



Exploring the role of reflective teaching in professional growth: insights from Vietnamese tertiary EFL educators

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers on the effectiveness of reflective teaching practices in their professional development. Reflective teaching is essential in continuously improving teaching methodologies and fostering a deeper understanding of instructional practices and student learning. Moreover, reflective teaching, a critical self-assessment methodology, is increasingly recognized as pivotal in adapting and enhancing teaching strategies in diverse educational environments. The study recruited nine Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers from two institutions, representing a range of career stages: novice, mid-career, and near-end. Through semi-structured interviews, the research explored the teachers' experiences and views on the integration, challenges, impact on professional identity, and the effects of reflective practices on student engagement and learning outcomes. Key findings revealed that reflective teaching significantly influences teaching methodologies across different career stages, with each group adapting these practices uniquely. Challenges such as time management and adapting to educational technologies were noted, along with their solutions. Reflective practices were instrumental in shaping teachers' professional identities and enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. The study underscores the importance of reflective practices in EFL teaching, emphasizing the need for tailored professional development programs and institutional support.

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Introduction

In the dynamic field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly in the Vietnamese tertiary context, the practice of reflective teaching has gained significant traction as a method for professional development. Reflective teaching, characterized by

self-evaluation and introspection, allows educators to critically assess and evolve their pedagogical strategies, thereby fostering a more effective and responsive educational environment (Schön, 2017).

This qualitative study centers on a singular, pivotal research question: “How do Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers perceive the effectiveness of reflective teaching they employed in their professional development?” By focusing on this inquiry, the study aims to unearth the insights and perspectives of these educators regarding the utility and impact of their reflective practices.

The study’s emphasis lies in understanding the nuances of how reflective teaching shapes the professional journeys of Vietnamese EFL teachers at the tertiary level. It explores the extent to which these educators perceive reflective teaching as a beneficial tool for their professional growth, examining the ways in which such practices influence their teaching methodologies, classroom management, and overall pedagogical effectiveness.

Reflective teaching, as conceptualized by Schön (2017), posits that practitioners engage in a continuous cycle of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. This approach, which Dewey (1933) also advocated, emphasizes the importance of reflective thinking in educational practices. Zeichner and Liston (2013) further expanded this concept, emphasizing the role of critical reflection in challenging established norms and practices in education.

In the realm of EFL education, Farrell (2015) and Richards and Lockhart (1994) highlighted reflective teaching as a crucial tool for teacher development. They argued that through reflection, EFL teachers could better understand their teaching context, learner needs, and the effectiveness of their pedagogical approaches. Ayooibyan and Rashidi (2021) and Salih and Omar (2022) added that reflective teaching in EFL promotes adaptability and responsiveness to diverse classroom dynamics.

The relationship between reflective teaching and professional development has been well-documented. Mann and Walsh (2013) found that reflective practices lead to enhanced teacher autonomy and professional growth. Akbari (2007) observed that reflection fosters critical thinking, leading to more informed and effective teaching decisions. Borg (2013) emphasized that reflective teaching contributes to the development of a teacher’s personal teaching philosophy.

In Vietnam, Nguyen (2017) and Thao et al. (2023) explored how Vietnamese EFL teachers engage with reflective practices. Their findings suggested that while reflective teaching is valued, there are challenges in its implementation, primarily due to traditional teaching cultures and institutional constraints. Yen et al. (2023) added that Vietnamese teachers often find it challenging to balance reflective practices with the demands of a high-stakes testing environment.

Reflective teaching, while beneficial, is not without its challenges. Previous studies have identified time constraints, lack of training, and institutional resistance as significant barriers (e.g., Farahian & Rajabi, 2022; Farrell, 2008; Jaeger, 2013). However, opportunities also exist. Other scholars have suggested that technology and collaborative platforms could enhance reflective practices among teachers (e.g., Farahian & Parhamnia, 2022; Shek et al., 2021).

