

Issues in the Implementation of 21st Century Learning Skills in Malaysian ESL Classrooms

Maizatulliza Muhamad^{1*}, Goh Hock Seng²

^{1,2}Faculty of Languages, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia
35900 Tanjong Malim Malaysia
maizatulliza@fbk.upsi.edu.my
goh@fbk.upsi.edu.my
*Corresponding Author

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Abstract: Implementing 21st century learning skills in the English language classrooms requires both teachers and students to learn and adapt new knowledge and approaches during the teaching and learning process. This research seeks to identify the issues related to the implementation of 21st century learning skills in the Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Through semi-structured interviews and written surveys, this qualitative study involved five School Specialist Improvement Coaches (SISCs) and 116 English language teachers. The findings of the study highlighted important issues such as teachers' resistance and misconstrued perspectives towards 21st century learning skills. The results implicate that more comprehensive measures are needed to ensure effective implementation of 21st century learning skills in Malaysian ESL classrooms. The measures would assist in addressing issues which can hinder the implementation of 21st century learning skills.

Keywords: 21st century learning skills, ESL, English language teaching and learning

1. Introduction

21st century learning signifies a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning process. Teaching in the 21st century does not focus on getting students to memorize knowledge provided by the teacher, but on molding students to create and build knowledge, with teachers playing roles as facilitators (Amin, 2016; Jan, 2017; Dakhi et al., 2020). Sumardi, Rohman and Wahyudiati (2020) highlight main areas of 21st century learning such as core subjects and 21st century themes, learning and innovation skills, information, media, and technology skills as well as life and career skills. These areas are to be integrated within each lesson. The lessons for 21st Century learning should aim at creating well-rounded individuals who are balanced, resilient, inquisitive, principled, informed, caring, patriotic, as well as effective thinkers, communicators, and team players (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2012).

The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MMOE) has strongly advocated the implementation of 21st century learning skills (henceforth 21st CLS) in Malaysian schools since 2013. The new Malaysian Education Development Plan stipulated that the teaching of all major subjects such as the English language and Mathematics must integrate 21st CLS. Such a directive has raised new challenges to the affected

teachers. They now have to embrace a new construct of teaching and learning paradigm, which is quite different from the one they are used to. Some of the new skills these teachers must acquire are utilizing technology to maximise learning, developing students' critical thinking skills and nurturing students' collaborative and self-directed learning (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2015).

21st century learning demands an explicit integration of learning strategies, digital competences and career abilities during the teaching of major subjects such as English (Fandino, 2013; Begum & Liton, 2018). English language classrooms should provide students with practices and processes focused on acquiring and developing, among other things, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, self-direction, and cross-cultural skills. In this regard, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2015) argues for the explicit integration of learning and innovation skills, information, media and digital literacy skills, and life and career skills. With such demands, concerns on the implementation may occur. Hence, to a certain extent, the success of 21st CLS in the classrooms depends, among others, on the teachers' ability to integrate all the elements effectively.

Shafie, Majid and Ismail (2019) caution against making the assumption that teachers would be ready and knowledgeable enough to implement the construct. According to them, such assumption may result in lack of training and guidance given to the teachers. They must be equipped with the right qualities and values as well as theoretical and practical knowledge of 21st CLS to ensure the success of its implementation (Salleh et al., 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2019; Julaihi & Hamdan, 2019; Kong & Mohd. Nor, 2020).

2. Literature Review

Previous studies on 21st CLS have two main foci. Firstly, they focus on 21st CLS in general education, not specifically in English language classrooms. For example, Lemley et.al (2014) investigated the learning environment that best supports students' needs in 21st century learning classrooms. The study concluded that students performed best when they have autonomy, when they realize the relevance of the lessons to their lives and finally, when they feel connected with the lessons. Even though the study highlighted important findings, it was not conducted in the English language classrooms context where the dynamics of the lessons might be different.

Similarly, Alismail and McGuire (2015), in their study on 21st CLS described the importance of integrating students' current knowledge with actual experiences so they would thrive in the classrooms. In addition, the study stressed the need to make multimedia an integral part of the learning environment to ensure optimum benefits of 21st century classrooms. The suggestions made were indeed useful but the researchers were discussing 21st CLS in the context of general education, not specifically to the context of English language teaching and learning.

