New Challenges and the Changing Role of Language Teachers in Japan

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Abstract: This paper gives an overview of the most important challenges that language teachers have faced in the past 25 years in Japan. These include changing from the traditional grammar-translation teaching style to a communicative one; the introduction of English into the elementary school and the problem of training teachers for these classes; the insufficient level of English of the teachers at different levels of the educational system; the special challenges of the teachers of other foreign languages than English; the skills teachers should focus on in their teaching and; the teacher's role as a mediator in the classroom. The impact and the subsequent technological challenges created by the pandemic are also briefly described. The author argues that teachers need the qualities and the mindset that will enable them to face challenges with confidence in any situation.

Mots-clés: Japan; challenges; other languages; elementary schools; teachers' language skills

> *"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."*
>
> — Alvin Toffler

1 Introduction

Some people still think that a teacher's job is to go into the classroom and tell the students what they need to learn, meaning, in fact, what they need to remember. So, if they memorize everything that the teacher said, and if they can reproduce that, they will get a good grade, and they will accumulate knowledge. Of course,

learning *can* take place like that, but in most cases, it does not work very well this way. Even if this was the accepted way of educating children and young people for centuries, more and more people realize that remembering information is simply not enough in the 21st century. Nowadays, companies are looking for a potential workforce with specific skills rather than certain knowledge. According to Bernard Marr (2019), critical thinking, adaptability and flexibility, creativity, decision making, and collaboration are among the ten most valuable skills in the workplace. In addition, he mentions "self-motivation, … and the ability to embrace and celebrate change". The goal of the educational system is to prepare young people for working and functioning in a particular society. Thus, the needs of companies have a strong influence on education. However, tests that the students have to take to get into good schools and universities have an even more substantial influence, and the short-term needs have priority over the long-term ones. (See Allen 2006; Brown, 1996; 1998; Hama & Okabe, 2006; Spratt, 2005.)

The author of the present paper started teaching English in Japan in 1995, exactly 25 years ago. She taught for three years at one university and for the last 22 years at her present job while also teaching part-time at another university. She has first-hand experience only at the tertiary level, but she is going to include challenges at the primary and secondary levels in this paper as well. In order to do that, she has also gathered information from official sources such as the Website and the YouTube channel of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), interviews with representatives of the local board of education, and personal communications with teachers, parents and students at different educational institutions, to name the most important ones. It is natural that all the information gathered from a variety of sources over the past 25 years helped to shape the author's way of thinking, whether it was the result of chit-chat at a conference or of a laborious research effort. However, in this paper, only a fraction of that accumulated information will explicitly be incorporated.

Educational systems have always been slow to respond to the changing needs of society. Besides, the results of educational innovation and reforms can only be objectively evaluated after a decade or two, depending on how extensive the changes were. In this paper, the author looks at how language teaching has changed in the past 25 years in Japan and how well-prepared and ready teachers are to assume new roles and to tackle new challenges. As the teacher's role as a mediator is getting more critical, mediation will also be briefly discussed.

2 Teachers of foreign languages in Japan

The limitations of this paper make it impossible to discuss all the challenges and all aspects of the problems for language teachers in detail. However, it seems essential to give at least a brief overview of the most critical issues that may be worth looking into more in detail by the reader later. First of all, it may be needless to state that most language teachers in Japan are non-native speakers of the language in question. This has been especially true of the lower levels of the educational system. Universities usually employ more native speaker teachers of the respected language.

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As with any teaching, knowing the subject matter should be the teachers' priority. In the case of non-native teachers, it means mastering the foreign language in the first place. Many academic papers describe the feeling of insecurity and the lack of communicative competence of Japanese language teachers (Sato, 2002; Wada, 2002), which is probably due to their own learning experience as students and the way they were trained when becoming language teachers. Most teachers majored in literature (Mondejar *et al.*, 2012), where the focus was on reading and discussing literary works, and that was not necessarily done in English either. Breaking the vicious cycle is an imperative, and that requires reforms that are properly implemented in teacher training. This is a considerable challenge for the educational system in Japan, but without that, language teaching will not be successful for lack of the right educational personnel.