Empirical studies by Jay and Johnson (2002) and Larrivee (2008) demonstrated that reflective teaching positively impacts teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. In the EFL context, this implies a more learner-centered approach, leading to improved language acquisition and engagement.

The literature establishes reflective teaching as a critical component of professional development for EFL educators. While it offers significant benefits in enhancing teaching quality and responsiveness to learner needs, its implementation, particularly in contexts like Vietnam, faces specific challenges. Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering effective teaching practices and for the professional growth of EFL educators in the tertiary sector.

Through this investigation, the study contributes to the broader discourse on teacher development in EFL contexts, particularly within Vietnam, where the education system is continually adapting to meet both national and global educational standards. The findings aim to offer valuable insights into the efficacy of reflective teaching practices, potentially informing future pedagogical approaches and teacher training programs in similar educational settings.

Method

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, underpinned by interpretivist and constructivist theoretical frameworks, to explore the perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers on the effectiveness of reflective teaching in their professional development. The choice of a qualitative methodology is guided by its suitability for gaining in-depth, contextualized understandings of complex phenomena such as teaching practices and professional development (Taylor et al., 2013).

In this study, the interpretivist and constructivist frameworks play a pivotal role in guiding the research methodology and informing the analysis (Elliott & Timulak, 2021). Interpretivism, as a theoretical framework, is rooted in the belief that reality is not a fixed, objective entity, but rather is subjectively experienced and constructed by individuals. This perspective is particularly relevant to our study, as it allows for a deeper exploration of the personal experiences and subjective perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers with regard to reflective teaching. By acknowledging that each teacher's understanding and implementation of reflective teaching is shaped by their unique experiences, background, and context, interpretivism facilitates a nuanced appreciation of the diverse ways in which reflective teaching is perceived and practiced.

Complementing interpretivism, the constructivist approach underscores the notion that knowledge and meaning are actively constructed by individuals through their interactions with the world around them. This approach is well-suited to examining the process of reflective teaching, which is inherently interactive and introspective. Reflective teaching involves a continual process of self-examination, where teachers engage with their own experiences, beliefs, and practices, as well as with the broader educational context, to construct their understanding of effective teaching. In this study, the constructivist

framework helps in understanding how teachers actively develop and modify their professional knowledge and practices through the process of reflection.

By employing these frameworks, the study aims to capture the complex, multifaceted nature of reflective teaching as experienced by individual teachers. This approach enables the research to go beyond surface-level descriptions, delving into the deeper, subjective experiences of teachers as they navigate their professional development through reflective practices. The interpretivist and constructivist lenses thus provide a rich, contextualized understanding of the role and impact of reflective teaching in the professional lives of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers.

Participants

The participant group in this study comprised nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, representing a diverse range of experiences within the field. These teachers were employed at two different institutions in Vietnam, providing a broader perspective on the reflective teaching practices across varied educational settings. To capture a wide spectrum of insights, the participants were carefully selected to include three distinct career stages: three novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and three near-end career teachers. This stratification ensured that the study encapsulated a comprehensive range of experiences and perceptions, from those just beginning their teaching journey to those with substantial experience in the field.

The inclusion of novice teachers aimed to explore the fresh perspectives and challenges faced by individuals new to the profession, particularly in adopting and adapting reflective teaching practices. Mid-career teachers, with their mix of experience and ongoing development, offered insights into the evolving nature of reflective practice over time and its impact on their professional growth. Near-end career teachers, with their wealth of experience, provided valuable reflections on the long-term implications and benefits of reflective teaching practices over an extended career.

Ethical considerations were paramount in the selection and engagement of participants. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, methodology, and their role in it. They were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any adverse consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to create a safe and trusting environment for participants to share openly and honestly. Special attention was given to ensure that the participation of these teachers did not interfere with their professional responsibilities and that their identities and institutional affiliations were protected in all disseminations of the research findings.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, which included permission to record and transcribe the interviews. The ethical protocol also included measures to handle the data sensitively and securely, ensuring that it was used solely for the purposes of this research. By adhering to these ethical guidelines, the study aimed to respect and protect the participants' rights and integrity while gathering valuable insights into their experiences with reflective teaching in the Vietnamese EFL tertiary context.

