

Dramatization and Foreign Language Learning Anxiety: The Case of French in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to investigate the perceived impact of dramatization on reducing foreign language learning anxiety among students studying French at the University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA) and the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in Ghana. The study adopts a mixed approach to gather data from 54 randomly selected Level 100 students. The study is based on Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. The analysis reveals that the majority of the students initially had communication apprehension before the intervention, which consisted of using drama techniques to develop speaking skills. It further shows that the students had low levels of self-confidence, hence their anxiety. Tasks of dramatization performed in groups contributed significantly to developing the level of confidence of students. This intervention enhanced their pronunciation, listening, understanding, and speaking skills of the French language, thereby reducing their anxiety about learning the language. They also developed mechanisms to overcome their fear of the audience when speaking in public. The study therefore strongly recommends the use of drama to overcome learning anxiety in the French language classroom

KEYWORDS

communication apprehension, dramatization, language learning anxiety, task-based learning, speaking skills

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Introduction

Learning a foreign language in an environment where the language is not widely spoken could be very challenging. Studies have revealed that most students learning a foreign language express fear when they have to communicate in the language (Nkrumah, 2021; Dansieh, Owusu, & Seidu, 2021; Lomotey, 2020; & Tridinanti, 2018). These studies observed that most learners virtually freeze or begin to stammer when asked a question to which they have to respond in the language learning class. Others seem scared to initiate conversations in the new language they are learning, even when they have learned all the useful expressions. Some researchers, such as Spielberger (1972), Horwitz et al. (1986), and Atas (2015), refer to this feeling as foreign language learning anxiety.

Spielberger (1972, p. 482) defines anxiety as “an unpleasant emotional state of condition which is characterized by subjective feelings or tension, apprehension, and worry and by activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system that accompanies these feelings.” Horwitz et al. (1986) define anxiety in language learning as “a complex and multidimensional phenomenon of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to foreign language (FL) classroom learning” (p. 128). Language learning anxiety has been identified by several researchers (Dansieh, Owusu, & Seidu, 2021; Lomotey, 2020; Tridinanti, 2018; Zheng & Cheng, 2018) as an impediment to the smooth learning of foreign languages that leads to poor performance. Andrade and William (2009) reveal that anxiety could have some effects on the language learning process, with physical symptoms including “rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, dry mouth, and excessive perspiration. Psychological symptoms can include embarrassment, feelings of helplessness, fear, going blank, and poor memory recall and retention, among others.” (p. 4). The same author’s statement further states that “negative social behavior may be manifested in such ways as inappropriate silence, unwillingness to participate, absenteeism, and withdrawal from the course.” (p. 9). This, we believe, will adversely affect the student’s motivation.

As a remedy to minimize foreign language learning anxiety, some studies recommend the use of drama as an effective learning tool for foreign language learners, particularly in the areas of oral proficiency, pronunciation, motivation, and self-confidence (İşigüzel, 2020; Inphoo & Nomnian, 2019; Schenker, 2020; Hershner, 2015; Atas, 2015; Saglamel & Kayaoglu, 2013). Drama is to “increase the fluency and confidence of the students’ speech, to create authentic communication contexts, and to generate new classroom relationships” (Kao & O’Neill, 1998, p. 15). It is also believed that when the student’s self-confidence is boosted, he or she expresses less anxiety (Takkaç, 2018; Du, 2009). It is therefore necessary for the language teacher to enhance the students’ language proficiency (Gregersen &

Horwitz, 2006) by boosting their self-confidence through drama (Tunçel, 2015; Rubio, 2007; Bandura, 2006; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2005).

After a review of the literature recommending the use of drama to minimize anxiety in the language classroom, we observed that most of it focused on English as a foreign language. There seems to be no study at the time of conducting the present study, which investigated how drama affects anxiety in the French Language Class in the Ghanaian setting. We therefore seek to know: what is the nature of anxiety experienced by students learning French in universities in Ghana? Would dramatization be an effective tool to minimize the anxiety levels of these French language learners and to promote their oral fluency, as other studies claim? The study would therefore examine the issue of language anxiety from the perspective of students learning French at two public universities in Ghana. It will first establish the nature of language anxiety as experienced by students and then use dramatization as an intervention to minimize the effects of anxiety on the learners' ability to speak the language.

The current study is based on Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis and Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis demonstrates how affective variables such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and poor self-esteem can influence the ability to learn a language. He explains that anxiety can act as an affective filter to block a learner from being receptive to language input. On the other hand, Horwitz et al. (1986) identify three components related to foreign language anxiety. These include communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. According to these authors, communication apprehension is a kind of shyness that has to do with a fear of communicating with people. While test anxiety has to do with fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation has to do with fear of what others will say. This is the framework within which dramatization as a learning tool will be analyzed and discussed.

