Impact and Gravity of Spoken Language Errors on Communication among Kimeru Learners of English as a Second Language in Kenya

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Abstract
Speaking effectively, clearly, and confidently is the desire of any language learner. A learner would make a lot of effort to develop their vocabulary, improve their grammar and pronounce words correctly when learning a new language to achieve a native-like spoken mastery of it. Many learners only put to test their writing skills in that new language later. This means that learners rate their ability in spoken language based on their improvement levels in speaking. Therefore, speaking forms a major part of language learning. However, English as a second language (ESL) learners experience many communication challenges in their spoken language. Their speech is riddled with many errors, which hinder the intelligibility of their communication. This paper explores the ESL spoken errors among Kimeru L1 English learners by answering questions on the major types of learner errors, the possible causes of these errors, and how the errors affect communication. The gravity (local or global) of errors was assessed by the extent to which communication was affected. The causes and sources of these errors were investigated and classified as interlingual, intralingual, or unique errors.

Keywords: Communication, errors, intelligibility, language learner, new language, speaking

Introduction

The use of English in oral communication is one of the most emphasized skills, and as a result, there is a need to take cognizance of the pronunciation errors committed by English as a second language (ESL) learners in secondary schools in Kenya. For ESL learners, the demands are even higher. This is because the English language is one of the main languages in the world that is used for communication as well as for educational purposes (Mashoor *&* Abdullah, 2020). For effective communication, the correct pronunciation is key.

Pronunciation is a way in which a language or particular word or sound is spoken. In language learning, pronunciation is used as the production and perception of the significant sounds of a particular language in order to achieve meaning in the context of language use. It is important to master spoken language skills in order to communicate effectively with those around us. While most speakers of English produce spoken language which is syntactically very much simpler than written language and whose vocabulary is usually much less specific, highly literate speakers may produce utterances with complex syntactic structures, a good deal of subordination, and a confident marking out of what they are going to say.

Literature Review

Changes in the second language learning process from early research to the most recent developments indicate that spoken language errors such as pronunciation have a great impact on communication. The literature reviewed was majorly based on spoken language errors.

Studies on Learners' Language Errors

Errors are part and parcel of language learning. Errors help to point out the linguistic strategies that learners employ in the process of acquiring a new language. As educators and trainers, teachers of the English language should acknowledge errors made by their learners as strategies in language acquisition. Error correction should be put off until the end of the interaction or exchange to avoid interrupting communication exchanges unless in situations requiring immediate attention where there is communication breakdown due to linguistic or sociolinguistic difficulty.

In acquiring a second language, it was believed that there is interference between L1 and L2, a view held by Contrastive Analysis Theory (CA). However, this view could not account for all the errors made by learners. As a result, Error Analysis (EA) emerged. According to Shastri (2010), EA accepts many sources of errors such as intralingual interference, overgeneralization, misteaching, and the role of the variables of age, attitude, aptitude, and motivation. Yang (2010) states that EA evolved to become the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes, and consequences of unsuccessful language. Errors were not only predicted but mainly observed, analysed, and classified. In addition, Shastri (2010) reports that the process of error analysis deals with the identification, description, and explanation of errors.

Yaseen (2018) states that besides lacking linguistic knowledge, the students also lack self-confidence because of their lack of practice and exposure to using English. They also have little knowledge of different cultures which in turn increases their anxiety level in speaking English. There are several other causes of the students' spoken errors including teaching techniques, poor vocabulary, lack of motivation, and lack of practice (Mashoor, 2020).

The affective filter emphasizes that there are things that can hinder input necessary for the acquisition of languages such as anxiety, motivation, age, and one's self-confidence. Implying that for acquisition to take place, the input must be achieved in low-anxiety contexts, free from the aforementioned factors to enable the second language learner to receive more input and interact freely (Mekonge, 2017). Learner errors are significant in three ways: they serve a research purpose by providing evidence about how languages are learned; they are proof that learning is taking place; and that errors can serve a learning purpose by acting as devices by which learners can discover the rules of the target language by obtaining feedback on their errors.

Communication and Meaning

Human communication is a complex process. In research carried out by Pourhosein (2016), the findings indicate that people need communication in saying or transmitting information. In this process of communication, meaning then becomes essential if the speaker has to achieve their goals. This means that for effective communication to take place, the speaker is expected to apply language that is relevant to the goals to be achieved and act both as speaker and listener at the same time.