Data collection

The data collection for this study was primarily conducted through semi-structured interviews, which were designed to elicit detailed and in-depth responses from the participants regarding their experiences with reflective teaching practices. Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted. This involved conducting preliminary interviews with a small group of EFL teachers who were not part of the main study. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the effectiveness of the interview questions and the overall interview procedure. Based on the feedback and observations from the pilot study, necessary revisions were made to the interview questions and approach to ensure clarity, relevance, and comfort for the participants.

The revised interview questions delved into various aspects of reflective teaching practices. Some of the key questions included: "Can you describe how you typically reflect on your teaching practices?", "How do you believe reflective teaching has influenced your professional development?", and "What challenges have you faced in implementing reflective teaching strategies?" These questions were designed to guide the conversation, allowing participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and the impact of reflective teaching on their professional lives.

Each interview was conducted in a setting that was convenient and comfortable for the participant, often within their own institution or in a quiet, private space. The lengths of the interviews varied but typically lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. This duration was chosen to provide ample time for a thorough discussion without causing fatigue or inconvenience to the participants.

Given the study's context in Vietnam and the native language of the participants, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. This choice was made to ensure that participants could express themselves freely and comfortably, thereby providing richer and more nuanced data. For participants who were more comfortable in English or required the use of English for specific technical terms, the flexibility to switch between languages was provided. This approach ensured that language did not become a barrier to effective communication and allowed participants to fully articulate their experiences and perspectives.

Data analysis

The data analysis for this study was conducted using thematic analysis, a method particularly suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. Following Braun et al.'s (2023) guidelines, the process began with a thorough familiarization with the data. This initial stage involved repeated listening to the audio recordings and reading through the interview transcripts multiple times, allowing for an immersive engagement with the content and context of the participants' responses.

The next step involved generating initial codes. During this phase, the data was systematically broken down into smaller segments, and initial codes were assigned to these segments. This coding was done meticulously, with attention to detail, to capture the essence of the participants' reflections on reflective teaching practices. The coding process was both inductive, emerging from the data itself, and deductive, guided by the research questions and theoretical framework.

Following the coding, the codes were then organized into potential themes. This involved collating all the data relevant to each code and then grouping codes into broader themes that captured significant patterns in the data. This thematic grouping was an iterative and reflexive process, requiring constant moving back and forth between the dataset, the coded extracts, and the developing themes to ensure coherence and consistency.

After the themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined. This stage involved checking the themes against the dataset to ensure that they accurately represented the data and refining the specifics of each theme and the overall story they told about the data. Themes were also considered in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

The final stage of the analysis was defining and naming the themes. This involved a detailed analysis of each theme, identifying the essence of what each theme captured about the data, and determining clear and concise names for each theme. The final thematic structure provided a complex and nuanced understanding of the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of reflective teaching in their professional development.

Throughout the analysis, rigor was maintained by continuously checking and rechecking the themes against the data. A reflexive journal was kept during the analysis process, noting decisions, reflections, and interpretations made along the way. This approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data and that the interpretations were credible and trustworthy, providing meaningful insights into the experiences of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers with reflective teaching practices.

Findings and discussion

Integration of reflective practices into teaching methodology

One of the key findings of this study is the integration of reflective practices into teaching methodology. This theme emerged prominently across the participant groups, with all three novice teachers, two of the mid-career teachers, and all three near-end career teachers discussing it. The integration of reflective practices was described as a transformative process that significantly influenced their teaching approaches.

