

Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) A Pathway for Effective Native Language Instruction and Rejuvenation

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Abstract: After unveiling Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) to a Canadian public in 2003, the Steinhauers used ASLA to help their son Ty become a fluent speaker of Cree. Although others have actively used ASLA since 2004, very little has been written about it or its effectiveness. This paper will discuss some of its history and effectiveness as a method for language instruction and rejuvenation.

Keywords: language, classroom, instruction, rejuvenation, revitalization, curriculum

1 Finding the Path

When putting a perspective on language rejuvenation, it is easiest for me to start with the language experience I am most familiar with, the Arapaho language. As an Algonquian language, dialects exist in Oklahoma among the Southern Arapaho, in Wyoming among the Northern Arapaho, and in northern Montana among the Gros Ventre, who are also known as the Aaniih, A'aninin, Haaninin, Atsina, and White Clay. Currently, there are no fluent first language speakers among the Atsina or the Southern Arapaho; all three groups are striving to revive or maintain their languages, and all are at risk of becoming extinct. To put this in a different perspective, when I first entered college, there were approximately 2,000 speakers of Arapaho among the roughly 3,800 Arapaho living on the Wind River reservation in Wyoming. By the mid-1970s, it had been approximately 15 years since any new first language speakers had emerged on the Wind River reservation, and as of 2020, there are less than 70 speakers.

As early as 1978, I considered animating traditional stories as a way to generate new language speakers. Although this never gained any relevant momentum, while I was a graduate student at Oklahoma University, linguist Zdnek Salzmann invited me in 1981 to work with him on an Arapaho Dictionary. It was at this point I began to realize that Arapaho was experiencing a decline in language speakers. For the next 25 years I explored ways that might work to generate new language speakers and began some of the initial work that would evolve into Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA[©]TM). It was not until 1996, when asked to run a language workshop for American Indian Institute, a program run at the University of Oklahoma, that I realized how widespread the problem of language loss was among many Native communities. It would take another seven years of intermittent work before I had developed a working model of ASLA. This paper discusses some of what was learned while teaching Arapaho at the University of Montana, some of ASLA's underlying theory, as well as examines efforts and obstacles faced by various Native communities seeking to invigorate and maintain their languages.

2 Motivating Factors and Student Achievements

I first used ASLA to teach Arapaho at the University of Montana in 2004. My decision to teach Arapaho was motivated by the resistance I consistently experienced when invited to run language teacher workshops. The rationale was, by observing students in classroom language learning experiences I would better understand obstacles that other Native language teachers faced when

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teaching. Once that experience was gained, I could use it to enhance the language teacher training workshops I conducted. After about five years of teaching Arapaho, I began challenging students and myself. What resulted was each year students learned more in the same amount of instructional time than what students had learned the year before. To better explain this, I will give a small example of what students learned in 2008, 2013, and 2020.

During the Spring 2008 semester, the class — officially titled Methods for Teaching Native Languages — met the last week of January to the first week of May on Mondays and Wednesdays an average of two hours and ten minutes each week. This stands in contrast to four hours of weekly instruction that students usually receive in language classes such as Chinese, French, German, Spanish, and Russian. By the end of the first 45 minutes of Arapaho language instruction, all students demonstrated full cognition of 16 single words and 24 phrases in the language. This was achieved by working with students individually for about 2 to 5 minutes per student, while others watched, listened, and learned until it was their turn. On the third class day, students were orally tested. Student examination times were staggered to isolate each student from one another when being tested. When all oral tests were completed, all students got all 40 Arapaho terms and phrases correct. A sample of the phrases they were tested on were: ‘An airplane is flying’, ‘A man and woman are walking’, ‘A young boy and young girl are dancing’, ‘A dog is running’, ‘A rabbit is sleeping’, ‘Beavers are swimming’, ‘A man is sitting on a chair’.