2.1 Languages other than English

In Japan, foreign language education means, in practice, only English. This applies even to the Ministry of Education. When the new subject for elementary school classes called *gaikokugo katsudou* [Foreign language activities] was introduced and described in the guidelines, MEXT used the term *gaikokugo*, foreign languages. However, when it came to the implementation of the activities, it was only concerning English, including the textbooks (*eigo no-to* [English Notebook]; *Hi, friends!; Let's try!; We can*!), instead of foreign languages, even though the declared goals of the subject were to make students aware of other cultures and languages, and not only English. As one might expect, in this situation, where foreign languages equal English even for the authorities, teachers of foreign languages other than English have a hard time surviving and attracting students to their courses, except where a second foreign language is compulsory.

With universities trying to cut costs, there has been a tendency to keep even full-time English teachers at a minimum and to hire part-time teachers to cover a considerable number of classes. As for non-English foreign language classes, most of the other language educators (OLE) are employed on a part-time basis. They face particular challenges in addition to the ones that all language teachers have to cope with. Part-time teachers do not have a budget to buy extra teaching materials or equipment for their classes, and they have to finance themselves for any research or related costs, such as memberships to professional organizations or going to conferences. They are not even sure whether the following year they would have classes at the same university or not. Or whether they will have any classes anywhere at all. As their chances of getting a full-time position are very slim, they usually do not engage in writing papers for academic journals or presenting at conferences, and thus, their voices are hardly ever heard. Although there are language-specific organizations, the Japanese Association for Language Teaching (JALT), with a membership of about 2 300 teachers, is probably the largest of language teacher organizations, and it includes all languages taught as foreign languages, even Japanese. One of their special interest group is the Other Language Educators (OLE) group: it has difficulty in reaching part-time teachers and providing them with information. Due to the financial and professional

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circumstances of other language teachers described above, OLE has been unable to increase its membership.

The author of this paper holds a master's degree in teaching French language and literature but has not been able to do it for almost 30 years. She is an active member of OLE because she believes that although English is essential for international communication, the teaching of other languages should pro-actively be supported to offer a wider choice and diversity for students, many of whom have already been demotivated and have a negative attitude towards learning English. Starting a new language can give them a fresh start and change their feelings towards learning languages, other cultures and eventually even towards English, too.

2.2 Challenges at different levels of the educational system

It goes without saying that teachers should know their subject matter and its teaching methodologies well. In 1987, the Japanese government started the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme that served as a source of Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) from the kindergarten through to the high school level. Although JET teachers are proficient users of English, few of them have mastered the skills and knowledge needed for teaching languages. See Ohtani (2010) and Browne (2008) for more on this topic. Their services could be much better utilized by providing more professional training before starting their jobs and by educating the Japanese teachers of English about how to make the most of the ALT's knowledge and presence in the classroom. Team teaching requires practice as well (Pearce, 2019; Tajino *et al.*, 2016; Tajino & Tajino, 2000).

For non-native language teachers, mastering the language is the key to becoming successful in their profession. Many of them feel inferior compared to native speakers, even if they are proficient speakers of the language. With the introduction of English in the guise of Foreign Language Activities into the elementary school in 2011, homeroom teachers have basically become responsible for that subject as well. They were not originally trained for such a task, and probably they never even imagined that they would have to do it one day. In addition to their already considerable workload, they have had to spend extra time learning about teaching this new subject. In-service training was designed so that teachers who have been trained first would become trainers themselves the following year and train more people in a pyramid-like way, going from the top to increase in number to the bottom. (figure 1)

MEXT carries out a considerable number of surveys each year. The following discussion about the knowledge of English of the teachers is based on information available on the MEXT home page (MEXT, 2020). The survey shows data as of December 1, 2019. Some of the survey questions were answered by the Local Boards of Education and some by the teachers themselves.