In second language learning, speaking forms the central part. However, this component of language learning is most of the time ignored or given little attention by language teachers even in secondary schools and higher institutions of learning, yet in learning a new language, human beings inherently have a tendency to speak before learning how to read and write. In many

circumstances, individuals interact and practice with language orally, then thereafter use it in its written form. Human beings as social beings prefer oral conversation to written communication. Since people speak everywhere and every day, Efrizal (2012) termed speaking as of great significance for people's interaction. Speaking is considered a collaboration of two or more individuals sharing time and context.

Pronunciation versus other Aspects of Language
There have been more ESL error analyses research on writing and other aspects of language such as vocabulary, syntax, and semantics compared to researches in spoken language. In Saudi Arabia, Alahmadi and Kesseiri (2013) studied language transfer speaking errors among Saudi students. The study explored various grammatical errors made by thirty Saudi students having been exposed to six years of studying English. The study revealed errors such as unmarked forms of verbs, wrong use of third-person pronouns, interchanged singulars and plurals, misuse of articles, sentences with no verbs, and repetition of pronouns in sentences. These errors were further categorized as L1 interference and ascertained to have been occasioned by cases of generalizations.

Alahmadi (2014) in the subsequent research, analysed grammatical errors and had similar outcomes as those of the previous studies. The errors ranged from unmarked forms of verbs, and wrong tenses, to pronoun copying. These errors were termed as those occasioned by interference, others as intralingual, and yet others as unique. Interference errors comprised interchanging singular noun forms with plural noun forms, misuse or lack of the definite article, and deletion of prepositions. Examples of intralingual errors were misuse of singular and plural noun forms and third-person pronoun errors. The incorrect addition of definite articles was considered a unique error, the same as preposition redundancy. From the above studies, it was generally observed that most of the errors were cases of L1 interference.

Studies on Learners' Pronunciation Errors
Lack of attention to the proper pronunciation of words while speaking may lead to unintended meanings and misunderstanding leading to occasional communication breakdown. Pronunciation errors can be made at three levels; sound level, syllable level, and word level. According to a study by Enaibe (2012), these pronunciation errors can therefore be classified as segmental or supra-segmental and thus regarded as L1 interference since the sounds in the target language may not exist in the learner's L1. Segmental pronunciation errors are best distinguished by setting up minimal pairs while supra-segmental pronunciation errors can be understood in terms of prosodic features such as stress, pitch, intonation, tone, and tempo among others.

Research by Bozorgian (2012) shows the relationship between listening skills and other language skills. It was found that the more effective learners listen, the better they speak. In this case of classroom communication, the ability of the learner to listen comprehendingly can greatly enhance their oral communication. Students need to be confident and motivated to use English inside and outside classrooms; and teachers should encourage them to participate in oral activities and tasks by utilizing modern teaching strategies (Mashoor & Abdullah, 2020).

The above findings were further reinforced by Urrutia and Vega (2010) when they demonstrated that learners' oral performance was influenced by their lack of vocabulary, confidence and fear of stigmatization. Tuan and Mai (2015) observe that learners face a lot of challenges speaking in the classroom and urge teachers to help learners overcome the problems of inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, low participation, and mother tongue use. The problem is

even compounded in situations where some learners share the same mother tongue and they try to use it in the classroom because they find it easier.

According to Bandar (2018), anxiety has a negative effect on the learning process and learners who suffer from language anxiety feel that speaking another language is a stressful experience. This experience hinders learners and makes them avoid or withdraw from active oral interactions. Speakers also worry about how listeners evaluate and view them. However, as Ombati and Kirigia (2020) puts it, the errors that learners commit are ineffective and are a result of their ignorance because they are experimenting with a linguistic form not yet acquired.

