

A Review of FER

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I. Introduction

At Asia University, all freshmen in the Business Administration, Law, Economics, and International Relations Faculties are required to take a five-day per week class in English called “Freshman English” or “FE.” Classes are 45 minutes long and scheduled in the morning. Students are placed in their FE class by proficiency level after taking an English test at the beginning of the academic year, and in accordance with university attendance policy, students may not miss more than ten classes per semester. Students who fail FE, either because of poor academic performance or excessive absences, must successfully complete a different class called “Freshman English Repeaters” or “FER” in their sophomore, junior, or senior year in order to satisfy their freshman English requirement and graduate.

Few other classes generate quite as much discussion and debate among teachers at the university’s Center for English Language Education (CELE) as the FER class. Teachers differ on what they consider the purpose of the FER class to be, or what it *should* be. Many question the educational value of the class as it is currently structured, although some feel the FER alternative to FE provides a pragmatic solution to a difficult problem. Nearly all recognize a considerable disparity in requirements students must satisfy to pass either class, although they may disagree whether that disparity is justifiable and whether passing FER should be recognized as sufficient to satisfy the English requirement at the university. Some teachers even speculate whether the comparative ease of passing FER may actually result in students deliberately failing their FE class so that they can take the easier route through the FER class instead.

This paper does not attempt to address all of these issues but has the more limited scope of attempting to 1) provide a better understanding of both the development of the FER class into the form it currently has and of the students who are required to complete the class in order to satisfy their Freshman English requirement, 2) review some of the impressions both students and teachers have of the FER class, and 3) consider recommendations for change in the FER class for the future.

II. Background and Description of the FER Class

Over the years, the FER class has changed significantly. Although the record is not well documented, the original class appears to have been similar to a regular FE class with strict attendance requirements but with the very important exception that the students were not placed in FER classes by proficiency level. In the only article which appears in the CELE Journal on the subject of the FER class, Stevenson and Hilderbrandt (1999) report that it was a class teachers avoided and conclude it was difficult to conduct an FER class that was similar to the regular FE classes because of the wide variety of student proficiency levels in the class and because it was a population of students who had responded poorly to strict attendance requirements the first time around in their FE classes. The FER class they designed to deal with FER students at that time is very similar to the FER class that eventually developed. The current form of the class was established as a project undertaken in the Center for English Language Education by Park and Weaver in 2002 and then again modified by others in later CELE projects in 2004 and 2005.

In its current form, FER is a four-skills independent-study course divided into a Listening/Speaking component and a Reading/Writing component. Both components meet twice a week, and classes are

45 minutes long. The classes are scheduled in the morning or the afternoon, and students self select their class. Students come from all 17 levels of FE classes, so the typical FER class is made up of students from a full range of proficiency levels, from novice to advanced. An outline of goals for the class, with details about what competencies students are expected to gain by the end of the term, do not exist for class, as they do for the Freshman English class. However, detailed descriptions of the class activities and requirements were included as part of the Park and Weaver (2002) project.

To complete the Listening/Speaking component, students watch seven English language movies of their choice, fill-out and submit a discussion worksheet for each movie, and then discuss the worksheet and movie one-on-one with their instructor for approximately five to seven minutes. For movie meetings they miss, or to raise their grade in the class, students are able to attend one of the university's "English Hours," where they are expected to participate in conversations about a variety of subjects.

To complete the Reading/Writing component, students come to class and complete worksheets in three different skill areas: reading, writing and vocabulary. The worksheets are divided into five different proficiency levels. At the beginning of the term, each student is assigned to a worksheet level on the basis of a short placement test. Worksheets at the appropriate level are then selected by the students and done only in class. Each worksheet is worth a certain number of points, and the students need to accumulate a certain total number of points to satisfy the requirement of the class. Students submit completed exercises to the teacher who then grades the answers and keeps a record of points accumulated but does not return the completed exercises to the students. No regular attendance is monitored for this class although students are encouraged to complete at least one worksheet a week. Practically speaking, though, students are able to accumulate the points they need for this component without attending many of the classes. The course is designed to be more on the order of independent study with the role of the instructor being that of a monitor and facilitator.