According to the Local Boards of Education, out of the 336,638 elementary school teachers surveyed, only 21,221 of them had an English teaching license, which amounts to 6.3%. According to the teachers, 137,077 (39.8%) of them have taken an external language proficiency exam, and 4,390 (1.3%) of them have achieved a level equivalent to B2 or higher according to the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR),

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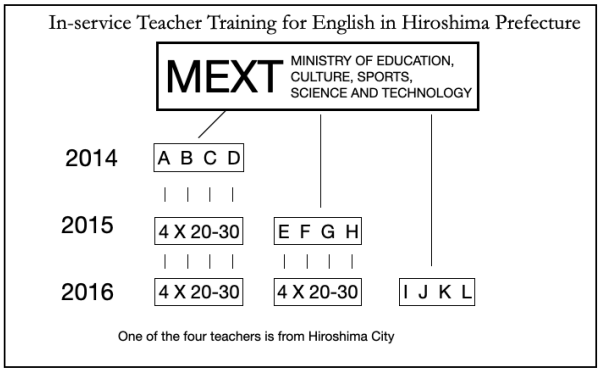


Figure 1: In-service training for teaching English

which has become a point of reference in the Japanese educational system as well. The notes for the survey results state that a) these numbers do not include part-time or temporary staff; b) English teachers who come from junior high schools and high schools to teach foreign language activities at elementary schools are excluded, and c) the term "English license" includes temporary and special licenses for junior and senior high schools (Table 1).

Table 1: The number of elementary school teachers with a license for English. Source: MEXT, 2020b

Number of teachers in the survey	Number of teachers with license for English	Percentage
336,638	21,221	6.3%

In order to give a complete picture, the number of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) should be added here, which is 13,326 (3.96%), including both Japanese and non-Japanese ALTs.

It is also meaningful to see how many non-licensed teachers have a good command of English. The following table (Table 2) shows the information provided by the teachers themselves and not the Local Board of Education. Almost 40% of the elementary school teachers took an external language examination, and the number of teachers who reached level B2 or higher of the CEFR equalled 1.3% of all these elementary school teachers.

Table 2: The number of elementary school teachers who took an external language examination. Source: MEXT, 2020b

Number of teachers in the survey	Number of teachers who took an external English examination	Percentage	Number of teachers who reached B2 or higher	Percentage
336,638	134,077	39.8%	4,390	1.3%

As for junior and senior high schools, the following graphs show the percentage of English teachers who have attained level B2 or higher of the CEFR, or passed the Pre-level 1 of the Japanese English language test called EIKEN or higher. The graphs show

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the percentage of teachers from the year 2013 marked as H 25, Heisei 25 according to the Japanese calendar up to the year 2019, marked as R1 for Reiwa 1 in the Japanese calendar. In 2013, less than 30% of the junior high school teachers and a little over 50% of senior high school teachers had a knowledge equal to a minimum of B2 on the CEFR scale. In six years, numbers went up by 10% and 20% respectively.

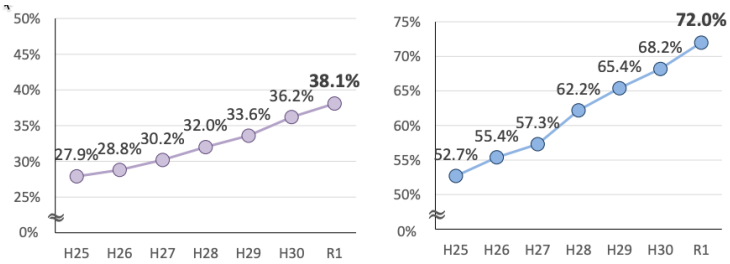


Figure 2: The percentage of English teachers who have achieved a CEFR B2 level (EIKEN Pre-level 1) or higher in junior (on the left) and senior (on the right) high schools. Source: MEXT 2020a

Although the tendency in the number of teachers achieving the necessary knowledge of the language is positive, one might wonder whether MEXT followed the proper order when they introduced a new system without first making sure that the personnel requirements were fully covered. Junior and high school teachers are required to have a license to teach English, so having a license may guarantee that the licensee has acquired the necessary knowledge and skills in English, as the data in figure 2 shows. The immediate challenge for these teachers is to improve their language skills. Nevertheless, the ultimate responsibility lies with MEXT as they should make sure that teacher training courses equip the would-be-teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills right from the beginning of their career (see Van Amelsvoort, 2014).

