

Form-focused Grammar Instruction: Effects on Grammar Accuracy and Oral and Writing Proficiency in English

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Abstract

One of the main goals of second language learners is to develop awareness of language structure (Bialystok, 1989). To achieve this goal, there has been a paradigm shift from form-focused to meaning-focused type of instruction over the years. However, through a number of researches, some researchers have explored the effectiveness of switching back to form-focused grammar instruction (FFGI) to develop proficiency in a language. Motivated by this “pendulum-shift” to pedagogical grammar, the researcher investigated the effectiveness of FFGI and its relationship to two macro skills in language development, speaking and writing. This study aimed to explore the effects of form-focused grammar instruction (FFGI) on grammar accuracy, oral and writing proficiency. It also aimed to establish the correlation between oral and writing proficiency after the participants’ exposure to FFGI.

The study adopted a one-group pretest-posttest design. An oral exam by Cromwell and an online writing test for writing proficiency were administered to the participants of the study. Afterwards, the participants were exposed to the intervention (FFGI). The same tests in the pre-test were administered during post-test. The findings revealed that there was a significant difference in the participants’ pre- and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test. Conversely, there was no significant relationship between grammar accuracy and oral and writing proficiency. It was concluded that FFGI can contribute to the improvement of grammar accuracy of students. However, knowledge of grammar rules does not automatically result in oral and writing proficiency.

Keywords: oral proficiency, writing proficiency, form-focused grammar instruction, grammar accuracy

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Introduction

An understanding of language and its structure is essential for communicative purposes. This is in conjunction with one of the components in Savignon's (1976) communicative competence model which is grammatical competence. It pertains to the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological features of a language and to make use of these features to interpret and form sentences. Clearly, it implies the importance of grammar in language learning and teaching.

The Philippine education system puts premium on the understanding of the English language structure in developing the communication skills, both oral and writing, of Filipino students as reflected in the curriculum of both basic and tertiary education. Even with the Enhanced Basic Education program (K to 12 curriculum), grammar lessons remain to be integral components of the English subject. In a larger scale, it recognizes the vital role that English plays in producing highly-skilled and globally-competitive citizens.

However, there are alarming realities that English quality is seriously deteriorating and that mastery of English among Filipinos is declining. By a common observation, Filipino students can no longer communicate well in the English language as evidenced by the decline in their proficiency. In a survey conducted in 2004, it was observed that the English proficiency of Filipino overseas workers, both skilled and non-skilled, has likewise declined (Funtanilla, 2005). What is even alarming is the poor performance in English proficiency examinations even among teachers themselves (Melencio, 2007). For instance, the mean score of 117, 728 permanent Grade 1 and 2 public school teachers in the entire country who took the Test of English Proficiency for Teachers (TEPT) and Process Skills Test (PST) in 2012 was 50.53. This indicates low level of proficiency based on the descriptive equivalent set by the Department of Education (DepEd).

Indubitably, these alarming observations challenge English teachers to develop writing and oral proficiency among students. English teachers face the greater responsibility of enhancing such skills to help students realize the goals and specific learning outcomes set by the English curriculum while dealing with the other factors affecting second language learning and teaching. As Funtanilla (2005) noted in her study, language specialists who view language as something learned through use and practice are convinced that the more exposed a learner is to the structure and use of the target language, the better he/she learns. Bachman's (1990) grammatical competence strands, cited by Brown (2000), were also used by Malik (2012) in his study where he indicated that the language competence aspect that affects English oral proficiency the most was limited knowledge and poor understanding of the English language.

In conjunction with these findings, there are several issues related to the development of students' oral and writing proficiency. Some of these issues concern the current pedagogical practices that may have a contribution to students' low oral and writing examination results. Thus, it is timely to find out whether or not teachers are able to capitalize on the time used for grammar drills and exercises. It is worthy to investigate whether or not such drills have aided or contributed to the development of English

proficiency of the students who have been exposed to grammar instruction for a long period of time. More than the time spent in learning and understanding the structure of the English language, the manner in which grammar lessons are taught sparks interest in the researcher given that it is an important factor in the teaching-learning process. Consequently, it motivated the researcher to look into grammar teaching methodologies in order to develop English proficiency.