III. Student Survey

Method/Procedure: A student survey was distributed to five of the FER classes for the Fall to Winter 2010-2011 term and then to all ten FER classes for the Spring to Summer 2011 term. Students were asked to fill out the survey when they either completed or were close to completing the requirements of the class. The items in the survey were written in both English and Japanese, side by side, to facilitate student understanding of the questions, and students were instructed to respond in either language. Students who responded to the survey did not always respond to all items, which accounts for some of the different numbers of respondents to items in the survey.

Profile of students who participated in the survey:

Items 1-3: What year are you at AU? What was your FE class? What is your major field of study?

# of participants	Year in university	Department	Range of FE levels represented
108	2 nd Year: 60	Economics: 35	Top, Middle, Bottom
	3 rd Year: 36	Law: 28	Top, Middle, Bottom
	4 th Year: 11	Business: 27	Top, Middle, Bottom
	Not Identified: 1	IR: 18	Middle, Bottom

The sample is a good representation of students who have failed Freshman English. All of the faculties and FE levels are represented in the sample with the exception of students from the top level of IR, which may be

a reflection of a lower overall failure rate for that faculty. IR students are generally motivated to study in their FE class because most of them will be going to the states to continue their English studies, an incentive the other faculties don't have.

Students' impressions of Freshman English and the reasons why these students failed FE:

Item 4: How would you describe your Freshman English class?

# of respondents	Very interesting	Interesting	A little interesting	Not interesting
108	14	26	52	16

FE did not get very favorable reactions from this group of students. A significantly higher percentage rate FE in the bottom two categories: 63%.

Item 5: Why did you not pass Freshman English? (More than one answer can be given.)

# of respondents	Absences	Low scores	Both	Other
108	55	7	45	1

Item 6: What was the cause of the absences? (More than one answer can be given.)

# of respondents	Part-time job	Long commute	Wanted to enjoy my personal time: friends, hobbies, clubs	Thought FER would be easier than FE	Other
95	48	32	16	3	13

Item 6A: How many hours a week did you work, and what was the purpose of the part-time job?

# of respondents	Average Hours Worked Per Week	Purpose of Part-time job
49	27	A. Educational expenses: 7 B. Extra spending money: 13 C. Both: 28

Item 6B: How long was your commute?

# of respondents	One hour	Two hours	More than 2 hours
30	10	14	6

Item 7: What was the cause of the low scores?

# of respondents	Did not study enough	Was in a class too advanced for me	Other
51	46	2	3

Absences as the major reason for failure certainly comes as no surprise, nor do three of the four most frequently cited reasons for those absences, long commutes, placing a priority on personal time activities and simply not being able to get up in the morning. The major reason students give for low scores, not applying themselves academically to the classes, is also very familiar to teachers. Although these reasons for failure are a cause of frustration for teachers in the management of FE classes, they are consistent with Kelly's (1993, pg. 178) assertion that the principal role of the Japanese university is not necessarily studying and developing strong academic skills but rather "allowing students to mature," for which end students place a priority on their personal time, relationships with friends and participation in circles and clubs.

But what may be somewhat startling, and a change in the circumstances our university students face today compared to university students in the past when the economy was stronger, is the number of students who indicated that part-time work was the reason for absences (51%). The amount of work, at an average of 27 hours per week, would certainly be a lot to manage in addition to a full-time academic schedule at the university. On top of that, some students in the survey indicated the part-time work is done during late night or even all night hours, which naturally would have an impact on their attendance in morning classes. This is consistent with what this writer has heard from students firsthand, that many students take on part-time work in the evening because of the higher pay scale at that time. In fact, the financial pressures on students to take on part-time work is greater than it has been for some time. According to the National Federation of University Co-operative Associations as reported in the Japan Times (2010), “more students than ever are having a hard time paying for their studies.” Support from parents is lower than at any time since 1983, which was before the bubble economy. Considering economic trends today, even a casual observer would likely conclude that this kind of pressure on students will continue or increase for the foreseeable future.

Does FER encourage students to fail their Freshman English class?

Items 8: Did you know about the FER class before you failed the regular FE class?

# of respondents	Yes	No
107	85	22

Item 9: What did you hear about the FER class?