Unfortunately, information about Japanese university teachers' language skills is not available. Although they went through the same educational system using the same teaching methodology and focusing on the same goals, no qualifications as teachers are required, and specific evidence of language proficiency varies from teacher to teacher. It must be assumed that they acquired the necessary knowledge and communicative skills for their jobs.

3 Life skills versus examination skills

One can only teach what one knows. That is why knowing the subject matter, English in this case, is so important. However, the how is almost just as important. The traditional grammar-translation teaching method survived in Japan much longer than anywhere else in the developed countries, probably because of the realities of the Japanese educational system. Examinations are practically everybody's priorities, even now. First of all, examinations start at an early age. Parents want their children to get into good schools and universities, and so do the children. High school teachers are evaluated based on their students' success rate at the entrance examinations to the university. With everybody focusing on the exam results, it is natural that the

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parents and the students should expect teachers to support the students' studies in preparation for the entrance exam tests rather than for gaining practical language skills for life. Moreover, as the teachers themselves had also gone through the same educational system, which means that many of them lack the practical skills for communication, they seem rather happy teaching "exam English". As the entrance exam tests in the last couple of decades used to consist solely of multiple-choice tests focusing on grammar and vocabulary and not the actual use of language, "wasting" precious time on anything else but potential tasks in exams was out of the question. Although some universities started to include a listening component in their entrance examinations already before 2000, Central Examination included a listening part in 2006, many universities never included that component, so the main features of the entrance examinations have not changed considerably.

In the situation described above, although the pre-tertiary level teachers may be aware of what activities the students would need in order to acquire practical language skills, and by the way, they are clearly stated in the MEXT guidelines as well, they are also aware of the students' and parents' expectations. They feel that their duty is preparing the students for the exams. It is a big challenge and dilemma. Should the teacher equip the students with skills for life, or should he or she prepare them for the exam? Introducing communicative and fun activities may seem for all other interested parties, including the students themselves, as a waste of time, and the teacher may seem incompetent, especially if students fail to get into the university. It remains a challenge for the teacher to find the right balance and activities to satisfy the short term needs and some of the long term ones as well.

4 Top-down directives

In Japan, everything is controlled from the top-down, and the chain of command needs to be respected not only in the military but in companies and educational institutions as well. For example, if one goes into an office, the youngest workers sit at the desk closest to the entrance. Nevertheless, of course, they are the ones without any power and sometimes without enough experience or knowledge to deal with one's problems. Even if one knows that his or her question or request can only be discussed with the person sitting at the other end of the long office desk, one cannot directly talk to that person. He or she has to talk to the closest person first, and then, as if it was a game of Chinese whisper, one's question is passed along from person to person until it gets to the one who can answer it or do something about it.

The biggest problem with top-down directives is that they are very often ignored, or followed half-heartedly. Even if the changes would be educationally beneficial, changes are difficult to introduce, especially if people do not agree with them or if changes result in excess work for them. Sometimes, the people who are supposed to carry out the changes may not have the know-how or the necessary equipment for introducing the changes. Tahira (2012) mentions in the introduction of his paper about MEXT policies that "there remains a big gap between the stated policies and what is actually done in the classroom." (p. 3). The examples of the introduction of

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English and Foreign Language Activities show the way should be paved beforehand for people to walk, so to say.

Obviously, at different levels of the educational system and in different institutions, the extent of how closely teachers have to follow the directives may differ a lot. University teachers usually have more freedom in choosing their textbooks and teaching methodology. However, at some institutions, all the teachers have to use the same textbook, do everything the same way, including teaching precisely the same page of the textbook in the same week. They have to grade each student in each class, which can be very challenging when the teacher would also like to focus on teaching. It can be a real challenge to decide on how closely one should follow the official guidelines. Too many constraints in the name of uniformity and equality may kill motivation and creativity and may take out the fun from learning and teaching. Sometimes, the best way is to follow the "Do not ask and do not tell" policy.