In another study by Egan et al. (2017) the issue of developing creativity - a key skill for 21st century learning - was discussed. They claimed that many educators were unsure on how to develop creativity in their classrooms. As such, they presented a new protocol to establish the frameworks being utilised for the development of students' creativity. The findings also highlighted how the educators defined, encouraged and valued creativity in the context of 21st century learning. Once again, even though the results were interesting, they were not directly related to the context of 21st CLS in English language teaching and learning classrooms.

The second focus in research on 21st CLS is on what teachers can do in the classrooms to promote one or two specific elements of 21st CLS, especially the higher order thinking skills (HOTS). Fandino (2013) conducted a study to inform and motivate Colombian EFL teachers to incorporate meaningful and intellectually stimulating alternatives that allow students not just to learn English, but more importantly to understand complex perspectives, use multiple media and technologies, and work creatively with others. Although the results of this study were very useful, they did not indicate issues related to implementing 21st CLS in the English language classrooms.

Ganapathy et al. (2017) conducted an exploratory study to evaluate the aspects of ESL lecturers' practices, the types of ICT used in their lessons, their perspectives on the integration of various skills into

the curriculum, and the methods of teaching and learning using ICT to promote Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTs). The data from this study highlighted some insights on the use of ICT to promote HOTs as well as the issues the participants had to deal with in the process of teaching and learning.

These studies, even though very informative, did not focus on the construct of 21st CLS. Instead, they focused on one or two elements - HOTs and the use of ICT. The tendency to highlight such elements may result in teachers perceiving that implementing 21st CLS in the classrooms means teaching HOTs and exploring the use of ICT. Although the importance of HOTs and the use of ICT in 21st CLS cannot be denied, 21st CLS should be investigated as a whole construct because the success of its implementation cannot be guaranteed if teachers concentrate on only one or two aspects.

The current study addresses these two gaps by conceptualising 21st CLS as a whole construct - not focusing on one or two specific elements - in the context of English language classrooms.

21st CLS has been encouraged in the Malaysian ESL classrooms since 2013 and MMOE has organized various courses and workshops to ensure smooth assimilation of these skills in actual classroom practice. This is important because teachers' understanding of 21st CLS is one of the major factors that contributes to the success of its implementation (Rusdin, 2018; Buenvinida et al., 2020; Rahmayanti, Padmadewi & Artini, 2020). Realizing the importance of 21st CLS implementation in Malaysian ESL classrooms, the purpose of the present study is to identify 21st CLS issues faced by 'School Specialist Improvement Coaches' (SISCs) and ESL teachers.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews and written surveys. These data collection methods were chosen to ensure in-depth understanding of the issues faced by the SISCs and ESL teachers in the implementation of 21st CLS in Malaysian ESL classroom. The study commenced with semi-structured interviews with five School Improvement Specialist Coaches (SISCs). The main focus of the interviews was on the issues of the implementation of 21st CLS in actual classroom practice. The main guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews were;

1. What is the role of an SISCs in the context of 21st CLS in Malaysia?
2. What are the kinds of training and information given to the teachers with regards to 21st CLS?
3. How is the monitoring of the implementation of 21st CLS conducted?
4. What are your concerns about 21st CLS - in relation to the teaching and learning of English?
5. What are the teachers' common understanding/misunderstanding of 21st CLS?

The second set of data for this research were gathered through an open-ended written survey on Malaysian ESL teachers. In the survey, the teachers were asked to describe their views, experience as well as issues on 21st CLS which they believed had impacted their ESL classrooms. The written survey form was distributed to 295 ESL teachers but only 116 provided comments and suggestions. These comments were used for data analysis as reported in this article.

The interviews with the SISCs were audio recorded and transcribed. Data from both the interviews and the written survey were analysed qualitatively. Using thematic coding, themes on the issues of implementation were developed by identifying common ideas derived from the interviews with SISCs as well as the written survey responses from the ESL teachers. The data were coded under several themes such as learners' proficiency, the use of IT and assessment. They were then triangulated and categorised under two main themes – teachers' resistance and misconstrued perspectives which are presented and discussed under the findings section.