February 3rd marked the 6th class meeting and started with students demonstrating what they were able to say on their own in Arapaho. This exercise revealed a slight increase in the number of phrases they were able to produce since the last class meeting. Approximately 25 minutes were used per student to do this. The remaining 35 minutes were spent learning new material. This moved very quickly and increased in complexity. What follows is a partial list in English of what students understood and were able to articulate in Arapaho: ‘I see two birds flying, they are seagulls.’, ‘I see two cups on a table above two books’, ‘One woman is standing in front of a fence and a woman and man are standing behind the fence’, ‘Two girls are riding horses through a river’, ‘Dogs are standing inside a car’, ‘I see five men riding five horses; they are riding very fast’. During this time students were able to increase what they were able to say in Arapaho by about 25 new phrases. By March 19 (class 13), students reached a level where they could express themselves in Arapaho in over 140 different ways and could understand over 250 sentences in the language. This was accomplished after about 300 minutes, or five hours, of classroom instruction, and represented learning a new term or phrase approximately every two minutes of instruction.

In comparing 2008 to 2013, January 28, 2013 was the first day of class. After class introductions, language instruction began and within the last 35 minutes of class students went through 34 single words and several phrases. On February 13 and 20, students were tested, resulting with all students getting all words and phrases correct. By class 8, February 25, students knew 34 words and 100 phrases of varying complexity. An example of some of the phrases learned, including emboldened sentences of newly learned increased complexity were as follows: ‘A woman is riding a horse **jumping over a fence and stream**’, ‘Two cats are sleeping in a bowl’, ‘A dog is sitting between a man and a woman’, ‘A mother and her baby are smiling’, ‘A man is sitting on a chair **reading a paper inside a white house in front of a window**’, ‘A young man and woman are walking **on a road holding hands**’, ‘A boat is floating under that bridge’, ‘**A young woman is walking across a bridge**’, ‘**A little dog laughed when a cow jumped over the moon**’, ‘**Elephants are walking**’, ‘Horses are running through snow’, ‘A woman is riding a horse in the ocean’. In the last half hour of this class, students were exposed to 20 new expressions in Arapaho.

3 Pushing the Envelope

Wednesday, February 5, 2020, was the 6th meeting of the class. I had wondered how much material might be too much. With a total of 90 language concepts I had hoped to work students through, I thought students might have hit a saturation point. On the plus side, students had increased the number of Arapaho phrases they could say without assistance or prompting. I noticed students exhibiting some confusion as a result of grammatical features that do not necessarily occur in English the way they do in Arapaho. This also caused some students to overthink, which at times bogged the learning process down. Students had learned ‘A bobcat is eating a mouse’, but I also wanted them to learn ‘A bobcat is holding a mouse in its mouth’ — *To’uu3eebexookee neniwoheet hookuu*. While this could be said, *Hookuu neniwoheet hinee to’uu3eebexookee*, had I said it this way, it would have made it more difficult for them to understand. The problem was the word that conveys ‘holding in his/her mouth’ does not have in it the word for ‘mouth’ (*betii*), nor the learned word for ‘hold’, as with ‘He is holding a puppy’ — *tonouno’ he3ebiisoo*. Additionally, the word is said differently if one is holding a pen or some other object in one’s mouth. In most circumstances, a language instructor would just translate the meaning into English. However, English translations are not used in class and although it took some work, after a while they were able to understand. Other sentences learned were: ‘**A rabbit is running across the snow**’, ‘**Elephants are walking across a field**’, ‘A dog is playing with a ball’, and ‘A man and woman are dancing in a parking lot’. New concepts introduced during this class were personal pronouns. This was introduced with the phrases: ‘A boy and his dog are praying’, ‘A woman and her infant are smiling’, At this point of their instruction, students understood the following 27 verbs in a variety of different sentences; chase, cry, dance, fall, fish, float, fly, hold, jump, kick, laugh, love, play, pray, read, row, run, sing, sit, sleep, smile, smoke, stand, swim, talk, tickle, walk. In addition to these verbs, they also know over 40 different nouns and a few prepositional phrases. By the 14th class, before the pandemic hit and classes were forced to be taught over the Internet, students went on to learn: ‘A man is reading a paper and falling into a pond’, ‘**A mother and her daughter are playing at the ocean/beach under the sun**’, ‘**The sun is setting behind a lion standing on a rock**’, ‘**That man is walking holding a laptop computer and talking on a cell phone**’ — *Cebiseet hinee hinen tonouno’ hee’ineeyoohuuho’ noh niheenetit heecis woteikuu3oo*. This translates as: ‘He is walking, that man holding a computer (it knows things) and he talks on small phone.’ By mid-March, COVID-19 hit and all classes were moved to online instruction. At first, I was skeptical that teaching language over the Internet could work and thought at best all I would be able to do would be review sessions. After about two weeks, I saw how I could teach new concepts. With four classes remaining, students competently understood 58 new phrases that included over 20 new nouns. Some of these included: ‘A boy is feeding a horse an apple’, ‘A mother is nursing her baby’, ‘A man is drinking tea’, ‘A bird is swallowing a fish’. Some of the new words learned included: ‘coffee’, ‘drinking’, ‘soda’, ‘strawberries’, ‘cooking’, ‘swallowing’, ‘eating’, ‘milk and cookies’, ‘wearing’, ‘pants’, ‘shirt’, ‘coat’, ‘raincoat’, ‘frying’, ‘meat’. These words were learned and quickly used in sentences such as: ‘A person is frying meat’, ‘A girl and kitten are drinking milk’, ‘A girl wearing a red raincoat is playing in the rain’, ‘A man is laughing because his wife and daughter are tickling him’. In addition to understanding these complex sentences when said in Arapaho, students were also able to say without assistance a poem and tell a joke in Arapaho. Additionally, although there was not a single word of English used to explain the poem and joke’s meaning, students understood what they were saying and were able to translate both into