# of respondents	Difficult to pass	Easy to pass	Interesting	Not interesting	Didn't hear anything in particular	Other
82	10	13	4	2	52	1

Item 9 seems to provide a reasonably clear answer to the question about whether the FER class, because of its comparative ease to pass relative to the FE class, might actually result in first year students opting to satisfy the FE requirement by taking FER instead. Clearly, whatever students had heard about FER while they were in their FE classes would not have encouraged them in that direction. By far, the greatest number of respondents (78%) had not heard anything in particular about the class or had heard it is difficult to pass or is not interesting. In addition, as indicated from responses to item 6, only three out of 95 respondents may have failed FE because they felt FER would be easier to pass.

Students' impressions of the Freshman English Repeater Class:

Items 10 – 11: How would you describe the FER class? Is the class helpful for improving your English skills?

Listening/Speaking				
# of respondents	Very interesting	Interesting	A little interesting	Not interesting
104	44	33	21	6
# of respondents	Very helpful	Helpful	A little helpful	Not helpful
104	37	40	25	2

Reading/Writing				
# of respondents	Very interesting	Interesting	A little interesting	Not interesting
103	29	25	42	7
# of respondents	Very helpful	Helpful	A little helpful	Not helpful
103	27	35	39	2

Of the two components of FER, the Listening/Speaking component clearly receives more favorable marks: 74% of the students felt the interest level was either “very interesting” or “interesting” compared to 52% for the Reading/Writing component. Similarly, 74% of the students felt the Listening/Speaking class was either “very helpful” or “helpful” in improving their English skills compared to 60% for the Reading/Writing component. It is worth noting here that in item 4 these students rated their original Freshman English class significantly lower in terms of interest level. Only 37% of the respondents indicated the FE class was either “very interesting” or “interesting.”

Effectiveness of level assignment in the Reading/Writing class:

Item 12 A-C: What color (level) exercises did you work on? Was it appropriate? Did you change levels?

Original exercise level assignment from bottom to top level					
# of respondents	Lime	Aqua	Blue	Purple	Violet
106	6	18	49	27	6

Appropriateness of the level		
# of respondents	Appropriate	Not Appropriate
104	96	8

Number of students who changed levels during the term		
# of respondents	Changed	Did not change
96	14	82

The colors represent different levels of difficulty from basic (lime) to advanced (violet). Consistent with the profile information in items 1-3, the responses demonstrate the diversity of students that the FER class accommodates. One of the virtues of the FER class is that students from five different levels of proficiency can study in the same class. The current reading comprehension placement test used in FER to identify student proficiency level appears to assign students to the appropriate level of work done in the class.

Student preference for feedback and correction:

Item 12 D: You do not receive any correction or feedback in the Reading/Writing FER class on the exercises you do. As a result, you do not know which of your answers are correct or incorrect. How do you feel about that?

Reading/Writing			
# of respondents	Corrected exercises should be returned so we can review our work	Not necessary to return corrected exercises	Other
98	59	38	1

Item 13: For the Listening/Speaking part of the FER class, should you receive correction and feedback on your use of English?

Listening/Speaking			
# of respondents	We should receive a lot of correction and feedback	We should receive some correction and feedback	We do not need to receive any correction and feedback
100	9	64	27

One note of explanation about item 12 D. The main reason that the students' graded and scored exercises are not returned to them is that if they were returned they would get passed around and it would be easy for students to use the answers to gain points and satisfy the requirements of the class without actually doing the work on their own.

It is possible for Reading/Writing students to ask a teacher to go over with them individually any given exercise they have completed, but in fact this almost never occurs. In a follow-up inquiry, five of the seven teachers who have taught the Reading/Writing class reported that they were never asked to review any completed exercises with a student, one of the teachers indicated he had only one student make such a request, and the seventh teacher, who did report receiving such requests, indicated it was rare.

The responses to 12 D and 13 clearly indicate student preference for feedback and correction from their teachers in both components of FER. 60% of the responses for the Reading/Writing component were in favor of having corrected worksheets returned, and 73% of the responses for the Listening/Speaking component indicated a desire for at least some feedback and correction. It should be pointed out here that students in the Listening/Speaking component of the class, because of the one-on-one interview with the teachers and the opportunity to attend English Hours classes, do seem to receive some kind of regular feedback from teachers.

Comparative ease or difficulty of passing FER

Item 14: Is it easy to pass the FER class?