3.1 Sampling

The participants in this study were five teacher mentors who also hold the official position known as School Improvement Specialist Coaches (SISCs). SISCs are experienced teachers appointed by MMOE to conduct and monitor in-service courses for ESL teachers including courses related to the implementation of 21st CLS. Table 1 provides a brief profile of the five SISCs.

Table 1. SISCs profile

NO	AGE	GENDER	EXPERIENCE
SISC 1	34	Male	A TESL graduate from a local university. He had been teaching English in secondary schools for 8 years before appointed as an SISC.
SISC 2	37	Female	A TESL graduate from a local university. She had been teaching English in secondary schools for 10 years before appointed as an SISC.
SISC 3	47	Female	A TESL graduate from a local university. She taught English in secondary schools for 10 years, was an officer at a District Education Department for 8 years before appointed as an SISC.
SISC 4	42	Female	A TESL graduate from a local university. She had been teaching English in secondary schools for 15 years before appointed as an SISC.
SISC 5	43	Female	A TESL graduate from a local university. She had been teaching English in secondary schools for 17 years before appointed as an SISC.

The 116 ESL teachers who provided feedback in the written survey were all English language teachers in several secondary schools in Malaysia. All of them were trained and coached by the SISCs interviewed. 87 of these teachers were female and 29 of them were male. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 23 years.

4. Findings

Two recurrent themes on the issues of the implementation of 21st CLS in the Malaysia ESL classrooms emerged based on analyses of data obtained through the semi-structured interviews and the survey. The themes are a) teachers' resistance and b) teachers' misconstrued perspectives.

4.1 Teachers' Resistance

The SISCs observed that for some teachers, especially very experienced ones, 21st CLS does not complement their current practices in the classrooms. According to one of the SISCs (all comments are shown verbatim),

Some teachers are conducting 21st century learning activities just for the sake of doing without actually believing that they can contribute towards the development of their students.

Another SISC noted,

My main concern is some teachers feel that they are being forced into implementing 21st CLS skills in the classrooms. They infuse 21st CLS elements only when they are being observed. They fail to comprehend that 21st CLS is the change needed to ensure students' success.

Such views were shared by another SISC who claimed,

Some teachers do not realize that their way of teaching can no longer be the same as when they started teaching 20 years ago. Learning is a process not a product but now, some teachers are focused on the product – whether their students can get an A, pass or fail. They are not really focusing on how their teaching today will be useful in the students' life later on.

The claims above highlight teachers' resistance to implement 21st CLS in the ESL classrooms. The concern voiced by the SISCs interviewed was also echoed in the comments made by the teachers in the open-ended written survey. Some of the teachers wrote comments such as the following;

- *Generally the idea of implementing 21st CLS in our education system is definitely good. However, certain steps taken to implement it effectively should be revised as it could make the education itself an experiment to our students. We may jeopardize their future if we keep come up with new elements when we are not even ready to embrace it*
- *... majority of our teachers are still 'a bit reluctant' in implementing 21st CLS in their teaching.*
- *The key should always be about the students. I really dislike the labeling of the activities as 21st century learning as I think it should be embedded in the everyday classroom practice. Labeling it puts border on teachers especially for senior teachers.*
- *It depends on the readiness of the teachers and whether the teacher really thinks 21st CLS can give positive impacts to students.*
- *What's wrong with conventional T & L?*
- *Total waste of time. How to do two things at the same time? 21st CLS and must get good grades?*
- *In certain schools, especially the ones in the rural areas, it is difficult to implement the 21st CLS as the teachers are struggling with the language barrier between the students and the teachers. This is the major challenges for teachers to conduct the 21st century learning smoothly in an English lesson. Thus we should provide some space for the teachers to conduct the lesson not scrutinizing their teaching and learning process, forcing them to use the 21st century learning approach*

All the comments above confirm the SISCs' observation and concern about the teachers' perception on the importance of implementing 21st CLS in the ESL classrooms. These comments seem to suggest that there were some apprehensions about changing the way students should be taught in the class. These apprehensions, once again, may affect the success of the attempt to create learners who possess all the qualities envisioned by MMOE.