5 Communicative skills

The lack of focus on communicative skills in spite of the MEXT guidelines that explicitly require teaching them has already been mentioned. The first steps in order to change from the grammar-translation model to a more student-centred one can be traced back to the 1980s. The launching of the JET Programme in 1987 was also expected to improve the communicative skills in the classroom, but the first official explicit statement can be found in the 1989 guidelines, which stated "that developing students" communicative ability in English was the central purpose of English education in Japan" (Tahira 2012: 4) See also Yoshida, 2003; Kikuchi & Browne, 2009. Considering the number of teachers who still lack the necessary communicative skills, it is questionable how well they can teach these skills. This is an issue that clearly shows that directives may not work unless they are implemented in the right order and in the right way. The author's intention here is to mention this problem as the number of academic papers about this topic is considerable. For the more recent ones see Hosokawa, 2016; McGregor, 2017; Otani, 2017; and Tajino, 2019).

6 Active learning or passive survival?

One might think that after the students get into university, they can relax and finally focus on the practical side of language learning, and they will be open to new methods and experiences. Wishful thinking! Obviously, there are big differences between the students majoring in languages and the students studying English or languages as a compulsory subject for one or two years only to get the credits that are required to graduate. But bad habits and expectations die hard. After six years of solely focusing on exam-English, many of the students are reluctant to change their ways of studying, especially if these new methods require active participation and thinking in class or in preparation for the class. Students are used to "being taught" rather than learning on their own. Teachers who try to do their best to introduce activities that they believe to be interesting and effective at the same time may face passive resistance on the students' part because they feel that these activities require too much effort on their part. Once such activities are met with indifference and reluctance, thus failing

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to succeed, the teachers may be discouraged to keep trying. They may also be aware that they could get unfavourable student evaluations as a result.

Active learning, the flipped classroom and e-learning have been promoted by MEXT for a number of years now as the preferred ways to university education. However, there are several problems in actually using these techniques. The first one is that most teachers have probably not experienced any of these as students and they were not part of their teacher training course either. As for the students, once the majority of the teachers start using these principles in developing their courses, and during their classes, students will certainly get used to the new ways of studying as well. However, if only one or two teachers try to use them and the rest of the teaching staff clings on to the traditional ways, students are likely to give preference to the one requiring less effort.

7 Mediation

The word mediation may immediately bring up the images of war or a nasty divorce. Mediation is usually defined as the actions of a neutral party helping to reconcile adverse parties. Intervention, arbitration, conciliation are synonyms of the term. However, mediation is also used in the sense of intermediary or link. The easiest example could be a translator or interpreter, who mediates between people speaking different languages, thus making communication possible.

7.1 Mediation in school in its usual sense

Schools are not sanctuaries of wisdom and learning. They are full of conflicts between students, students and teachers, teachers and other teachers, or school management and teachers. There is sexual harassment, academic harassment, cheating, and many other sources of conflict that need to be solved. Administrative repercussions such as suspension from school may actually make things worse rather than solve problems. That is why restorative justice, including mediation, is needed. Without any discussion or objective evaluation of the problem and reflection, administrative measures can have an undesirable, adverse effect, so schools do need trained mediators to manage conflicts in schools. (Girard & Koch, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). However, initial teacher-training in most countries does not include such training in spite of the obvious need.

7.2 Mediation in the classroom

The teacher is standing in front of the blackboard, explaining something to the students, who are looking at the teacher attentively. This is the typical image of a traditional class regardless of whether it is a language class, literature or mathematics. The teacher is the focus of attention, and the teacher is the ultimate source of knowledge in the classroom. Obviously, in this situation, the considerable risk for the teacher is to lose face by not being able to answer a student's question. However, even if the teachers does know everything, he or she needs to filter that knowledge and make it accessible, understandable for the students. The width and depth of knowledge should be appropriate for the students. Nowadays, in most school systems, the

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curriculum prescribes what should be taught to the students in each school year, and the teacher does not have the liberty to make that choice. However, he or she can still choose how the relevant material is taught. The correct methodology, the use of visuals and the appropriate medium of communication can make a big difference for the learners (Orland-Barak & Maskit, 2017).