Causes and Sources of Errors and other Factors that Affect the Level of Spoken English
According to Mashoor and Abdullah (2020), a variety of factors ranging from poor teaching techniques, poor vocabulary, no practice in the use of the language, lack of enough time to study materials related to the language, or just lack of interest in the part of the learner, may cause errors. This view is shared by Diani et al. (2019) who say that teachers should discourage faults and model a remedial strategy of minimizing mistakes made by the learner. Another cause of error in spoken language according to Hartinah et al. (2019) is language transfer. The author outlines two types of language transfer: the positive transfer facilitates learning especially when both the native language and the target language have the same form; and the negative transfer also called language interference, hinders the full acquisition of the target language (Richards & Richard, 2010).

Error Gravity
Within the error data, not all errors are of the same gravity. Johansson (1978) carried out a study on the gravity of errors in communication, and the results revealed that phonemic errors were more serious and had a global effect than subphonemic errors which only had a local effect. This observation was further reinforced by Cichocki et al. (1993) while analysing errors of French consonants by Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong where they reported that some variants of speech errors were found to be more acceptable than others. Therefore, when planning for the remedial and therapy stage in an error analysis class, the notion of error gravity should be considered.

Theoretical Framework
A theoretical model which is eclectic in nature was adopted. The eclectic method was advocated in the 1990s and has become popular presently. Freeman (2011) used the term 'principle eclecticism' to describe a desirable, coherent, pluralistic approach. From a contrastive point of view, it is noted that since phonotactic rules determine which sounds are allowed and which ones are not, in each part of the syllables of English, the application of the syllable structure of Kimeru on some segments of English words gave rise to errors in pronunciation. Error Analysis on its part, provided a methodology for investigating the language learning process on the basis of errors committed, while the Lingua Franca Core grounded the fact that the central factor for intelligibility is pronunciation. As indicated, most ESL learners avoid conversing with other speakers of English except with those who do not share their L1. This is because in situations where they share L1, they are most likely to use their L1 than English.

Research Methodology
A descriptive research design was adopted in describing the existing error phenomenon in general communication in line with the observations of Donald (2010) that the descriptive method

describes events as they naturally occur. Purposive sampling was used to select four day schools in Meru Municipality, while random sampling techniques were applied to pick thirty learners whose first language is Kimeru.

Data was collected through observation, interviews, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and audio recordings. The data collected was then transcribed for analysis. The behaviour and acts of students such as shyness, nervousness, smacking of lips, and fidgeting, as they talked and interacted with each other in their natural settings and their unmonitored conversations were observed. Any relevant behaviour or acts in line with errors made were noted down whenever it was expedient to do so as guided by an observational checklist. Interviews were conducted to provide additional information and reinforce what was observed regarding the general impression of how well the learners could speak. According to Dornyei (2010), interviews create a relaxed atmosphere in which the respondent may reveal more than they would in formal contexts.

FGDs were used to elicit complementary and useful data either through debates or group discussions. Spontaneous data was collected from the group as they engaged in topics such as politics, sports, and religious issues. Learners' utterances were recorded during the interaction sessions using mobile phone devices as they read the lexical items on the flashcards and the passage provided.

The recorded spoken data was then transcribed in notebooks and classified according to error types. Transcription entailed creating a text-based version of any original audio or video recording. This study employed normal orthography in transcription which consists of rules for mapping spoken words onto written forms as prescribed by the orthography of a given language, which in this case is English. This convention was more convenient given that meaning-related aspects of spoken language were being investigated.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science Research (SPSS) and classified as interlanguage, intralanguage, and unique. The emerging errors were regarded as pronunciation errors and their effect on communication was assessed. The analysis revealed basic observations and patterns that mirrored the objectives of the study. Coding or indexing was developed and data was organized to answer the research questions.

The data collected and documented in the form of texts, transcriptions, and audio recordings were analysed to evaluate certain speech patterns that were common in a majority of the respondents. To answer the question on the major types of English language spoken learner errors in Kimeru speakers, the texts were coded, summarized into categories, and tabulated to calculate the frequency of specific spoken errors.

By focusing on establishing patterns of meaning in the different sets of data collected during interviews and FGDs sessions as shared by learners, the data effectively answered the question of how spoken learner errors in Kimeru speakers affect communication. In addition, inferential analysis was used to show the relationship between pronunciation errors and how such errors lead to communication breakdown. A distinction was made between receptive and productive errors, and also between errors and mistakes. The correlation method was used to describe the relationship between pronunciation errors and communication breakdown, and determine whether the error was local or global.