# of respondents	Yes	No
95	42	53

Item 15: Is the FER class easier to pass than your FE class?

# of respondents	Yes	No
94	67	27

An interesting contrast is revealed in items 14 and 15. Although a majority of students feel that FER is not easy to pass, which might come as a surprise to teachers, a far greater majority of students do find FER easier to pass than the FE class. Among the most frequently cited reasons for FER being difficult to pass, aside from the comment that "English is difficult," are:

1. The requirements for FER are difficult to complete. (13 students)
2. Just attending isn't enough; students have to do the work. (7)

On the other hand the most frequently cited reasons for FER being easier to pass than FE are:

1. Attendance requirements are lower and more relaxed. (24)
2. Schedule differences: students don't have to study early in the morning/they can choose the time. (8)
3. Class style is individualized/students can study at their own pace. (6)

Student preference for studying in a group or on an individual basis:

Item 16: Do you prefer studying English with a group of other students as you did in your original FE class, or do you prefer to study individually as you do now in your FER class?

# of respondents	Studying with a group is better	Studying individually is better
97	19	78

When the preference for studying with a group or on an individual basis is explicitly asked about, this group of students clearly prefers studying individually. This may have a lot to do with why these students find FER more interesting than their FE class. These results are consistent with those reported by Stevenson and Hilderbrandt (1999, pg. 23).

If they had the opportunity to do it all over again...

Item 17: If you had it to do all over again, would you make sure to pass your original FE class rather than having to take the FER class you are taking now?

# of respondents	Would prefer to pass the original FE class	Would prefer to take the FER class I have now
98	63	35

Though they find the FER class more interesting, more helpful, and easier to pass than their Freshman English class, these students, by a margin of nearly two to one, would still prefer to have successfully completed their Freshman English class. These responses are consistent with the responses to item 9, in which students indicated they had not heard anything in particular to encourage them to fail their FE class in order to take the less demanding FER class to satisfy their English requirement. Neither before or after enrolling in FER would students have preferred completing the FER class to their original FE class. Nor would it seem likely that these students would tell their juniors that taking FER would be the easier path to satisfying the Freshman English requirement.

IV. Teacher Survey

A. Method: In order to get additional information about the FER class, a teacher survey was given to the twelve teachers who have been teaching the course recently. All twelve surveys were returned. Because CELE teachers work closely with each other and there is a considerable amount of communication and information sharing among them about classes, teachers were welcome to respond to any of the items in the survey beyond items 2-4k. In some cases, although a teacher may not have taught a particular component, that teacher may have felt enough familiarity with an item in the survey specific to that component to respond. Generally speaking, however, teachers tended to respond only to items related to the component they had taught. Also, in some cases, respondents chose to write comments rather than select one of the choices provided in the survey. Finally, there is some overlap in questions asked between the student and teacher surveys in order to make some comparisons between the two groups although the teacher survey does ask some different questions, or asks some questions that are similar to those in the student survey but in a different way, and leaves more opportunity for teachers to write additional comments.

Item 1: FER classes taught by teachers:

Total # of respondents	12
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Reading/Writing	Listening/Speaking	Both
2	5	5

Items 2-4: How interesting do you think the FER classes are for the students? Is the FER class helpful for improving the students English skills?

Listening/Speaking			
Very interesting	Interesting	A little interesting	Not interesting
0	4	5	0
Very helpful	Helpful	A little helpful	Not helpful
0	1	6	3

Reading/Writing			
Very interesting	Interesting	A little interesting	Not interesting
0	3	0	4
Very helpful	Helpful	A little helpful	Not helpful
0	1	3	3

The sizes of the two survey groups are necessarily very different, and that makes comparisons between the two groups limited. However, the teachers’ responses are less favorable about both classes compared to the students’ responses with more of the ratings falling in the bottom two categories.

Item 5: In the Reading/Writing class, teachers have very limited interaction with students other than scoring and recording students’ exercise sheets. As the class is designed, teachers do not provide students with any correction or feedback on the exercises they do. How do you feel about that?

Students should have more interaction with teachers and receive some kind of language feedback.	7
It is not necessary for students to interact with teachers or receive any kind of language feedback.	1
Other	1

As indicated in item 12 D of the student survey, the exercise sheets the students complete in the Reading/Writing component are not returned to them. Interactions between teachers and students in this component are pretty much limited to very occasional questions from students about how to proceed with an exercise, or, more regularly, questions from students about how many points they have accumulated toward completion of the class requirement. This is largely due to the independent-study design of the class.