Method

The target group for this study is Level 100 students studying French at two public universities in Ghana: the University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA) and the University of Cape Coast (UCC). These students can be categorized as basic users of the French language, having attained a proficiency level of A1 or A2 of the Council of Europe (2001).

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to collect the data for the study. Firstly, a questionnaire adapted from the Horwitz et al. (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was administered to 54 randomly selected students from UPSA and UCC at the beginning of the first semester of study. The

questionnaire sought to determine the nature and level of foreign language anxiety the participants experience in the French language class. After that, the same participants were put into six groups, with three groups representing each university. They were then tasked with creating dialogues around three thematic areas, namely: shopping, ordering food at the restaurant, and a medical check-up with the doctor. These three (3) themes were selected because they feature on the course outlines for oral expression for the semester. After performing the task, 10 participants from each of the universities were randomly selected and interviewed to find out if the performance had any effect on reducing their anxiety about the French language. The qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed with ATLAS.ti 6.2, while the quantitative data from the questionnaire was analyzed with SPSS Version 25.

Results

The data for this study emanates from questionnaire administered and interviews conducted in focus groups. The questionnaire was used to determine the nature of anxiety experienced by learners, while the interview gathered their opinions on the impact of drama on their level of anxiety. In this section, the two sets of data will be discussed.

Results from the questionnaire

The proposed questionnaire sought to identify the anxiety levels of French language learners. Its items, presented in the form of a scale, were adapted from Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS. Table 1 presents the quantitative data obtained from participants on the nature of anxiety. The students provided statements that describe what students experience when they are anxious for validation.

Table 1: Nature of Language Learning Anxiety of Students

Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking French in class.	22.2	44.4	9.3	13.0	7.4
I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in French class.	18.5	18.5	20.4	24.1	14.8
During French class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	5.6	16.7	13.0	40.7	20.4
I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	18.5	27.8	18.5	24.1	7.4

Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in French class.	20.4	33.3	9.3	22.2	11.1
I worry about the consequences of failing my French language course.	46.3	33.3	3.7	3.7	7.4
In French class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	18.5	25.9	16.7	25.9	9.3
It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my French class.	11.1	11.1	11.1	35.2	25.9
Even if I am well prepared for French class, I feel anxious about it.	25.9	27.8	9.3	24.1	7.4
I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in French class.	22.2	22.2	14.8	27.8	9.3
The more I study for a French test, the more confused I get.	13.0	11.1	9.3	42.6	20.4
I always feel that the other students speak the French language better than I do.	13.0	35.2	16.7	24.1	7.4
I feel very self-conscious about speaking the French language in front of other students.	22.2	44.4	13.0	11.1	5.6
I feel more tense and nervous in my French class than in my other classes	20.4	20.4	7.4	33.3	11.1
I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my French class.	20.4	16.7	11.1	38.9	9.3
I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak French	22.2	24.1	27.8	16.7	1.9
I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the French language.	14.8	18.5	13.0	27.8	18.5
I don't worry about making mistakes in French class	31.5	16.7	11.1	22.2	14.8
It wouldn't bother me at all to take more French language classes.	33.3	18.5	9.3	25.9	7.4

Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
I don't understand why some people get so upset over French language classes	29.6	33.3	16.7	11.1	1.9
I would not be nervous speaking the French language with native speakers.	27.8	20.4	16.7	18.5	13.0
I feel confident when I speak in French language class	16.7	29.6	14.8	22.2	11.1
I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for French class	20.4	40.7	5.6	11.1	18.5
When I'm on my way to French class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	22.2	29.6	11.1	20.4	13.0
I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the French language	25.9	22.2	14.8	24.1	7.4
It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in French	24.1	40.7	9.3	13.0	9.3
I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting	24.1	18.5	18.5	24.1	7.4
I often feel like not going to my French class.	7.4	7.4	13.0	31.5	37.0
I am afraid that my French teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make	7.4	13.0	11.1	31.5	27.8
French class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind	24.1	27.8	14.8	20.4	9.3
I get nervous when I don't understand every word the French teacher says	31.5	25.9	16.7	16.7	3.7
I get nervous when the French teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance	31.5	31.5	9.3	16.7	3.7

Adapted from Horwitz, et al. (1986)

Note: SA – Strongly agree, A – Agree, N – Neither agree nor disagree, D – Disagree, SD – Strongly Disagree