Findings and Discussions
Learners were given a list of sixty (60) lexical items and a short passage which they were required to read loudly by clearly articulating every item. The output was recorded and later transcribed, and the spoken language samples of ten (10) learners were extracted and tabulated as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Learners' Pronunciation

Respondent	Help	Hen	Girl	Late	Desk	Arm	Painted	Corps
1	[he|p]	[en]	[gɜ:l]	[let]	[desk]	[hɜ:m]	[peintid]	[kɔps]
2	[he|pu]	[hen]	[gəl]	[let]	[deski]	[ha:m]	[peintid]	[kɔmps]
3	[he|p]	[hen]	[gəl]	[let]	[ndesk]	[a:m]	[peinted]	[kɔps]
4	[he|pu]	[hen]	[gɜ:l]	[let]	[desk]	[hɜ:m]	[peinted]	[kɔps]
5	[hɛ|p]	[hɛn]	[ngər]	[leit]	[desk]	[ham]	[peinted]	[kɔps]
6	[hɛ|p]	[hen]	[gɜ:l]	[lɛt]	[desk]	[a:m]	[pɛinted]	[kɔps]
7	[hɛ|p]	[en]	[gəl]	[rɛt]	[deks]	[hə:m]	[peinted]	[kɔps]
8	[he|p]	[en]	[gəl]	[lɛt]	[desk]	[həm]	[peinted]	[kɔps]
9	[he|ep]	[hen]	[gəl]	[let]	[desk]	[həm]	[peinted]	[kops]
10	[he|p]	[hen]	[gəl]	[lɛt]	[desk]	[a:m]	[peinted]	[kɔps]

Identification of Errors
From the table, the following Kimeru consonantal processes were observed;

1. There is the addition of a sound segment, mostly a vowel, between two successive consonants to break the consonant cluster, for example, *helep for *help*

2. A consonant sound segment is added at the word-initial position especially in some words that begin with vowel sounds, for example, *harm for *arm* *hare for *are*

3. Some consonant sounds are omitted especially at word-initial positions, for example, *en for *hen,* *and *had for *hand*

4. Nasals are added to other consonants such as plosives at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of words in the process of pronouncing some words, for example *ngirl for *girl* *bendroom for *bedroom*

5. Certain consonant sounds are substituted for others, for example *rate for *late* *ribrary for *library*

6. In some words, two or more segments are interchanged in their order ending up with a totally different word. An instance was in the word 'kiosk' which was pronounced as *kioks* and the word 'desk' pronounced as *deks*

7. Morphemes being regularized and realized differently without regard to phonetic conditioning and the nature of the word especially in past tense, plurals and stridents. For example, the [-ed] in the word 'packed' is realized as [-t] same as in the word 'walked'. The [-ed] in the word 'painted' is realized as [-id]. Therefore, when a learner

regularizes by pronouncing the word without considering the phonetic environment of some sounds will result in spoken error, which might not be the case with writing.

Also, in the formation of plurals, learners are aware that one simply adds an [-s] or [-es] to the noun. Whereas that is correct with written forms, spoken forms are realized differently depending on the nature of the word. The [-s] in the word 'bags' is realized as [-z] while the [-es] in the word 'churches' is realized as [-iz]. Words like 'churches' and 'bushes' contain sounds that are referred to as stridents.

8. Some words are pronounced as they appear in their graphemes (letters) without considering silent letters or diphthongs for vowel sounds, for example * /lamb/ for /læm/ * /kops/ for /ko:z/

Explanation and Classification of Errors

The consonantal processes observed above were described as follows: if a segment (a vowel sound or a consonant sound) was added to break consonant clusters or a consonant sound produced before another consonant, particularly a plosive, such errors were regarded as errors of addition and were classified as errors involving vowel insertion, prenasalization or consonant addition. On the other hand, if a respondent pronounced a lexical item with sounds in reversed order or interchanged in position, these were regarded as errors of ordering and classified as metathesis.

