESP teaching.
Analysis of potential threats underlying work on the Internet shows that the language of a web site can be a barrier for students (59% indicated this), but not so much for the teachers (22%). The top barriers that may threaten virtual interaction and cause rejection of a site were improper language, operational difficulties (user-unfriendly interface) and excessive advertising on the site. It can be concluded that web sites for a virtual professional environment have to be sieved thoroughly considering the above observations and need certain selection procedures.
This is how the SWOT checklist suggested looks like.

SWOT Analysis Checklist for Web Resources Evaluation

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
Authentic materials	Too narrow content specificity, for specialists only
Evident advantages of using the Internet tool as an alternative to a traditional tool of similar modality	Contracted forms, net jargon
Professional relevance (theme, key concepts, terms) represents a resource desirable for a tourism and hospitality specialist	Profuse terminology, difficult language
Specific discipline relevance, providing opportunity to use similar strategies, tasks and activities in ESP teaching	Too many skills required from user (difficult in operation)
Multimodality, multidimensional representation, variety of ESP genres representation	Too commercialized (many obtrusive adverts)
Interaction with user (feedback)	Poor potential for creative work
Offering users productive activity (built-in or potential creative activities possible)	
Communicative value (the materials of the resource can be used in professional communication)	
Suitability for developing several kinds of skills (reading+speaking, reading+writing, listening+speaking, listening+writing or other combinations)	
Correlation with the communication competence level of learners	

Foreign culture-loaded materials	
Demonstrative / illustrative power (both positive and negative)	English language mistakes
Benchmarking function (ability to serve as an ideal example to model on)	
Reliability of the site (long history, competent authors and contributors, frequency of visiting etc.)	
Regular updating (live, not dead)	Regular updating (live, not dead)
User-friendly lay-out, well-formatted text	Poor lay-out
Simple and clear resource instructions	
Speedy faultless service	

Opportunities	**Threats**
Updating language skills with the help of the Internet resource, practising	Communication barriers, complicating interaction with this resource (conceptual, perceptual, anticipatory etc.)
Discourse and other communication competence development	Technical barriers impairing interaction with the resource (advanced user e-literacy needed, payment needed, complicated registration, low-quality slow traffic etc.)
Pragmatic competence development	Misunderstanding of the pedagogical potential of the resource and its misuse (attractive interactive sites which do not develop ESP communication skills)
Cross-cultural competence development	Difficulty in arranging control over out-of-class resource use and evaluation of the results
Searching skills development	Home culture constraints for the user of the Internet resource
Video and audio materials can be worked with at a student's pace	Misunderstanding of the realia, abbreviations, acronyms and special idioms
Online feedback can be obtained from the resource	Unreliable information, inappropriate for ESP learners (biased, distorted by commercial interests, deliberately faked etc.)
Creating a virtual communicatively meaningful product of one's own	
Modelling on a sample and imitating	
Adapting or transforming texts for personal use	

Compiling special word lists and ESP vocabularies of one's own	
Improving non-authentic materials, editing skills development	

Three major factors influenced the application of the SWOT grid, they were
a/ justified preference of an e-resource to its traditional substitute of the same modality, e. g. a more compact but more informative hypertext than an ordinary career-related text; more updated, more diverse in accents and genres audio resources with built-in feedback instead of limited in variety and non-interactive audio recordings etc.
b/ the fact that the resources were set for out-of-class use and were to be used by students independently, that is why they were not to be too difficult for students (correspond to their communication competence level), but had to be appealing enough to motivate them without a teacher looming over them;
c/ the fact that learners do not know much of the profession and could not be left totally to themselves in choosing supporting e-resources.

An e-resource was measured with the 4-part matrix in the following way.
The weaknesses were used to exclude unwanted resources, that is if the resource met at least one of the weaknesses it was rejected as improper for the ESP course.
The strengths, available in a particular resource, positively marked it as suitable and indicated the direction of its "exploitation". For instance, the resource loaded with foreign culture was used mostly for developing cross-cultural competence, though it could additionally serve for learning spelling or developing reading skills.
The multimodality value of the site means that a site with on-line texts, audio recording or video is much more valuable than just a textual or only a video resource, because the former appeals to more students (eye-learners and ear-learners) and offers more space for various skills development.
The benchmarking function of a resource is especially important in pre-career ESP course, as it allows to demonstrate the desirable communicative behaviour in professional settings.
Interaction requirement tells resources that react to the user from those that do not, for example, air companies and hotel booking sites let a student simulate professional activities of browsing over, comparing, making a choice, booking the dates, the types of tickets or hotels, filling in forms (without payment), reading and aggregating client-oriented data base, etc. Another interaction-potential tool is a so-called MOO (a multi-user object-oriented dimension), which is some permanent space on the Internet, providing real-time meeting for several visitors for virtual interaction with some objects (making a design of one's business card, for example, with a range of instruments offered by the tool and sharing it with other students).
The most valuable criterion for an ESP resource is its productive potential, that is a number of creative career-related activities it can be used in, both built-in and teacher or student-designed.