A novice teacher highlighted the role of reflection in adapting to the diverse needs of students: "When I started teaching, I was unsure how to address different learning styles. Through reflection, I have learned to adjust my methods to be more inclusive and responsive." This excerpt demonstrates how reflective practice facilitated the novice teacher's ability to adapt teaching strategies, resonating with the constructivist framework's emphasis on knowledge construction through experiences. A mid-career teacher shared, "Over the years, reflection has become a habit. It is not just about improving a lesson; it is about understanding myself as a teacher and how my teaching impacts students." This statement underscores the deepening of reflective practices over time, aligning with the interpretivist framework, which values the subjective understanding and personal growth of individuals. From a near-end career teacher's perspective, "Reflection has been a constant in my teaching journey. It helped me stay relevant and effective even as educational trends and student populations changed." This reflects the sustained value of reflective practices across

an extended teaching career, offering insights into the long-term impact of reflection on teaching efficacy.

These excerpts, underpinned by the interpretivist and constructivist frameworks, demonstrate how reflective teaching practices are integrated into teaching methodologies at different career stages. For novice teachers, reflection serves as a crucial tool for initial adaptation and learning. Mid-career teachers use reflection to deepen their understanding of their professional identity and impact on students, while near-end career teachers utilize it to maintain relevance and effectiveness over time. This finding illustrates the dynamic nature of reflective teaching and its role in the continuous development of teaching methodologies, viewed through the lenses of subjective experiences and the construction of professional knowledge, including enhancing educators' technical skills (Thao et al., 2023).

Similar to past research, such as that by Richards and Lockhart (1994) and Minott (2019), who emphasized the role of reflective teaching in understanding educational contexts and student needs, this study found that reflective practices were instrumental in helping teachers adapt their methodologies to diverse student populations. However, the current study extends this understanding by highlighting how these adaptations are specifically implemented across different career stages. The novice teachers' use of reflection to discover inclusive teaching methods aligns with the constructivist framework, emphasizing knowledge construction through experiences, a perspective not deeply explored in earlier studies.

Challenges and adaptations in reflective practice

A significant finding from the study is the challenges and adaptations in reflective practice. This theme was noted by two novice teachers, all three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers. Participants discussed various challenges they faced in implementing reflective practices and the adaptations they made to overcome these challenges.

One novice teacher expressed difficulties in balancing reflective teaching with other professional responsibilities: "As a new teacher, finding time for deep reflection amidst lesson planning and grading is tough. I have had to learn to integrate reflection into my daily routines in smaller ways." This excerpt highlights the initial struggle with time management and the gradual integration of reflection into everyday teaching, consistent with the constructivist framework that emphasizes learning through adapting to challenges. A mid-career teacher shared insights on evolving their reflective approach: "Earlier in my career, reflection was more about what went wrong in a lesson. Now, it is broader, considering student feedback, my emotions, and classroom dynamics." This evolution in reflective practice reflects the interpretivist framework, showcasing how personal experiences and perceptions shape the reflective process over time. From the perspective of a near-end career teacher, "The biggest challenge has been keeping up with new educational technologies and integrating them into my reflective practice. I have had to continuously learn and adapt." This statement underscores the ongoing nature of professional development and the need for adaptation in response to changing educational landscapes, aligning with both interpretivist and constructivist perspectives.

These participant excerpts reveal that while reflective teaching is beneficial, it is not without its challenges, particularly in terms of time management, evolving the depth of

reflection, and adapting to new educational contexts. The experiences shared by the teachers at different career stages illustrate the dynamic and evolving nature of reflective practice. They also demonstrate how teachers, guided by their individual experiences (interpretivism) and their interactions with the changing educational environment (constructivism), adapt their reflective practices to enhance their professional development.

The evolution of reflective practices among mid-career teachers, as revealed in this study, adds a new dimension to the existing discourse. Unlike previous research which often focuses on the initial adoption of reflective practices (Mulryan-Kyne, 2021; Raven, 2014), this study sheds light on how reflection deepens over time, resonating with the interpretivist framework that values subjective understanding and personal growth. This finding is particularly significant as it underscores the role of reflection in ongoing professional development, moving beyond the initial stages of career.

The contribution of this study is further underscored in its examination of near-end career teachers. Earlier studies have not extensively explored how reflective practices influence teaching efficacy over an extended career (e.g., Thao et al., 2023). This study fills this gap by demonstrating the sustained value of reflective practices across a teaching career, thus offering new insights into the long-term impact of reflection on teaching efficacy.