From our analysis of the data obtained using the questionnaires as shown in Table 1, the majority of those students validated statements related to speech, such as “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in French class.” (53.7%), “I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in French class” (44.4%), “I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to

speak French" (46.3%), "I get nervous when I don't understand every word the French teacher says" (57.4%), "I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting" (42.6%), "It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in French." (64.8%) and "I feel very self-conscious about speaking the French language in front of other students." (66.6%). However, the majority of our respondents rejected speech-related statements such as "I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in French class" (38.9%) and "I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my French class" (48.2%). They, however, believed that they "would not be nervous speaking the French language with native speakers" (48.2%). Though 66.6% said they were never quite sure of themselves when they spoke French in class, 46.3% said they felt confident when they spoke in French language class. Other respondents also endorsed statements such as "I worry about the consequences of failing my French language course" (79.6%), "Even if I am well prepared for French class, I feel anxious about it" (53.7%), and "I get nervous when the French teacher asks questions that I haven't prepared in advance" (63%).

Results from Interview

These results were obtained from 20 respondents, made up of 10 students from each of the two universities. When asked during the focus group interview to share their personal experience about the impact of the intervention on their ability to speak the French language, the respondents revealed that it was exciting to communicate in French with someone for the first time (7 occurrences). Others thought it was fun and amazing (5 occurrences).

Participants were then asked whether their confidence level in speaking French had improved. All the interviewees answered in the affirmative. They explained that dramatizing in French made them more confident in class (15 occurrences). They expressed feeling a sense of courage, confidence, and control (8 occurrences). Some said they were not bothered about making mistakes (9 occurrences) because the audience (5 occurrences) easily accepted the mistakes. This boosted their confidence greatly (8 occurrences). Some participants also felt less confident at the commencement of the drama owing to the presence of an audience (5 occurrences); however, the anxiety associated with the situation gradually reduced as the performance started (three occurrences).

Some of them explained that the intervention helped them to improve upon their public speaking (6 occurrences), as reported by one of the respondents: "We feel shy when we have to express ourselves with our colleagues because of fear of making mistakes, but when you are given the scripts, you have to rehearse. I think it helps us release anxiety." They explained that it helped them overcome their fear

of speaking French in public (three occurrences). They further revealed that before the intervention, their fear of the audience caused them to make terrible mistakes or forget what they planned to say in French. Our review of the video recordings confirmed that, indeed, the students exhibited a good level of confidence and spoke more spontaneously. They were less tensed and allowed their speech to flow.

Other students have improved on their reading skills (5 occurrences) and acquired new vocabulary and expressions (8 occurrences) in French. Some of the students also believed that their oral expression in French had improved a lot (8 occurrences). On one hand, the practice of memorizing their lines for the role-play made them recall such words and expressions easily when they engaged in other conversations in French (6 occurrences). On the other hand, others improved on their pronunciation skills in French (five occurrences) because of the preparation ahead of the drama performance.

Discussion

The results from the questionnaire will first be discussed before the interview results. Regarding the results from the questionnaire, Horwitz et al. (1986) explain the main reason for the fear and anxiety among learners as the low command they have over the language. The sense of anxiety and discomfort is further heightened when they are unable to draw on their knowledge of the language in spontaneous situations of communication. It can therefore be concluded that Ghanaian learners of French experience what is known as communication apprehension, which is a high sentiment of fear that arises whenever they have to speak the foreign language in class (Horwitz et al., 1986). These authors explain the phenomenon as a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people. This is characterized by a fear of speaking in public.

Self-confidence is identified as a significant factor that influences the learners' language performance (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2005; Krashen, 1985). Students who lack confidence are extremely fearful and timid; they move away from expressing their opinions and are unable to utter a complete, meaningful sentence in class. It is believed that anxious students are afraid to make mistakes in the foreign language and are afraid to fail (Horwitz et al., 1986). These authors explain that learners often have high expectations of themselves, and anything short of a "perfect test performance is a failure". According to Rubio (2007), foreign language learning classrooms must promote self-confidence. Therefore, a classroom environment where students can express themselves without fear of being humiliated when they make mistakes is ideal for boosting self-confidence in learners.

Meanwhile, while some participants (48%) claim that they do not worry

about making mistakes in French class, others (37%) express worry about that. However, a majority of them (59.3%) rejected the statement, "I am afraid that my French teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make." 20.4%, on the other hand, agreed to the statement. These statistics show those teachers' behavior, teaching and learning activities, feedback, and questions they ask students have an impact on their self-confidence. Therefore, teachers should help students relax in the class by explaining clearly, what they demand from them and providing positive feedback that increases their self-confidence in foreign language learning (Tunçel, 2015).