Opportunities characteristics do not depict the properties of a resource, but suggest possible directions of practices and activities with the resource. Thus pragmatic competence development, for example, can be ensured only by e-resources with a strong appeal to the consumer and a clear target in view, but the implementation of pragmatic opportunities is not guaranteed, it needs an elaborated set of pedagogical adjustments.
E-resources that can provide not only opportunities but also ways and techniques for their implementation are Web 2.0 tools which allow users to produce content of their own and share it with others. This role is perfectly performed by travel 2.0 tool, which provides

travel content generated by users (Chabot, A., 2007) and is indispensable for the ESP course in tourism and hospitality.

The threats of using a resource may be evident (technical barriers) or hidden (home culture intrinsic perceptual constraints of using a resource). In the latter case the threat may be predicted intuitively but additional investigations are needed to account for such threats and minimize them or turn them into the opportunities of the e-resource with special tasks and activities.

The SWOT analysis of ESP e-resources for tourism and hospitality revealed a set of e-resource types that can and should be selected and put together as a resource minimum. They are

- Wikipedia.
- Specialized dictionaries with a pronunciation option, including translation dictionaries.
- Efficient research engines: Hotbot and other resources for developing ESP discourse competence, Dogpile for quick and efficient search of various illustrative images etc.
- Professional sites like www.kayak.com, www.anywayanyday.com, Tripadvisor, www.wikitravel.org/, Amtrak, www.oag.com, www.eHow.com for learning to process and analyze information, getting operational skills, for benchmarking etc.
- The sites of tourism and hospitality periodicals to keep abreast of the industry news and pick up authentic up-to-date lexis and idioms (http://www.ttgdigital.com/, http://www.conciergequestionnaire.com/, etc.)
- Professional associations and organizations sites like www.abta.com, www.unwto.org, http://agipe.ru/ (Association of Guides and Tour Managers of Russia) and others.
- Interactive travel 2.0 tools like www.ohio.edu/esl for creating a web quest of one's own simulating some elements of designing a tour; http://evernote.com for taking photos, supplying captions and pasting them into a proper context; www.travelpod.com for designing a tour, Tripbuilder or Tripwiser for creating some travel content of one's own and sharing it with others and suchlike.

The last type of resources is of particular importance for ESP students as it lets weld together various communicative competences and fertilize them with special vocational skills.
The selection of the above resources was done in tune with the valuable observation of Brown and Yule (Brown, Yule, 1983) about teaching materials saying that they should be chosen not so much on the basis of their own interest, but for what they can be used to do.

Unfortunately the analysis of the questionnaires showed discrepancies in attitudes toward e-resources of teachers and students. The former demonstrated less enthusiasm and activity in applying e-tools.

Conclusions

1. The Web can provide a wide range of career-related materials, but their volume is overwhelming and the quality varies. Besides ESP students are not competent to decide on the resource types to choose from and must be taught and helped to do so.
2. There is a need for a more or less objective and relevant tool for selection of ESP resources. The SWOT technique may serve as guidelines for ESP

instructors to evaluate the potential of e-resources with comprehensible criteria. This evaluative tool calls for reliable interpretative techniques.

3. The attitudes of teachers and students toward e-based supplements to an ESP course must be brought to some common denomination to produce the expected efficacy.
4. Well arranged e-based ESP supplements for out-of –class study motivate students to design an individual ESP course for themselves, which improves their learning techniques, enhances their interactive competence and develops career management skills.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire Sample

Please respond to these questions honestly marking the proper boxes.

1. Are you a confident Internet user? Yes □ No □

2. Which do you do more often, react to contacts or initiate contacts via the Internet?
React □ Initiate □ _____□

3. What purposes do you mainly use the Internet for?
□ - to get the latest news
□ - to communicate
□ - to search for the wanted information (content)
□ - to learn / teach English
□ - to arrange travel
□ - to get entertainment (games, music, films etc)

4. If you use the Internet regularly for your English do you
□ - look up words in electronic dictionaries?
□ - use Wikipedia or other encyclopedias?
□ - do / ask students to do grammar or lexical tests or tasks in the Net?
□ - watch or listen / ask students to watch or listen to English materials in the Net at home?
□ - speak English via the Internet (orally)?
□ - regularly exchange messages in English with e-pals?
□ - use the Net for teacher - students communication?
□ - look for textual materials in English using Google, Yandex etc.?
□ - use photos, pictures and other images in studying English?

5. Which of these resources in English do you use **regularly, sometimes or never**?

- Audio recordings on tourism and hospitality topics R S N
- Videos R S N
- Sites of professional tourist and hospitality periodicals R S N
- Self-testing in English via the Net R S N
- Sites of hotels and air companies R S N
- Sites of museums, travel exhibitions etc R S N
- Quizzes in country-study, geography etc R S N

6. What makes you reject an Internet site in English?
□ - its language (too difficult, too easy, too slangy)?
□ - its content unrelated to your study / work?
□ - its too specific content (for specialists)
□ - no pictures
□ - no video
□ - poor layout from your viewpoint
□ - no interactive options
□ - too commercialized (many adverts imposed on the user)
□ - not simple in operation
□- for Teachers' replies only: hard to check and evaluate the results of students' work with the site

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