4.2 Misconstrued Perspectives

According to the SISCs, although the Ministry of Education has provided clear guidelines of 21st CLS, teachers tended to form their own perspectives on what 21st CLS entailed. One of the common views about 21st CLS held by the teachers was that 21st CLS must involve the use of Information Technology (IT) or Information and Communication Technology (ICT) during teaching and learning. One of the SISCs pointed out,

Teachers believe that 21st century learning involves the use of IT. IT related tools are a must in a 21st century classrooms. This is a misconception because IT is not a compulsory feature. Yes, it is encouraged but the absence of IT does not affect the effectiveness of the teaching and learning. This is the main misconception. Some teachers actually equate 21st century learning with the use of IT in the classrooms.

Similarly, another SISC noted,

Sometimes teachers say that 21st CLS is usage of ICT and 21st century classrooms need lots of gadgets/gizmos.

The information technology, communication and media skills are listed by MMOE as one of the three skills that students need to master in the 21st century classrooms. However, it is not stipulated that in order to adhere to the construct of the 21st CLS, all classroom interactions must involve the use of IT. Even though IT could be ubiquitous in the 21st century classrooms, its absence should not hinder its implementation.

The teachers' written responses in the survey regarding the implementation of 21st CSL corroborated the points made by the SISCs about IT and 21st CLS. The following are some of the comments written by the teachers;

- *The idea of having 21st CSL is very good to be implemented in the classroom. However, to prepare the pupils especially rural area pupils, a lot of support from the MMOE or private sectors are needed. We need good internet connection, laptop/computers and other resourceful materials for the pupils and teachers as well. Pupils are eager to learn but we don't have adequate facilities to cater the pupils.*
- *I have problem with integrating ICT in my class because my school is having internet problem*
- *It would be awesome if every school has a projector in the classroom like in university. It would make the PDPC process so much easier. I think that where the funds should go, not to the free tablet and phone. Also, improve the Wi-Fi of each school too.*
- *I personally think it is good for nowadays generation of students as they are attracted to ICT more than other method of teaching*
- *To put the ICT skills in the teaching and lesson, the school should be provided with a television which is the use of television is more clear than LCD projector. The activities can be more enjoyable by the kids*

- *21st CLS in the Malaysian ESL classrooms make teaching more effective but KPM should supply the ICT (computer, tablet, etc)*
- *Teaching and learning by using the 21st Century method is suitable for the school that has highly source of technology and ICT facilities, especially urban area school. It is not easy to implement in rural area school because lack of ICT technology like networking, LCD and etc.*
- *The classroom must have the modern and complete equipment to support 21st century learning*

The comments above indicated the tendency for the teachers to relate 21st CLS with the use of IT related equipment and facilities. This view may result in some restrictions in the implementation of 21st CLS in ESL classrooms as the teachers believed that the right facilities must be available before the teaching and learning involving 21st CLS could take place.

Furthermore, because of the misconception about IT use and 21st CLS, teachers tended to restrict the implementation of 21st CLS to only specific contexts deemed appropriate. For example, some teachers believed that 21st CLS were only suitable for small classrooms. Many of the teachers in this study, however, had large number of students in their classes. Thus, they perceived that 21st CLS in large classrooms was challenging or could not be implemented. Some of the comments written by the teachers regarding this matter are:

- *21st century learning is an effective way to incorporate with T&L processes; however the number of students in one classroom would be the challenge for the teacher to conduct it. It would create disciplinary and class control issues.*
- *The best number of students should be 15-20*
- *The best number of students must be below 20 students*
- *My opinion, it's better if we change the quantity of pupils in the classroom from 25 to 20*
- *The 21st CLS in Malaysian ESL classroom will only be applicable when there is lesser number of students in classroom (20 - 25 students).*
- *Classroom should be more conducive. Pupils should not be more than 25 pupils per class.*

As the teachers emphasized the use of IT for 21st CLS, the large number of students in the class may result in insufficient gadgets for everyone. Because of this, the teachers opted not to infuse 21st CLS elements in their interactions unless they had the perceived appropriate number of students in their classrooms.