English when required as part of their final exam. To give a different perspective of ASLA as a method for language instruction and acquisition, there should be some discussion on the endangerment of Native languages and the complexities that come with working to revitalizing them.

4 Resistance, and Theories on Language Acquisition

When I was first asked to facilitate language teacher training workshops, I was perplexed by attendees exhibited strong resistance toward the ASLA method. I first experienced this in 2004 when I was asked to facilitate a language workshop in Albuquerque, New Mexico for American Indian Institute, a program situated within the University of Oklahoma. During the second day of this four-day workshop I called forward four different language instructors from the 140 attendees. Their task was to use ASLA to instruct two of my students to learn sixteen different words and twenty-four phrases in four different languages. After they accomplished this in about 40 minutes, one of the attendees stood up and stated for all present to hear, “I have been a language teacher for 17 years and I want you to know that no one will ever learn to speak my language”, then walked out of the room and never came back. I found this very puzzling and wondered why that person had remained a teacher for 17 years, and why would the person leave the room if there were a chance for that to change? To this regard Jon Roberts (1998) — similar to Mitchell and Martin (1997), Richards and Lockhart (1994), and Salmon (1995) — noted:

For anyone, change can produce a stage of confusion and emotional turbulence... Of course, a further challenge for providers is that learner teachers, novices, or experienced are not a mere row of empty vessels to be filled with our knowledge of theory and good practice... Their personal theories constantly filter and mediate the attempts of others to change them. (Roberts 1998:2)

By facilitating workshops from 1996 to 2004, I gained first-hand knowledge from Native language teachers of issues faced when trying and save their respective languages. I erroneously thought if you explain how language could be revitalized, language instructors would accomplish it. As years passed, and I continued to hear the same issues being stated about students not learning, I came to realize the complexity of rejuvenating languages in North America.

One of the things known about first language acquisition is that children can move quickly from single words to basic two- and three-word sentences. Crane, Yeager, and Whitman (1981) have said the following about this:

By the age of six months the child has entered a babbling period, or prelanguage state, in which almost any sound can conceivably be produced. This babbling period allows the child to develop articulatory prowess... Normally the first vowel produced with regularity is a low, somewhat frontal vowel... and the first consonant is generally a bilabial stop...
(Crane, Yeager, & Whitman 1981:164)