The results clearly indicate a teacher preference for having more interaction with the students and providing them with more feedback than currently occurs in the Reading/Writing component. The additional comments teachers offered generally indicated a desire on their part to have a more active role in the class than they currently have, not only in terms of providing feedback but also in terms of having a more active instructional role. One of the teachers did feel, however, there is sufficient opportunity to provide students with feedback and correction, and another felt it is not necessary for teachers to interact with the FER students in this class.

Item 6: In the Listening/Speaking FER class, teachers have one-on-one interviews with students, and teachers give students some kind of language feedback on the exercises they do. How do you feel about that?

The amount of teacher/student interaction and feedback given to students should be increased.	3
The current amount of teacher/student interaction and feedback given to students is sufficient.	5
There should be less teacher/student interaction and less feedback given to students than now.	0
Other	1

Here the responses indicate a higher degree of satisfaction with the amount of interaction and feedback in the Listening/Speaking class compared to the Reading/Writing component. Despite that, there were quite a few critical comments in the comment section about the interaction and feedback in the Listening/Speaking component. Some teachers comment that students sometimes simply use translators to fill out the movie review forms, or that students just read their movie review page, or that they give memorized accounts of movies. Because of that, teachers comment that there isn't really much time for meaningful communication between teacher and student or feedback from the teacher.

Item 7: Is the FER class easier for students to pass than the FE class?

FER is easier to pass than FE	FER is more difficult to pass than FE
11	1

Similar to the students, the teachers cited the significantly reduced attendance requirements compared to FE. Teachers also commented that the academic load is significantly lower in FER. Teachers pointed out there is no homework in the Listening/Discussion component but none in the Reading/Writing component, there is no review work done in either course, and there are no tests.

Item 8: How would you compare the teacher workload for the two classes?

The amount of work for the Reading/Writing class is significantly greater.	4
The amount of work for the Listening/Speaking class is significantly greater.	0
Both classes are about the same amount of work.	2

The teacher comments indicate a considerable difference in the teacher workload for the two classes with the Reading/Writing component being far greater if the teacher carries out all the responsibilities of the class as designed on paper. Some of the teachers comment that they make adjustments to decrease the workload in the Reading/Writing component by abbreviating the exercise grading and point calculation process once students' levels have been established and the course is up and running. Two of the teachers commented that when they carried out the responsibilities for the Reading/Writing class as they were designed the workload was as great as the FE classes whereas the FER Listening/Discussion workload was much less.

Item 9: Do you have any suggestions about how the FER class could be improved?

The Listening/Speaking class is O.K., but the Reading/Writing class needs to be revised.	1
The Reading/Writing class is O.K. , but the Listening/Speaking class needs to be revised.	1
Both sections of FER need to be revised.	3
Both sections of FER are fine and do not need to be revised.	2
Other	5

Taking into account the additional comments teachers offered for item 9 along with responses indicated above, all but two instructors recommended either one or both components of FER be changed, in some cases completely, in others in more limited ways. Here is a sample of the suggestions for change teachers made:

- Make it a computer class. (1)
- FER should be replaced with a proper class with required attendance like FE. (3)
- Provide more interaction in the Reading/Writing class. (1)
- The students should be required to retake FE. (1)

- FER should be replaced by a class focused on projects that require students to use all four skills, and then visit the class less often but for a longer time so that there is more time for feedback. (1)
- It is difficult to completely reformat the class but there are ways to integrate a few new ideas so that students benefit from the class more. (1)
- The two classes could be combined with one primary teacher. The students could watch movies, do detailed reports and then have one-on-one discussion with the teacher. (1)
- The Writing/Reading class needs to have at least as much teacher/student interaction and opportunity for feedback as the Listening/Discussion class. (1)

V. A recommendation for changing the Reading/Writing component

It seems clear from the surveys that of the two components of FER the Reading/Writing component receives more critical reactions and is in greater need of improvement than the Listening/Speaking component. Whereas there is a clear desire from both students and teachers to have feedback in both components, the Reading/Writing component seems to fall far short of a level of feedback that would satisfy that desire. In addition, teacher responses to item 5 indicate a desire for more interaction with students than currently exists in the Reading/Writing component. The Listening/Speaking component, on the other hand, with its one-on-one interview design and English Hour option, comes closer to satisfying the need for interaction and feedback, and the teacher responses to item 6 in the survey indicate that.