Another perspective held by many teachers with regards to 21st CLS was that it could only be implemented with high English language proficiency students. This view was grounded on the three elements deemed essential in 21st CLS which are a) student-centred learning b) collaborative learning, and c) higher order thinking skills.

According to the SISCs, many teachers they interacted with expressed their concerns and reluctance about implementing 21st CLS because their students' level of English language proficiency was very low. They believed that lessons could be student-centred and collaborative only if the students possessed the

right level of proficiency. In other words, low proficiency students would not be able to apply higher order thinking skills. The SISCs' concern corroborated with the comments given by the teachers surveyed who expressed their reluctance to implement 21st CLS with low English proficiency students. Some of the comments written are;

- *(21st CLS is...) good but difficult to carry out with students of low proficiency*
- *(21st CLS) can be applied depending on the pupils' level of ability / capability.*
- *In certain schools, especially the ones in the rural areas, it is difficult to implement 21st CLS as the teachers are struggling with the language barrier between the students and the teachers.*
- *Most rural school students are struggling in using 21st CLS in the classroom because of their incompetence in English language*
- *It is easy to teach the average pupil but not the weaker ones especially in rural school.*

21st CLS does not cater for only high proficiency students. However, the above comments by the ESL teachers suggest that such view existed and this may hinder the implementation of 21st CLS in ESL classrooms.

The interviews with the SISCs also revealed that some teachers were worried about the effects of 21st CLS on their students' performance in the examination, especially high-stake examinations such as the Malaysian Certificate of Education (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*). Some of the comments written in the survey pertaining to this matter are;

- *21st CLS is not really a great way to use because by the end, we will judge them based on their exam results. Teachers do have to focus on examination-oriented achieving, unless it there's no exam (PT3, SPM), then we can implement 21st CLS.*
- *It's an interesting idea but most of the time Malaysia ESL classrooms focused on exam instead*
- *My biggest concern is that school always finds examination results more important than anything. Teachers may carry out / implement 21st CLS in the classroom however sometimes it is quite difficult to apply it when everything is all about exam-oriented.*
- *Teachers may implement every single aspect/element of 21st CLS but if the students do not score, nobody even cares about the teacher's effort.*
- *21st CLS could be a success if there is no standardized exams*
- *I agree with the use of 21st CLS. However, we have to acknowledge the pressure of ranking and admin's concern about the end result of year-end examination. Despite being competent in other aspects of language, the admin pressure the teacher to focus on the ranking of the school, thus forcing teachers to use exam-based teaching techniques, hence, back to square one.*

Based on the comments above, it is apparent that teachers did not quite associate implementation of 21st CLS with desired performance or targeted achievement in high stake examinations. As such, they had the tendency to be selective as to when to implement 21st CLS in their classrooms. In other words, 21st CLS were not permanent features but rather only scheduled activities whenever the teachers felt appropriate. One SISC expressed concern over such a practice. She described that one of the biggest challenges as SISCs was helping teachers be aware that 21st CLS would not have negative effects on examination results and that it should be a routine during the teaching and learning of English. She emphasized that,

Implementing 21st CLS is very easy if teachers know what to do in order to achieve their objectives. To do this, teachers need to change their mind set. The focus of teaching should shift from ensuring the students passing their exams to developing skills that are useful not only for the exams but for real life purposes. 21st CLS is no different from what the teachers have been doing. It just needs a little adjustment to make the teaching and learning more student centered instead of teacher centered.

Based on the perspectives and comments put forward by both SISCs and teachers as seen above, it can be suggested that many of the highlighted issues pertaining to the implementation of 21st CLS were generally related to teachers' misconstrued perspectives about its construct and implementation.