This study aimed to explore and assess the effectiveness of form-focused grammar instruction in promoting not just the oral but also the writing proficiency of students. Likewise, it investigated the correlation between speaking and writing, two important language skills, after implementing a form-focused grammar instruction. In essence, this study capitalized on FFGI as a tool in addressing difficulties specific to the declining writing and oral proficiency in English of a group of Filipino students.

Need to Focus on Grammar

The selection of form-focused grammar instruction as an intervention was grounded on several theories and related studies. According to Enverga-Florece (2006), the conscious understanding of the target language system and its features: phonology, orthography, morphology, and syntax is necessary if learners are to produce correct language forms and use them appropriately in verbal or written communication. It presupposes that teaching of grammar is a sufficient condition for language.

Concerning form-focused instruction, Hayashi (1995) cites three positions in relation to learning the structure of a language. First is the non-interface position which claims that formal instruction such as FFGI has little effect on second language acquisition and learning because explicit knowledge does not become implicit knowledge (Krashen, 1982). The second position is the strong interface position which claims that knowledge acquired explicitly becomes implicit knowledge through constant practice (Sharwood-Smith, 1981). Finally, the weak interface position (Ellis, 1990), affirms that FFGI can be useful in natural communication depending on the target structure. Among these positions, the main influence in the researcher's conduct of form-focused grammar instruction was the strong interface position and the weak interface position. Thus, various activities that drill the students' mastery of the grammar structure were carefully chosen and implemented during the intervention.

The study also anchored its framework on the claim of Swain (1985) in his output hypothesis which states that speaking or writing can help students move from semantic to syntactic processing such as adjectival agreements, subject-verb agreements, subordination, and coordination. This claim was supported by Malik's study in 2012. The study investigated the factors affecting students' fluency level in the second language and their effects on oral proficiency and fluency. The results indicated that oral fluency was most of the time affected by grammar. After analyzing the recording of 50 students, the researcher captured more mistakes in grammar followed by vocabulary and pronunciation. These mistakes were highly correlated with pauses due to hesitation and word repetition. It is therefore clearly understood that grammar as well as vocabulary produced direct impact upon the dependent variable pauses due to hesitation and word repetition. Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that if students do not have proper knowledge of grammar rules and their automatic application in verbal speech (pertaining to the output component

of Swain's hypothesis), they will not be able to consciously raise their awareness of grammar structure and consequently, this will prevent them from speaking more fluently.

Clearly, the study shows the importance of Swain's suggestion: learners should be engaged not only in input which she believes, involves comprehension and that requires little syntactic organization but also in output which includes negotiation of meaning and talking about language in order to succeed in acquiring and learning the language. With these observations and findings, the study did not only focus on providing input (form-focused grammar instruction) but also concentrated on analyzing participants' outputs (speaking and writing tasks during the implementation of the intervention) to further explore and validate the claims in Swain's output hypothesis.

Form-Focused Grammar Instruction

The history of second language teaching and learning has alternated between two opposite approaches - those that focused on analyzing the language, i.e., language usage (focus on forms) and those that focused on using the language, i.e., language use (focus on meaning) (Afshari, 2012). The focus on forms (FonFs) pertains to the systematic teaching of language structure and features while focus on form (FonF) refers to the instruction that focuses on the communicative tasks or activities with the language feature taught incidentally, that is, only when the need arises.

While the advent of these approaches has yielded some significant contributions to the field of second language teaching and learning, it has also posed a dilemma as to whether or not teachers should focus on form or meaning. Further, it has elicited several conflicting and various views and criticisms among linguists, teachers, and researchers. Moreover, it has paved the way for certain studies that attempted to determine which methodology is more effective in learning and teaching a second language.

The approach focusing on form has numerous definitions but to simplify, Spada has provided a nicely-worded definition: "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learner's attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly" (1997:73). In essence, it is not just confined to the language form per se since the other end of the continuum implies indirect reference to forms, learner's paying attention to specific linguistic features in input and the integration of forms into communicative tasks or grammar consciousness raising by Ellis. Accordingly, in this study, communicative activities were incorporated in speaking and writing tasks applying the rules of grammar. The form-focused was solely done during the delivery of instruction on grammar lessons.