The authors explain additional sounds acquired include nasal consonants in opposition to the oral consonants, which explains “... why *mama* and *papa* are early occurrences in English as well as in many other languages” (Crane, Yeager, & Whitman 1981:164). These words, however, are not uttered with the same understanding or meaning ‘mother’ and ‘father’ will have later in life. The

authors discuss what is at times referred to as the ‘two-word’ stage. Two-word sentences have been viewed as combinations of words from two classes, a small class called pivot words such as *my, pretty, more*, and a large class of open words that previously may have been one-word sentences such as *dog, milk, mommy*. Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2011) explain:

Most children go through a stage in which their utterances consist of only one word. This is called the holophrastic or “whole phrase” stage because these one-word utterances seem to convey a more complex message. For example, when J. P. says “down” he may be making a request to be put down, or he may be commenting on a toy that has fallen down from the shelf. When he says “cheerios” he may simply be naming the box of cereal in front of him, or he may be asking for some Cheerios. This suggests that children have a more complex mental representation than their language allows them to express. (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams 2011:335)

The authors relate that sometime around 24 months, children begin to form two-word sentences with clear syntactic and semantic cognition.

During this stage children often sound as if they are sending an e-message or reading an old-fashioned telegram ... which is why such utterances are sometimes called “telegraphic speech,” and we call this the telegraphic stage of the child’s language development.

The correct use of word order, case marking, and agreement rules shows that even though children may often omit function morphemes, they are aware of constituent structure and syntactic rules. Their utterances are not simply words randomly strung together. From a very early stage onward, children have a grasp of the principles of phrase and sentence formation and of the kinds of structure dependencies. (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams 2011:348)

Another relevant point is that these sentences are free expressions, in that they do not necessarily reflect command dominance.

Given this information, it is then surprising that second language learning efforts often do reflect command-based dominance, and while this may produce students who can easily be directed to follow commands in a Native language, these types of approaches fall short of generating fluent second language speakers. The question then is why do Native language teachers resort to this when teaching? Part of the reason seems to stem from a perception that because their language is complex it has to be reduced to its most basic element when taught. This usually resorts to teaching basic commands, animal names, colors, counting, a few kinship terms, and basic phrases like *I love you, I am hungry, I am thirsty, can I get a drink of water, can I go to the bathroom*, and in some classrooms something I introduced in the early 1990s: the monthly weather pattern picture board. This is where children move images on a large poster board of clouds, rain, sunshine, and wind to show what the weather is on a particular day during the month. With the weatherboard they can also learn to count with each day of the month to 31. Through these various tools what is learned has not generated new competent speakers. So, why the shortfall and what can be done about it?

5 Examining Issues

One mid-January 2016 evening, Robert Hall, Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, both of the Blackfoot nation, and I had a discussion about language rejuvenation efforts on the Blackfoot and other reservations. I had asked Robert to tell me how many students had gone through the immersion

schools on the Blackfoot reservation in northern Montana that had become and remained competent speakers since the time the language schools were first established through to 2012, and was surprised to hear his response of “one, or maybe two”. I then asked what Robert thought the reason for this was. In response Robert acknowledged that students did come out with a small language skill set that would be helpful were they in a viable speaking community, but unfortunately Robert stated this is not the situation in Browning, and often is lacking in a majority of other Native communities. Sterling then brought up that, when he was in his early 20s, he wanted to learn to speak Blackfoot but only knew one person who was a speaker, Edward North Peigan from southern Alberta, Canada. Edward spent about three hours every Wednesday night for about three months trying to teach Sterling Blackfoot. After two months, they reached a point where Sterling had only been able to learn basic words and phrases in Blackfoot, and while this did help Sterling to learn the sounds of the Blackfoot language, he had not become a Blackfoot speaker. One of the points Sterling made that night addressed what he saw as a major problem of a lack of understanding among Native language instructors with regard to how language can be transmitted in a structured environment like a classroom. He then reflected on his first experiences with ASLA when Robert Hall taught Blackfoot in my methods class during the spring 2014 semester.

Probably within about 20 minutes of that first class I realized I was learning the language in a way I had never learned Blackfoot or any other language before. By the end of that first class I realized that for the first time in my life not only was I learning the language, but also in some way that was difficult for me to understand I wasn't looking at it from the outside trying to translate Blackfoot into English as an English speaker would in order to comprehend the language: I was inside the Blackfoot language.