With the emergence of active learning and easy direct access to an enormous body of information, the teacher disappears from the focal point. Instead of filtering down what the students should learn, the teacher needs to teach students how to process the amount of information available and how to make decisions about evaluating information. That could help students whether to pursue a search or abandon it. Thus the teacher's mediation is directed towards understanding the tools and ways of acquiring the necessary information, rather than providing factual information about the problem. Thus, the teacher becomes more like coaching and facilitating than teaching in the traditional sense.

As active learning often takes place in a flipped classroom situation, the teacher's role completely changes in the classroom. The teacher should instigate discussion among the students and direct their thinking in the right direction with questions or comments. The teacher ceases to be the source of information and does not deliver lectures. Teachers wishing to keep up with the changes in education need to sacrifice a considerable amount of time and effort, first to learn about the techniques and skills needed for this new role, then to motivate students to learn their new roles and ways of learning. Motivation has always been a substantial part of a teacher's job. The students' motivation is probably the most crucial element in being a successful learner. (See Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Hadfield, 2014, Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001; Oxford, 1990)

8 The impact of an emergency

"Necessity breaks the law" is a Hungarian saying. Its truth value could be verified in the Japanese educational system this year. Sometimes, it is the authorities that refuse to accept new ideas and changes. In spite of MEXT's official promotion of e-learning, in the Nikkei Asian Review, a MEXT official was quoted as saying: "We generally do not approve credit for lessons taken solely online" (Hata, 2020). However, this is exactly what they have had to do as the pandemic of the coronavirus has drastically changed teaching practices in Japan, at least temporarily. What decades of guidelines and promotions could not achieve, the pandemic did in a matter of weeks.

However, neither the students nor the teachers were ready for the sudden change from classroom teaching to online classes. Many of the teachers did not have even the basic tools, such as a microphone, speakers or a camera in their office computers, let alone special software that they could use to create adequate teaching materials for the online classes. As the academic year starts in April in Japan, just when the situation was getting worse in Japan, so many first-year students did not have a chance to attend any face-to-face guidance at the university. They were handed their IDs and passwords for accessing the university's intranet, and then they were on their own.

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The lack of information was frustrating for teachers as well. In addition, regardless of the subject teachers were teaching, all the teachers had to support and try to solve the students' technical problems as well. The number of desperate e-mail messages from students arriving day and night was unbelievable. Coping with the situation that evolved as a result of the pandemic has probably been the biggest challenge in the author's career so far without any exaggeration, even though she has constantly been using computers in her classes since 1995.

9 Conclusion

Looking back on a teaching experience of more than thirty-five years, it seems that the skills and attitudes mentioned in the introduction: critical thinking, adaptability and flexibility, creativity, decision making, collaboration, self-motivation, and being open to change are qualities that all teachers should have in order to keep up with the changes in the society and in the field of education. In other words, teachers need and benefit from the same skills and attitudes as do the learners in their care. Besides these professional qualities, that everybody can benefit from, every teacher has their own challenges. For many non-native teachers of languages, the biggest challenge is acquiring the language skills and knowledge necessary to do their jobs effectively. Others might need to be more adventurous and try using new teaching methodologies. Some teachers may dislike technology, but they should accept the fact that some degree of computer literacy has become part of everyday life, and as such, they should not remain illiterate in this regard. Teachers should motivate students so that they can be successful learners and enjoy learning itself without constantly worrying about examinations. Learning a language cannot be reduced to speaking, listening, reading and writing classes! Teachers face challenges all the time, and they always have an audience, the students. How they accept failure when it is unavoidable and how they overcome difficulties serve as models for the students as well. The ultimate challenge for teachers is to help students develop the skills that will ensure that they will be able to face their own challenges with an open mind and determination. This attitude will ensure that students will be able to learn new skills and acquire knowledge on their own as adults without giving up.

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