A category of respondents also agreed to statements such as "I always feel that the other students speak the French language better than I do" (48.2%) and "French class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind" (51.9%). However, 33.3% say they are afraid that the other students will laugh at them when they speak the French language, while 46.3% are not. Horwitz et al. (1986) are of the view that "anxious students also fear being less competent than other students or being negatively evaluated by them" (p. 130).

A good number of students (68.5%) rejected the statement, "I often feel like not going to my French class," while some (14.8%) confirmed it. Some (25.9%) also agreed to the statement, "In French class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know." Andrade and William (2009) observed that anxiety could have some effects on the language learning process both physically and psychologically, resulting in negative social behaviors such as inappropriate silence, unwillingness to participate in class, absenteeism, and eventually withdrawal from the course. It can therefore be assumed that students (14.8%) who do not feel like going to the French class are exhibiting negative social behavior.

It is interesting to observe that 40.8% validated the statement, "I feel more tensed and nervous in my French class than in my other classes, while 44.4% rejected the statement". Though 40.8% does not represent the majority of the respondents, it is still disturbing to know that a considerable number of students feel more nervous and tense in the French language classroom than in other learning situations. Horwitz et al. (1986) believe that this statement is the single best discriminator of anxiety in FLCAS.

Finally, it is worth noting that 51.8% of respondents would not mind taking more French-language classes. This statement goes to show that despite the anxiety experienced by students, most of them still have a good level of interest in learning French. They probably believed that more lessons could help them get better at the language. According to Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2005), one importance of self-confidence is that it encourages a person to try new things. Confident learners are willing to take risks during classroom activities. They do not

easily give up when they face communication challenges in a foreign language. These attributes make them successful in language learning.

From the findings of this study, it is noted that the majority of students (63%) get anxious in the French class when they are asked questions for which they have not prepared in advance. This implies that they will feel more at ease when they prepare ahead of time. Nonetheless, 53.7% stated that even if they were well prepared for the French class, they still felt anxious about it. This is an indication that they are not sure of their competence. They probably have self-doubt and lack self-confidence. Anxiety in language learning has been identified by several researchers as a barrier to the smooth learning of foreign languages (Dansieh, Owusu, & Seidu, 2021; Lomotey, 2021; Tridinanti, 2018). This was confirmed when 44.4% revealed that they could get so nervous in the French class and end up forgetting things they already knew, though 51.3% said they felt very sure and relaxed on their way to French class. Does it imply that their feelings of anxiety and nervousness only start upon entering the French language class? With 44.4% feeling their heart pounding when they are about to be called on in the French class, we believe it is a terrible feeling to have in a language class. In addition, there is evidence of manifestations of some negative social behaviors, such as inappropriate silence and unwillingness to participate (Andrade & William, 2009), when 66.6% of the respondents revealed that they felt very self-conscious about speaking the French language in front of other students. The findings also reveal that, despite the negative effects of anxiety on students' communicative skills, self-confidence also plays a significant role in their class performance. 31.5% of students who had self-confidence strongly agreed that they do not worry about making mistakes in French class, and 33.3% of the respondents also strongly agreed that it wouldn't bother them at all to take more French language classes.

The findings from the analysis of the questionnaire suggest that the anxiety among the students cuts across communication apprehension, test anxiety, and negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., Almost half of the participants (48.1% and above) supported 10 statements, while over a third of the class (more than 32.1%) supported 13 statements. This implies that a significant number of participants supported 23 statements out of 32. This conclusion is in line with Horwitz et al. (1986), who established that "significant foreign language anxiety is experienced by many students in response to at least some aspects of foreign language learning" (p. 130) when they found out in their study that a third or more of their participants supported 19 statements while over half of them supported 7 statements.

Having established that students of French experience forms of language anxiety, interviews were used to obtain qualitative information on the effect drama had on students' ability to speak French, thereby reducing their anxiety about the

language. The data collected from the interview will be discussed in the next paragraph.

Based on the results obtained from 20 respondents during the interview, we can say that when students are given the opportunity to rehearse the language, such as in the preparation stage of the drama, various skills that are essential for oral expression are improved before the real act. These include active listening of the language, understanding verbal and non-verbal language, pronunciation and accentuation, fluency, and reading, among others, that are all embedded in the act of dramatization. This activity can thus be credited with so many benefits, including checking students' fear and anxiety about the use of the language. As stated by Bandura (2006), learners' sense of self-confidence (and self-competence) is tightly linked to the social group they are in. Therefore, the type of audience, if made up of their peers, can promote their sense of self-confidence and self-competence in using the foreign language. It is therefore recommended for beginners in French to constantly practice the foreign language until their level of confidence and knowledge in the language is built. On the contrary, they may feel less confident if confronted with a different category of audience with a higher social standing. In this particular case, the audience was made up of students and lecturers. Hence, their ability to quickly regain their self-confidence in speaking the language, as confirmed by the twenty (20) respondents from the two institutions.