For the first time in my life Blackfoot was no longer a mystical object that I could not comprehend... The way ASLA functions is as close as I have ever seen a system or method work in an artificial environment that actually parallels the way a child learns language... Children comprehend language that is concrete ... because initially a child's world is tactile, and later on they develop the abstract. What I find interesting is that ASLA mimics this basic learning process... I also noticed that the way ASLA functions has nothing to do with memorizing, you are actually accessing the language part of your brain as opposed to the memory part of your brain and that is a huge deal. (Greymorning 2019:236)

One of the reasons ASLA is different from other language revitalization methods resulted from my facilitating over 150 language instruction and acquisition workshops. A second reason is a result of my using ASLA to teach Arapaho at the University of Montana. Teaching Arapaho has allowed me to experience obstacles that happen in a structured environment of a classroom and then figure out how to solve them. A third aspect that distinguishes ASLA is that the result these combined experiences have had has enabled me to refine ASLA each year to make it more effective. This differs from other methods because this level of experience, combined with sustained personal contact and exposure to a large number of students and language instructors from Australia, Canada, and the United States does not appear to be the experience of other developers of language revitalization methods, and as a result they may not be as aware of the problems.

From time to time, problem areas emerge from within academia that can bog down language revitalization efforts. For example, Fromkin and Rodman (2011:361) state, “It usually requires

conscious attention, if not intense study and memorization, to become proficient in a second language”. Such ‘scholarly’ statements can mislead language instructors to believe students must memorize extensive word lists and grammar rules in order to learn a second language, a point challenged by Stephen Krashen (1998).

Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language — natural communication — in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.

The best methods are therefore those that supply ‘comprehensible input’ in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are ‘ready’, recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production. (Krashen 1998)

Another problem emerged when scholars discovered young children involved in language immersion classes might not speak the target language for two to three months. This the ‘experts’ labeled as the ‘silent’ phase. What resulted from this were Native language teachers in non-immersion classes who teach for 20 to 30 minutes per class period, two to three times per week, showing no concern over students not speaking. When questioned, this was justified by citing students were in their silent phase of learning. While this became an acceptable excuse, the problem was that students could remain ‘silent’, learning little to none of their Native language for the better part of a school year. With ASLA this is not the case because there is no silent phase when utilizing ASLA. Within the first 30 minutes of language instruction through ASLA, learners can jump from single words completely over the telegraphic speech stage to producing full sentences that begin to demonstrate proper grammatical features of their Native language. What follows is how this happens.

6 Navigating Native Language Instruction and Rejuvenation

Second language (L2) acquisition through ASLA initially is not much different than how children begin speaking their first language (L1). Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams note (2011):

In certain important respects... L2 acquisition is like L1 acquisition. Like L1ers, L2ers do not acquire their second language overnight; they go through stages. Like L1ers, L2ers construct grammars. These grammars reflect their competence in the L2 at each stage, and so their language at any particular point, though not native-like, is rule-governed and not haphazard. The intermediate grammars that L2ers create on their way to the target have been called interlanguage grammars. (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams 2011:362)

A pivotal point in developing ASLA came when I realized children understand an enormous amount of language in advance of their ability to speak. Parents experience this around the time their children begin to walk. This can be observed when parents begin directing children to perform basic tasks such as *Get mommy’s keys*. The infant than toddles over to where the keys happen to be, perhaps picks up something else, and the parent says *No, no, my keys*. Understanding that the selection was wrong from hearing *No, no*, the infant grabs something else, and, if correct, the parent confirms the child’s selection with *Bring mommy her keys*. The child

then toddles over with keys in hand. What this demonstrates is that language cognition precedes being able to speak. Upon realizing this back in 1993, I began developing ASLA along cognitive lines. When first using ASLA with my children and subsequently within a classroom, I quickly discovered the ability of learners to understand language was happening within a matter of seconds. Once learners understand the language they are to speak, speech production can follow much faster than the standard practice of having learners repeat, repeat, and repeat until instructors and students tire or decide to move on. If we circle back to where I wrote out sentences students were saying within the early hours of language instruction, the next thing to explain is how this was accomplished.