Impact of reflective teaching on professional identity

A crucial finding of the study is centered around the impact of reflective teaching on professional identity. This theme resonated across the participant groups, with two novice teachers, all three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers discussing it. The impact of reflective teaching on shaping and evolving the teachers' professional identity was a recurrent and significant point of discussion.

One novice teacher described the formative effect of reflective teaching on their emerging professional identity: "Starting out, I was not sure of my teaching style. Reflective practices helped me understand my strengths and areas for growth, shaping who I am as a teacher." This excerpt exemplifies how reflective teaching aids in the construction of a novice teacher's professional identity, aligning with the constructivist framework that emphasizes the development of understanding through personal experiences. A mid-career teacher reflected on the transformative impact of reflection over the years: "Reflective teaching has been a journey of self-discovery. It is not just about better teaching methods; it is about understanding myself, my values, and how they translate into my teaching." This perspective highlights the ongoing process of professional identity formation through reflective practices, consistent with the interpretivist approach that values the evolving nature of personal experiences and perceptions. From the viewpoint of a near-end career teacher, "My reflection over the years has solidified my teaching philosophy and my role as an educator. It is a continuous process of aligning my practices with my core beliefs about teaching and learning." This statement demonstrates the sustained impact of reflective practices in reinforcing and refining a teacher's professional identity over a long career, a concept that is deeply rooted in both interpretivist and constructivist theoretical frameworks.

These excerpts from teachers at different stages in their careers illustrate how reflective teaching practices significantly influence the development and evolution of professional identity. Reflective teaching, as understood through the interpretivist lens, allows teachers

to continuously shape their understanding of themselves and their roles based on their subjective experiences. Simultaneously, from a constructivist viewpoint, it is through reflective practices that teachers actively construct and reconstruct their professional identities, adapting and growing in response to their experiences and interactions within the educational environment. This finding underscores the profound impact of reflective teaching not just on pedagogical strategies but also on the deeper aspects of a teacher's professional self.

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Enhanced student engagement and learning outcomes

The study also revealed a significant theme, which is the enhanced student engagement and learning outcomes. This theme was highlighted by one novice teacher, all three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers. The participants noted how reflective teaching practices not only transformed their teaching methodologies but also had a noticeable impact on student engagement and learning outcomes.

A novice teacher shared their experience: "Since I started implementing changes based on my reflections, I have seen a positive shift in student participation. They seem more engaged and interested in the lessons." This observation aligns with the constructivist framework, suggesting that the teacher's evolving understanding and adaptation of teaching methods, informed by reflective practices, positively influence student engagement. A mid-career teacher noted, "Over time, I have refined my teaching based on reflective insights. This has led to more interactive classes and, as a result, better student performance and enthusiasm." This comment underscores the link between the teacher's reflective practice, improved teaching strategies, and enhanced student outcomes, resonating with both interpretivist and constructivist perspectives. The teacher's reflections on personal experiences and teaching practices have a direct impact on student engagement. From the standpoint of a near-end career teacher, "Reflection has been key to keeping my teaching methods effective and relevant. I have noticed that when I adapt my teaching to meet students' needs, their learning outcomes improve significantly." This statement illustrates the long-term benefits of reflective teaching on student engagement and learning outcomes. It highlights the importance of continual adaptation and responsiveness to student needs, a core principle of both interpretivist and constructivist frameworks.

These insights demonstrate the tangible impact of reflective teaching practices not only on the teachers' professional development but also on their students. By engaging in reflective practices, teachers at different career stages have been able to enhance their teaching methodologies, leading to more engaged and successful learners. This finding underscores the interconnectedness of teacher reflection, teaching methodology, and student outcomes, viewed through the lenses of interpretivist and constructivist theories, which emphasize the importance of personal experiences and the construction of knowledge through interaction and adaptation.