Conceptual Framework

Below is the conceptual framework of the current study. It reflects the effects of a method in teaching grammar (form-focused grammar instruction or FFGI) on the essential components of communicative competence and language skills in English (oral and writing proficiency) and the extent of its significance. First, it indicates how FFGI is related to grammar accuracy which reflects the first research question. Second, it depicts the relationship between grammar accuracy and both writing and

oral proficiency in English which is indicated in the second research question. Finally, it shows the possible relationship between oral and writing proficiency in English.

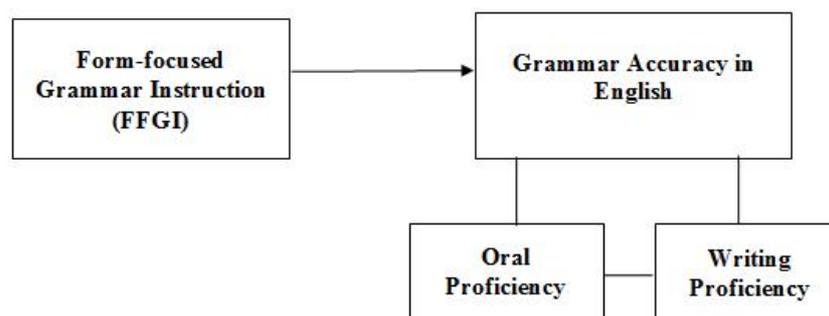


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

Research Questions

The focus of this study was the evaluation of the effectiveness of form-focused grammar instruction (FFGI) in developing oral and writing proficiency in English of college students. After the implementation of FFGI, it further investigated the correlation between oral and writing proficiency in English. Specifically, the study sought to address three research questions. First, *Is there a significant difference in the study participants' pre and post test scores in the grammar accuracy test after going through form-focused grammar instruction?* Second, *Is there a significant relationship between the students' grammar accuracy and English oral proficiency and the students' grammar accuracy English writing proficiency?* Finally, *Is there a significant correlation between students' oral and writing proficiency in English after they undergo form-focused grammar instruction?*

Research Design

To obtain the necessary information for this research, a One-Group-Pretest-Posttest design was employed. The pre-test and the post-test consisted of two sets of tests: one for oral proficiency and another one for writing proficiency. Results of these tests were collated and interpreted in light of the questions posed for this study. An explicit aspect of this study was the use of form-focused grammar instruction as an intervention emphasizing on the structure of the language rather than its meaning. The study also utilized a descriptive correlation method to determine the relationship between the oral and writing proficiency of students in English after the implementation of FFGI. This method was deemed the most appropriate for this study as it attempted to explain the relationships and the extent of the significance between and among its variables.

Research Locale/Participants

To realize the objectives of this study, forty-two (42) college students of a private non-sectarian university in Manila enrolled in an English grammar course during the first term of AY 2014-2015 served as study participants. They were mostly from the College of Business Administration but were pursuing majors such as Customs Administration, Operations Management, and Accountancy. One participant was taking International Relations while another was majoring in Multimedia Arts.

However, at the end of the term, there were only thirty-one (31) participants left due to attrition related to absences, course dropping, and unavailability of either the pre-test or the post-test results in speaking and/or writing.

Instruments

As this study operated on a One-Group-Pretest/Posttest design, two sets of tests for the pre-test stage and the post-test stage were utilized. Cromwell's oral pre-test (short autobiography) and a standardized grammar accuracy test including five open-ended questions on some selected topics was utilized to determine their writing proficiency.

Oral Pre-Test/Post-Test. The researcher used one of Cromwell's speaking tasks in his oral exam – narration of short autobiography. This oral pre-test was deemed appropriate for the self-introduction activity at the start of the course. During the pre-intervention phase of the study, the participants were asked to introduce themselves by sharing their autobiography. The self-introduction of each participant was set at two to three minutes. Accordingly, it was recorded using a digital camera and afterwards rated by three English professors using the oral proficiency rating scale to ensure objectivity and uniformity of rating. The highest possible score for the test was 35 points. The same oral test, which was the autobiography, was used after the intervention to measure improvement in the participants' oral proficiency.