Based on these observations, we tried to find out whether the participants felt confident enough to hold a basic conversation in French about topics that they dramatized. They all agreed that they could speak the language more spontaneously, even though they were not yet perfect. Participants endorsed the use of drama as a language learning activity that helps students overcome anxiety about learning a new language. With the improvement they felt in their confidence level and the ability to speak more spontaneously without fear of making mistakes, they suggested that dramatization be used more often in the foreign language learning process in order to build their confidence and help them overcome their anxiety. The responses of participants confirmed earlier studies (Takkaç, 2018; Du, 2009), which suggested that learners who were self-confident experienced less anxiety and were not afraid to make mistakes when they spoke. They engaged in different oral activities on any topic, learned from their mistakes, worked hard, and, in this way, enhanced their language proficiency (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2006). However, they acknowledged the role played by their lecturers in guiding them during the preparation and execution of the sketch. They believed supervision, positive feedback, and encouragement from the language teacher were key aspects of the process. Some studies (Tunçel, 2015; Andrade & William, 2009) are of the view that teachers must take up the task to minimize the effects of anxiety and need

to encourage students to act and speak correctly and give learners instant feedback, especially positive feedback, during classroom activities they can enjoy, which improves their self-confidence.

Conclusion

The principal concern of this study was to examine the effect of dramatization as a learning tool on reducing learners' anxiety about the French language. Through a questionnaire and interview, the nature of the anxiety experienced by Ghanaian learners was established, and the overall effect of drama on their oral competence and public speech was demonstrated. The findings suggest that language anxiety is a phenomenon experienced by many Ghanaian learners of French in its varied forms, namely: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and negative evaluation. The intervention, which consisted of using drama as a learning activity, also recorded positive impacts such as improvement in speech, better control of anxiety, and high self-esteem in spontaneous conversations in the French language, among other benefits.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this study; they could be implemented to help lower students' anxiety levels and improve their communicative skills in French as a Foreign Language. First, the study found that the kind of anxiety the students are experiencing cuts across three dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and negative evaluation. We therefore recommend that teachers create an affective space (Boal, 1995) for learners to enable them to boost their self-confidence. Thus, language teachers should ensure that dramatization in its various forms is part of classroom activities geared towards developing the oral competence of learners. They should also integrate drama as an activity for the oral evaluation of learners. This could be done by creating space on the timetable for extracurricular activities in drama, poetry, and singing clubs that invoke oratory and representational skills.

Secondly, the role of language teachers is very significant. As indicated by the students, their teachers, with their help, played a great part in boosting their confidence levels. Their inputs are needed at every stage of the process, in providing the right tasks (embedded within real-life communication situations and settings) and texts for dramatization, constituting language ability groups, providing authentic materials such as audio, video, and prints as models, providing guidance in assigning roles for members, providing linguistic inputs, and providing appropriate feedback and rewards.

Thirdly, it was observed that, after working with their peers on the drama,

the confidence levels of the students were boosted and they experienced less anxiety. The study therefore encourages more collaborative learning to help ease students' learning anxieties.

Finally, it is recommended that learners be instructed on techniques to control fear and anxiety in the language classroom by their teachers.

Implications

Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that the study has identified communication apprehension, test anxiety, and negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986) as the kinds of foreign language learning anxiety being experienced by the participants of the study. It has therefore aided in the understanding of the different types of anxieties experienced by French language students. Teachers of foreign languages in our various institutions would thereby be mindful of the kind of anxiety experienced by their students and know how to deal with it.

It has been confirmed that students learning French in Ghanaian universities could use drama to overcome their anxiety in the foreign language class. It has been discovered that drama creates an environment for students to collaborate, experiment with the language, and explore different knowledge sources in order to determine the appropriate speech acts and mannerisms required for the task. The study has thereby proven that drama is an invaluable tool in the hands of the language teacher. When used well, it would make a good impact on lowering the anxiety levels of their students.

Finally, the study also revealed that boosting students' self-confidence is a sure way to overcome their language learning anxieties. This implies that the language teacher has the task of helping students achieve this. Collaborative learning among peers is definitely a good way to achieve it.

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