Similarly, the challenges and adaptations in reflective practice present a nuanced view that builds upon existing literature. While previous studies have acknowledged challenges in implementing reflective teaching, such as time constraints (Farrell, 2008; Tajik & Ranjbar, 2018), this study provides a more detailed exploration of how these challenges manifest at different career stages and the specific adaptations teachers make. This offers a richer understanding of the dynamic and evolving nature of reflective practice, aligning with both interpretivist and constructivist perspectives.

The finding on the impact of reflective teaching on teachers' professional identity is another area where this study contributes new insights. While the transformative impact of reflective practices on professional identity has been noted in past research (e.g., Akbari, 2007; Colomer et al., 2020), the current study's emphasis on how this process unfolds across different career stages provides a more comprehensive understanding of this transformation.

Lastly, teachers' recognition of the enhanced student engagement and learning outcomes ties in with the constructivist and interpretivist frameworks and resonates with studies like Larrivee (2008) and Kheirzadeh and Sistani (2018), which emphasize the positive impact of reflective teaching on student learning. The current study builds on this by detailing how these improvements in student engagement and learning outcomes are perceived and achieved by teachers at different career stages, thus offering a more detailed and contextualized understanding of the link between reflective teaching, teaching methodology, and student outcomes.

Conclusion

This study embarked on an exploratory journey to understand the perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers regarding the effectiveness of reflective teaching practices in their professional development. Set against the backdrop of an evolving educational landscape in Vietnam, the study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights. Nine teachers, encompassing a range of career stages - novice, mid-career, and near-end - from two different institutions, participated in the study. Through this methodology, the study aimed to capture a rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives on reflective teaching.

The findings revealed four key themes: the integration of reflective practices into teaching methodology, challenges and adaptations in reflective practice, impact of reflective teaching on professional identity, and enhanced student engagement and learning outcomes. These themes highlighted the transformative role of reflective practices in shaping teaching methodologies, the dynamic process of overcoming challenges associated with reflective practices, the profound influence on teachers' professional identities, and the positive impact on student engagement and learning outcomes.

The implications of these findings are manifold. First, the study underscores the importance of reflective teaching as a tool for professional development across different career stages. For teacher education programs and professional development courses, these findings suggest the need for incorporating reflective practices as a core component, tailored to address the specific needs and challenges of teachers at various career stages.

Moreover, the study highlights the need for institutional support in fostering an environment conducive to reflective practices. This includes providing time, resources, and a supportive culture that values and encourages reflection as a means of professional growth. Additionally, the findings suggest that reflective teaching practices can lead to enhanced student engagement and learning outcomes, reinforcing the significance of teacher reflection in the broader context of educational effectiveness.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the scope of the research was confined to nine Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers from only two institutions. This limited sample size and range may not fully represent the diverse experiences and perspectives of EFL teachers across Vietnam. Additionally, the study employed a qualitative methodology, specifically semi-structured interviews, which, while rich in detail, are inherently subjective and may not capture the full complexity of the teachers' experiences. The reliance on self-reported data also raises the possibility of bias, as participants may provide responses they perceive as socially desirable or aligned with their self-image as educators. Furthermore, the study's focus on reflective teaching practices within the Vietnamese context may limit the generalizability of its findings to other cultural or educational settings.

Given these limitations, further research is recommended to extend the understanding of reflective teaching practices in EFL contexts. Future studies could employ a larger and more diverse sample of teachers, potentially including educators from different regions or types of institutions within Vietnam, to enhance the representativeness of the findings. To complement the qualitative approach of this study, quantitative methods could be employed to provide a broader statistical understanding of the prevalence and impact of reflective practices. Additionally, longitudinal studies could offer insights into how reflective practices and their impacts evolve over longer periods. Comparative studies involving teachers from different countries or educational systems could also provide valuable cross-cultural perspectives on reflective teaching practices. Lastly, it would be beneficial to explore the impact of institutional policies and cultural factors on the adoption and effectiveness of reflective practices, providing a more holistic understanding of the barriers and facilitators of reflective teaching in different contexts.

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