Purdue Online Writing Test. In order to assess the grammar accuracy and the writing proficiency of the participants, the researcher adopted the Purdue Writing Test, an online standardized test. This was chosen because it had already undergone validation as it was used in a study by Funtanilla (2005) and the test items are consistent with the grammar topics outlined in the course syllabus of the selected participants. The test consists of two sections: grammar and free writing. The grammar section consists of 60 items about basic grammar and proper use of the eight parts of speech. The free writing consists of five topics from which study participants can choose. These topics include the following: the importance of attending a college or university, a comparison between knowledge gained from experience and knowledge gained from books, the qualities of good neighbors, success as a result of hardwork, and parents as best teachers. In the free writing, the participants were instructed to choose one topic and write a short composition about it in at least three paragraphs. The objective part of the test was rated by the researcher while the free writing test was rated by the three faculty raters from the English department. They were the same raters who assessed the oral proficiency of the participants.

Oral Proficiency Scoring Rubric. For objective rating of the oral tests, the researcher adopted the oral proficiency rating scale used by Ibanez (2001) in her study on cooperative language learning approach towards English as a Second Language (ESL) Oral Proficiency. The rating scale has categories that include the four aspects of communicative competence by Savignon namely, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. The categories are rated on a scale of 1 to 5, the total scores are added up, and a simple average is taken from the examinee's overall rating. This was used by the three professors of English from the College of Arts and Sciences – Department of English and Literature (CAS-DEL) in the research locale.

Writing Proficiency Scoring Rubric. To objectively assess the written outputs of the students, the researcher utilized Lee and Paulson's (1992) Evaluation Criteria for Compositions which was also used by Baetiong (2004) and recently by Envarga-Florece (2006) in their respective dissertations. The analytic marking scheme consists of five criteria arranged according to the assigned numerical score each of the criteria received. The criteria include content, organization, vocabulary, language, and mechanics. Among the writing rubrics, this was selected as it had undergone a series of validations having been used in two related studies. Likewise, the descriptors for each criterion are very detailed particularly for language and mechanics. This was also used by the same raters for oral proficiency.

Lesson Plans. The researcher prepared twenty-five (25) sets of lesson plans for the entire semester based on the grammar topics outlined in the syllabus. Prior to the implementation, the lesson plans were submitted to the evaluators for their review and validation. Some of the evaluators' suggestions were considered in the revision and execution of the plan. The lesson proper usually began with motivational activity. Afterwards, the researcher discussed the lesson using form-focused instruction. Guided practice and individual practice followed the instruction. One of the key features of the plan was the reinforcement activities that always came in pairs – one for oral proficiency labelled as *Speak Up* and another for writing proficiency *Write Up*.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection consisted of three phases: pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention. Each phase comprised of an activity for oral and writing proficiency with corresponding data to be collected.

Data collection started after administering the two tests during the pre-intervention phase of this study. For the oral pre-test, the participants introduced themselves through their autobiography. The participants were given two to three minutes to share their autobiography. As they spoke, their speeches were recorded using a digital camera facilitated by the researcher himself. Two class meetings were allotted for the oral pre-test because the initial forty-two (42) participants could not be accommodated in one class meeting only. Thereafter, the speech samples were transcribed, analyzed and evaluated using the oral proficiency rating scale to account for the grammatical lapses in the course of the oral test. On a separate class meeting after the oral pre-test, the students took the Purdue Writing test consisting of 60 objective items on basic grammar and an essay part with five (5) topics. In other words, the oral and writing pre-tests were administered on separate class meetings. For the essay part of the pre-writing test, Lee and Paulson's (1992) Evaluation Criteria for Compositions was used in rating the participants' composition. The results gathered from both the oral and written tests at this stage served as baseline performance data for the study.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data obtained for this study, the following statistical tools and techniques were used to ensure valid, scientific, and systematic presentation, analysis, and interpretation of data: weighted mean, frequency count, standard deviation,

Pearson r for the third research question about the correlation between students' oral and writing proficiency in English after they undergo FFGI, and the T-test for paired samples.