5. Discussion

The introduction of 21st CLS in Malaysian ESL classrooms is aimed at revolutionizing teaching and learning. This requires a shift in terms of perceptions and practice among the ESL teachers. However, the findings of this research uncover some pertinent issues in the implementation of 21st CLS. It is quite apparent that there exists certain forms of resistance due to misconstrued perceptions among the teachers with regards to the inherent nature of 21st CLS itself and its implementation in the ESL classrooms. The results may indicate undesirable apprehension towards the implementation of 21st CLS despite having attended courses and workshops organized by MMOE. This finding is supported by Pak et al. (2020) who discovered in their study that teachers' limited understanding of the core elements of new curriculum reformation resulted in an ineffective teaching process. A research finding by Azmi and Nurzatulshima (2017) highlighted the tendency for the teachers observed to teach conventionally, despite the various exposures to 21st CLS. In addition, Ponniah et al. (2019) posited that even though there were positive results with regards to classroom environment, a lot still needed to be done in terms of teachers' and students' roles to match the demands of 21st CLS in the Malaysian classrooms. These findings suggest some missing elements in the construct of 21st CLS as perceived by the teachers. There is an apparent chasm between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice with regards to 21st CLS among the teachers.

According to Savina (2019), teachers' passivity towards new innovation in teaching and learning was mainly caused by their belief in its ephemeral existence in pedagogical activities. On the same note, Ibrahim, Al-Kaabi and El-Zaatari (2013) highlighted teachers' constant wariness about frequent changes they were expected to make due to the new outlook on teaching and learning in the 21st century. The effects were unknown to the teachers and there was no guarantee of a permanent status of the changes. This belief is very much similar to the claims made by some teachers in this study that 21st CLS is just another '*element*' which interfered with their '*conventional*' practice which had been upheld for a very long period of time. To address this issue, Ibrahim, Al-Kaabi and El-Zaatari (2013) suggested several measures to be taken by the authority such as providing psychological support, organizing effective professional development programmes and most importantly, introducing culturally appropriate changes.

Howard and Mozejko (2015) stated that new practices imposed on teachers must be congruent to teachers' teaching aims and goals and more effective than their current ones. If teachers are not confident with the benefit of the new practice, they may question the need for them to change. This is the issue discovered in the findings of the present research. The teachers seemed to question the benefits of

implementing 21st CLS in their ESL classrooms when they faced fundamental problems such as lack of IT infrastructure and equipment, large classes, and low proficiency among their students. In addition, Howard and Mozejko (2015) highlighted the pressure of standardized tests on teachers which may result in their resistance to change. This claim is particularly consistent with the findings of this study as teachers expressed their concern about the effects of 21st CLS on their students' examination results.

When teachers resist or have doubts about the effectiveness of certain constructs, problems of implementation in the classrooms might occur. As posited by Tai et al. (2022), teachers' perception plays an essential role in determining their competencies and attitudes towards their practice in the classroom. Since the SISCs asserted that some teachers seemed to have certain issues towards 21st CLS, it is a cause for concern. It is inevitably challenging for the SISCs to change the teachers' beliefs about the benefits of 21st CLS skills in English language classrooms. However, Huang (2015) posited that authorities may introduce in-service programmes to cultivate positive thinking about policies and practice among teachers.

The introduction of 21st CLS is indeed a paradigm shift for many teachers in Malaysia as it requires a number of changes especially in terms of their roles and focus in the classrooms. Their resistance to these changes and misconceptions may lead to apprehensions as discovered in this study. According to Li (2021) teachers' apprehension may lead to a number of problems including maintaining students' positive engagement during classroom interactions. To ensure effective implementation of 21st CLS, Snyder (2017) suggested a platform for teachers to discuss their understanding and concerns before the implementation of any new ideas. This platform could also be used by the authorities to validate the needs for the changes to take place.

6. Conclusion

The resistance and the misconstrued perspectives suggest there is still much to be done to ensure the success of 21st CLS in Malaysian ESL classrooms. Even though the results of this research may not seem very positive, the fact that teachers were aware of the need to implement 21st CLS provides hope for success. The 21st CLS is still relatively at its infancy in the Malaysian ESL context. Hence, resistance and misconceptions are to be expected. More importantly however, the findings of this study suggest that Malaysian ESL teachers need more exposures on the positive effects of 21st CLS. They also need to be convinced that 21st CLS is applicable to all students and not just for specific groups of students. They need to understand too that 21st CLS does not necessarily require state-of-the-art technology. MMOE has to play a more proactive role in providing hands-on courses so that the aspiration behind the implementation of 21st CLS can be achieved.

7. Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 carried out the field work, prepared the literature review and overlook the writeup of the whole article. Author 2 wrote the research methodology and conducted the data entry.

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