In cases where respondents systematically replaced one phoneme for another to conform to consonant sounds in their mother tongue, this error was classified as consonant substitution. Some instances involved morphemes being realized in a regularized manner despite their nature and phonetic conditions. This was commonly observed in English past tense, plurals, and in words with strident sounds. Such errors were termed as the regularization of morphemes in past tense and plural allomorphs. It was also observed that some respondents simply omitted consonant sounds in word-initial or word-final positions, and these errors were classified as consonant deletion. Another instance involved respondents attempting to pronounce words as they appeared in their graphemes (letters) without exception to silent letters or considering diphthongs. The respondents erroneously ended up mispronouncing those words, and these errors were classified as errors of spelling pronunciation.

1. **Vowel insertion**

   A sound segment (a vowel) was added to break consonant clusters. The possible cause of these errors is mother tongue conditioning since Kimeru has an open syllable structure and learners would therefore break the consonant clusters in English words by adding a segment between two successive consonants.

   For example,*[helep] for *help* *[tirip] for *trip* *[milik] for *milk* *[bediroom] for *bedroom* *[kiosik] for *kiosk.*

2. **Prenasalization**

   A consonant sound was produced before another consonant particularly a plosive and the combination was pronounced as a single phonological unit. Prenasalization majorly occurred in homorganic sounds. For example, the voiced alveolar stop /d/ pronounced in error and its voiceless counterpart /t/ were preceded by an alveolar nasal /n/ in words such as 'dinner' and 'take'. These errors were interlingual in nature as they were occasioned by mother tongue influence.

For example, *[ngirl] for *girl* *[bendroom] for *bedroom* *[ngate] for *gate* *[mboy] for *boy* *[degree] for *degree*

3. **Consonant addition**
A sound segment (the glottal fricative "h") is added at word-initial position of words beginning with vowel sounds. This addition is phonemic in nature and completely changes the meaning of a word. Its cause is mother tongue conditioning.
For example, *[harm] for *arm* *[hare] for *are* *[holt] for *hot*

4. **Consonant deletion**
A sound segment is omitted at word-initial position or word-medial position. Consonant deletion was deemed to be caused by mother tongue conditioning as Kimeru speakers inadvertently and without knowledge omitted the glottal fricative /h/ at the beginning of words or omitted the nasal /n/ in word medial positions
For example, *[en] for *hen* *[had] for *hand* *[at] for *hat* *[mik] for *milk* *[ouse] for *house.*

5. **Consonant substitution**
A phoneme is systematically replaced with another. In Kimeru, the lateral liquid /l/ in English is replaced by the post-alveolar /r/ in most instances. Or, the substitution of voiced alveolar fricative /z/ with the voiceless /s/, and /ʒ/ being replaced by the palato-alveolar /ʃ/ or even /s/ being replaced by the palate-alveolar /tʃ/. Consonant substitution was a result of both mother tongue conditioning and incorrect application of the rule in pronouncing English words. For instance, the occurrence of the alveolar fricatives is phonetically conditioned but some respondents could not make that distinction thus leading to errors. Consonant substitution errors were therefore both interlingual and intralingual. For example, *[rate] for *late* *[ribrary] for *library* *[soo] for *zoo* *[check] for *shake* *[sebla] for *zebra.*

The learner is unaware of the exceptions to the rules. For example, the learner is aware that the combination [-sure] in a word like 'pressure' is realized as [ʃ] and applies the same realization to every word that has [-sure] such as 'measure' and 'pleasure' without knowing that the [-sure] in 'measure' and 'pleasure' is realized as [ʒ].

6. **Regularization of morphemes in past tense and plural allomorphs**
The learner is aware that to form a simple past tense of a regular verb one simply adds [-ed] to the base form eg. *Brush = brush + -ed = brushed*. However, for some reason, unlike in written forms where it is clearly seen, in speech the realization is different because of phonetic conditioning. For example, the [-ed] in the word 'packed' is realized as [-t] same as in the word 'walked'. The [-ed] in the word 'painted' is realized as [-id]. Therefore, when a learner regularizes by pronouncing the word without considering the phonetic environment of some sounds will result in spoken error, which might not be the case with writing.

Also, in the formation of plurals, one simply adds an [-s] or [-es] to the noun. Whereas that is correct with written forms, spoken forms are realized differently depending on the nature of the word. The [-s] in the word 'bags' is realized as [-z] while the [-es] in the word

'churches' is realized as [-iz]. Words like 'churches' and 'bushes' have sounds that are referred to as stridents because of their loud, shrill, piercing, high-pitched rough-sounding. The errors were intralingual, that is, occurring within the target language itself.