The weighted mean was used to compute the participants' average scores in the tests. In comparing two means from a single sample arranged in a before-after panel design, the t-ratio was the most appropriate statistical tool to employ (Weirs, 2007). Accordingly, in this study, the t-ratio is used to compare two means (oral proficiency and writing proficiency means) from a single sample (a college class) arranged before and after the intervention (FFGI). Further, the parametric test (t-test) was used to determine whether or not the difference between the means was significant.

Results

Grammar Accuracy before and after FFGI

Table 1 shows the results of the study participants' pre and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test. The mean score of the participants in the pre-test is 34.39 and the standard deviation (SD) is 6.291. On the other hand, the mean score in the post-test is 36.13 and the SD is 6.874. This indicates an increase of 1.74 points.

Table 1

Pre-test and post test scores in the grammar accuracy test

Grammar Accuracy Test	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	t-value	p
Pre-test	34.39	6.291	1.13	-2.187	**0.037
Post-test	36.13	6.874	1.235		

Note: **= $p \leq 0.05$. N=31

To determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the study participants' pre and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test, the paired sample T-test was employed. Based on the Paired Sample T-test, the null hypothesis stating that there was no significant difference between the grammar pre-test and post-test scores was rejected because the p-value ($p=.037$) is less than 0.05. This means **that the participants' pre- and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test are significantly different in favor of the post-test scores.** Thus, this means that **the students' grammar accuracy score has improved after going through FFGI.**

Grammar Accuracy and English Oral and Writing Proficiency

Table 2 indicates that the participants' grammar accuracy has an inverse relationship with English oral proficiency. The Pearson's correlation value is -0.156. This value points to a moderate inverse relationship which means that even if there was an improvement in grammar accuracy, it did not necessarily lead to an improvement in the participants' oral proficiency. Despite the presence of a moderate inverse relationship, the p-value at 0.402, which is greater than the set level of significance ($p=0.05$), suggests that there is not enough evidence to show that **the relationship between grammar accuracy and English oral proficiency is not significant.**

Table 2

Relationship between the participants' grammar accuracy and English oral proficiency

	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed) p-value	Interpretation
Grammar Accuracy and Oral Proficiency	-0.156	0.402	Not Significant

Note: $p > 0.05$. N=31

The same results were observed for the relationship between grammar accuracy and English writing proficiency as specified in Table 3. The Pearson's correlation value is -.308. This value implies moderate inverse relationship which means that even if there was an improvement in grammar accuracy, it did not lead to an improvement in the participants' writing proficiency. However, after statistical treatment, the p-value is at 0.092 which is likewise greater than the set level of significance ($p = 0.05$). This shows that **the relationship between grammar accuracy and English writing proficiency is also not significant.**

Table 3

Relationship between the participants' grammar accuracy and English writing proficiency

	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed) p-value	Interpretation
Grammar Accuracy and Writing Proficiency	-0.308	0.092	Not Significant

Note: $p > 0.05$. N=31

The data shown above suggest that neither an increase nor a decrease in English oral and writing proficiency can necessarily be attributed to an increase or decrease in grammar accuracy. The non-interface cognitive model of Krashen (1982) can be used to partly explain the non-significance of the relationship between grammar accuracy and writing and oral proficiency. Using the model, Krashen claimed that form-focused instruction has little effect on second language acquisition. Explicit grammar knowledge which is learned from the instruction does not become implicit knowledge which can be automatically used in natural communication. This means that even if the students learn the rules, they do not understand them immediately and thus, they cannot be expected to use them spontaneously and accurately in interaction whether in task-based or real-life communication.

Participants' Oral and Writing proficiency after they undergo FFGI

Based on the data shown in Table 4, oral and writing proficiency have positive moderate relationship with a correlation value of 0.293. However, the p-value (p -value = 0.11) is more than the 0.05 level of significance; therefore, the positive moderate relationship is not significant. In essence, **this means that there is no significant correlation between the participants' oral and writing proficiency in English after they undergo FFGI.** This suggests that an improvement in oral

proficiency does not necessarily translate to an improvement in writing proficiency and vice versa.