In what form feedback can best be given to second language learners is a matter that a great amount of research and writing has been devoted to. But there is little debate that feedback of some kind should be provided. Nunan (1995, p. 195) points out that, along with instructing students, providing feedback on performance is one of the two “most commonly conceived classroom functions of teachers.” Citing a major investigation into learner preferences carried out by Willing in 1988, Nunan (1995, p. 198) adds that there is convincing evidence learners expect feedback and view error correction by the teacher as one of the “most highly valued and desired classroom activities.” In reviewing the role of motivational feedback in the language classroom, Zoltán Dörnyei (2001, p. 123) refers to feedback as not just an “additional asset worth having” but as an “essential ingredient of learning.” Providing feedback is a feature of the learning process that should be made a regular part of the Reading/Writing component of FER, as well, rather than something that is so infrequently requested and provided as it is currently in the class.

Interestingly, the Reading/Writing class Hilderbrandt (1999) describes, which was very similar in design to the current class, required students to go over the marked work with the teacher in order to receive feedback, during which time the student’s strengths and weaknesses were pointed out and suggestions for future study given. It is not clear what happened to that regular feedback part of the class as the class evolved over time. Very likely, with classes of up to 25 students, working at five different proficiency levels and on different exercises, teachers may have found such a feedback arrangement difficult and impractical to carry out.

But there are many ways the Reading/Writing component could be modified to include more meaningful student-teacher interaction and more feedback for the students. For example, an arrangement similar to the Listening/Speaking class could be implemented into the Reading/Writing class in which students read graded readers appropriate to their level of proficiency, fill out and submit a discussion worksheet for each graded reader, and discuss the worksheet and reader one-on-one with their instructor. Day and Bamford (1998, p. 33) report that research on extensive reading programs in ESL and EFL programs is very positive. Students not only increase their reading ability in the target language, develop positive attitudes toward reading, and have increased motivation to read, but they also make improvements in different areas of proficiency in the target language, including vocabulary and writing. Day and Bamford (pp. 118-125) also provide an overview of an extensive reading program that could be drawn from to develop a similar program for FER students. Cummins (2001) contributed a report to this journal on the value of implementing an extensive reading program for freshman students at Asia University that would be worth reviewing if an effort was made to modify the FER course in the direction being suggested here.

The students could also be given the opportunity to satisfy some of their Reading/Writing class requirement by attending English Hour classes, as they are in the Listening/Speaking component. The requirements for the two components could be made very similar with the additional benefit of making the teacher workload for the two classes equivalent.

VI. Final Remarks

Considering the teacher responses to the survey, however, particularly to item nine in which ten out of twelve teachers offer a great variety of alternatives to the current design of FER, perhaps modifying the Reading/Writing component alone is not sufficient. Those responses would seem to indicate enough interest in reviewing both components of FER to have a project team, or a committee, work on the class and try to arrive at a more comprehensive set of recommendations for improvement.

As Stevenson and Hilderbrandt (1999) point out, FER students are a very challenging group to work with. It would be critical for anyone attempting to implement changes in FER to consider the history of the class and the unique qualities of this student group: that an earlier version of FER which was similar in design to FE appears not to have been workable and to have been abandoned, that students are not screened by proficiency into FER classes, that this group of students has a preference for and seems to respond better to an individualized learning program, and finally, that FER students responded poorly to stricter attendance requirements in their original FE classes. Even with the more relaxed attendance and academic requirements for the FER class, the pass rate has been substantially lower than the FE classes, around 50% since 1995. Although it is difficult to obtain failure rates for FE classes at the university, the Academic Office reports a failure rate for FE classes in the Business Administration Faculty from 2004-2010 of about 14%. It would be reasonable to assume that the failure rates for the other faculties is somewhere in that neighborhood.

The current form of FER has had some success in dealing with these students over the years. But we should be able to apply what we have learned from the current model of FER, its strengths and weaknesses, and improve upon that record.

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