7. Spelling pronunciation

These are errors occasioned by the learner's attempt to pronounce words as they appear in spelling (graphemes).

The learner is not aware that some words in English have no direct relationship between their spelling and their pronunciation. Some letters are not verbally realized but remain silent during pronunciation. Kimeru speakers learning English as a second language experienced a lot of difficulties in pronouncing some of the English words because they attempted to pronounce those words as they appeared in spelling. This caused them to make errors of spelling pronunciation. However, these errors were intralingual rather than interlingual because they are errors occurring within the target language.

For example, *[lamb] for /læm/ *[kops] for /ko:z/, and *[wumb] for /wu:m/

8. Metathesis

This error involved interchanging the order of some letters in a word. It ended up producing a totally different word from the one targeted. For example, the word 'kiosk' was pronounced as *[kioks] and the word 'desk' was pronounced as *[deks] by some respondents. The error was considered unique since it was neither interlingual nor intralingual.

Other unique pronunciations were: *[nəis] for the word 'lice', *[maus] for the word 'house', and [brid] for the word 'bread'. However, these pronunciations were later treated as outliers to the study.

Error Gravity and its Effect on Communication

As stated in the literature review on error gravity, not all errors are of the same gravity. For example, phonemic errors (global errors) are more serious than subphonemic errors (local errors). Phonemic errors come about when there is a difference between sounds bringing a change in the meaning of words in a language while subphonemic errors do not. Applying the notion of global and local errors, this paper assessed the effect of spoken learner errors on communication among Kimeru ESL speakers.

1. **Vowel insertion** – the occurrence of the error had only a slight impact on communication since one could still decipher what the respondent intended to say. For example, if a respondent said *[helep] for 'help', one could still understand. The overall effect of the error was therefore local since it did not hinder intelligibility.

2. **Prenasalization** - For example, *[mboy] for 'boy' or *[bendroom] for 'bedroom'. These patterns were phonologically acceptable in Kimeru and the respondents tended to carry them over to the target language. Communication could still be understood in context. The error was local because it did not hinder intelligibility.

3. **Consonant substitution** - For example, *[rate] for 'late'. These errors greatly affected communication and hindered intelligibility. The impact was therefore considered to be global.

4. **Regularization of morphemes in past tense and plural allomorphs** - The effect on communication was local, meaning that communication could still be understood despite the presence of errors. For example, *[bags] for /bagz/.

5. **Consonant deletion** - This changed the meaning of words, making communication unintelligible. For instance, *[arm] instead of 'harm'. These errors had a global effect on communication.

6. **Consonant addition** –The glottal fricative /h/ was added at the beginning of words starting with a vowel sound. For instance, *[harm] for 'arm' and *[hare] for 'are'. These errors greatly affected communication and their effect was therefore global.

7. **Metathesis** – It involves the trans-positioning of sounds within a word. For example, the word 'desk' was pronounced as *[deks]. It totally caused a communication breakdown as one was left guessing what the respondent had meant. Its gravity was global.

8. **Spelling pronunciation** – Some respondents pronounced words as they appeared in their spelling resulting into error. For example, the word 'corps' was pronounced as *[kops] instead of /ko:z/. The effect of the error was both local and global as it affected intelligibility in one context but not in another.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that learners of ESL made many spoken language errors ranging from vowel insertion, prenasalization, consonant substitution, and metathesis, regularization of morphemes in past tense and in plural allomorphs, consonant deletion, consonant addition, and errors of spelling pronunciation. The possible causes of these errors comprise a variety of factors ranging from no practice in the use of the language, lack of enough time to study materials related to the language, or just lack of interest on the part of the learner. These errors affected communication and hindered intelligibility as they had varied levels of gravity. Some errors had a global effect resulting in a total breakdown in communication while others had a local effect. The differences in the language systems of Kimeru and English posed a great challenge to the learners' pronunciation. Several factors affecting the ability to speak effectively include shyness, absence of motivation, using L1 frequently, and failure to practice English. This study recommends that ESL learners be exposed to activities that encourage language practice such as group discussions, debates, and public speaking where they will freely express themselves and build self-confidence and communicative fluency.

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