Table 4

Correlation between the participants' oral and writing proficiency before and after FFGI

	Pearson Correlation	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed) p-value	Interpretation
Oral Proficiency and Writing Proficiency	0.293	-2.733	0.11	Not Significant

Note: $p > 0.05$. $N = 31$

Conclusions and Implications

Based on the findings obtained in this study, the following conclusions were drawn: **First, form-focused grammar instruction contributes to the improvement of grammar accuracy of students.** The explicit discussion of grammar rules and target structures, drills, repetitions and error correction aids in learning a language as also noted by Sheen (2003). The marked improvement in the participants' grammar accuracy score indicates their explicit knowledge of the target language. As explicit knowledge is mostly considered to be the starting point of second language proficiency (e.g., DeKeyser, 1998; O'Malley, Chamot, & Walker, 1987; Sharwood Smith, 1988), there is a direct relationship between teaching grammar and second language proficiency. Bialystok (1994) shares the same view that learners of second language learners can utilize explicit information for developing analyzed linguistic knowledge. Based on the assumption that language is a structured knowledge system, Bialystok argues that one of the main goals of L2 learners is to develop awareness of the structure of language. As posited by Macaro (2006), the effectiveness of FFGI is not conclusive but the focus on grammar will be beneficial. Grammatical ability is highly correlated with second language (L2) proficiency. Students who learn grammar do not only focus on form but also grasp meanings when sentences are complicated. Further, students who have high grammatical ability can understand meanings and write well-organized compositions even though they still produce errors on those that were not explicitly taught. **Thus, the teaching of grammar using form-focused instruction is still valuable in language classrooms.**

Second, the knowledge of grammar rules does not automatically result in improved oral and writing proficiency. In this study, there was no significant relationship found between grammar accuracy and oral and writing proficiency. While it is true that the study participants improved in their grammar accuracy after going through FFGI, there were a number of instances when they were not able to apply the correct language forms as evident in the incorrect grammar structures in their oral and written outputs. Despite being exposed to FFGI, the participants' outputs still reflected a number of errors related to tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, correct use of prepositions, pronoun-antecedent agreement, and parallelism. However, the persistence of these errors cannot be misconstrued as FFGI being an ineffective teaching methodology in developing students' proficiency in the language. Conversely, the improvement in grammar, oral and writing proficiency

cannot also be fully associated with FFGI being an effective approach to improve the students' communicative ability. Because of sample size constraints and the interplay of other factors not accounted for in this study such as first language background, second language proficiency level, learning styles, structure complexity, and affective filter of the study participants, the results were not fully conclusive particularly regarding the relationship between the participants' grammar accuracy and writing and oral proficiency as well as the correlation between the students' oral and writing proficiency in English after their exposure to FFGI. In this context, the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of FFGI cannot be generalized. In order to address this weakness, the study may be replicated involving a bigger group and considering the previously stated factors that may have an effect on second language learning.

To further determine the effectiveness of FFGI as a methodology in developing language proficiency, future researchers can replicate the study by a) involving more participants for the results to be more conclusive; b) extending the study for a longer period of time (longitudinal study) to establish the effect of sustained FFGI; c) including an experimental group that will undergo non-FFGI for comparison and contrast of effect; and d) integrating it with other pedagogical interventions like communicative approach, process writing, and reading-writing connection for further establishment of its pros and cons. The future researchers, who are particularly interested in pedagogical grammar, can also conduct a similar study that will take into account the developmental level of the learners. This recommendation was based on the weak interface model which claims that the effect of explicit instruction such as FFGI in learning a target language form relates to the learners' stage of development. The researchers can implement FFGI among three groups based on level of proficiency such as beginning, intermediate, and advanced and consequently, compare the groups in terms of who would benefit the most from explicit instruction.

In summary, language proficiency is not solely affected by a particular kind of instruction. Explicit knowledge acquired from explicit instruction such as FFGI does not necessarily convert to implicit knowledge of real-life communicative functions particularly involving speaking and writing. Nonetheless, the teaching of grammar, regardless of whatever approach or methodology, will always find its niche and value in the domains of a language class.

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