We all know a child's first words in English are usually some form of mommy or daddy. As a side note, my son's first words in Arapaho were *Nohoeseikuutii Noh'oe3eeyoo* 'Turn on the light', which was said when we walked into a dark room. When a child produces *mommy* or *daddy*, the child does not know these words represent terms of relationships. What happens is, when parents articulate *Say momma* or *Say dada*, they are consistently in the child's field of vision. After numerous times of doing this, the child starts to associate the parent's face with what is being said, and in time begins to anticipate the sound when seeing the parent until, eventually, the words connect along correct pathways that lead to vocalization and the child articulates the sound when seeing a parent.

With second language learners who possess English as their first language, because I understand the problem-solving processes of a learner's first language, when it is English, I can use what I know to accelerate the learning of their second language. I then am able to map out a foundation for what I often refer to as 'building a house of language', and what others could think of as a curriculum for language instruction. How a first class would be set up is similar to how infants associate a parent saying *mamma* or *dada* when they see a parent's face. This is done by exposing learners to images of what they are to learn by associating the image and the sound, or sounds, for what that image represents. This essentially retunes their brains' language learning function away from memorizing to visualizing. The initial group of images, referred to as the first language skill set, can consist of 16 to 24 images. In teaching Arapaho at the University of Montana, every single class of students over a 12-year period have fully learned this first skill set in less than 20 minutes. What happens at the second stage in developing students' language comprehension and speaking skills is using single words learned in the first skill set to build over 40 phrases in the second skill set, the concepts of which will be useful in developing an ability to converse in the language. In building language complexity with the third skill set, students' sense of a language's grammatical structure deepens, often without them consciously being aware that it has. With regard to sequencing for language learning, Jeff, a graduate student who took my class in 2011, had this to say.

I'm fluent in Spanish despite those classes... The way that this class works compared to how my Spanish classes worked in High School and college; with high school and college Spanish there was always a filter between Spanish and me, and that was English. I would learn a verb and I would immediately take it from Spanish to English and then I would know what it was. Whereas with this class, there is no filter, it goes straight from Arapaho into my bank of knowledge in a more organic way. There is never English uttered in order to translate a word... In the Spanish classes we were taught, today we are going to learn present tense, we are going to learn past tense, we are going to learn subjunctive... In this class (Arapaho), we were told we are on a new skill set, but we were never told what that skill set was... and with this class you would learn present tense verbs, you

would learn things in conjunction with one and other without knowing that was what you were learning... it just popped up in your head. (NSILC 2017)

Throughout various skill sets, students learn to express situations in first, second, and third person singular and plural, as well as reflexive, as with, 'I hit myself', or 'They are holding each other's hands'. For example, two phrases consistently learned from 2016–2020 are: 'Two mice are about to kiss each other' and 'A man and a woman are walking holding each other's hands'. The way ASLA works is to provide students with a structure so that even when hearing for the first time *Neehii3ei neniisei'ii nii3oxoeyou'u cebisee3i teesiihi ho'boone' nonou'unseeneti3i hinee hinen noh hisei* 'Between two fences they are walking on a dirt road holding each others' hands / A man and a woman are holding hands walking on a dirt road between two fences', they understand it with no need to have it translated. When ASLA is the learning medium of instruction, this process continues in complexity such that by the time students get past the middle of the semester, approximately 16 hours of in-class instruction, they are learning to tell stories (examples of students telling stories can be found at www.nsilc.org). When learning a story, it is learned without hearing any part of it translated into English, and when a part of a story is encountered that is not understood that part is explained in Arapaho in a manner that they can understand, not much different than how a child learns in their first language. It is only when students reach their final and are orally tested, which is done one-on-one in isolation, they then are graded on translating the story into English.

With regard to testing, which is an assessment, as a final comment, it is worth noting that over a 12-year period of teaching Arapaho through ASLA, from 2004 to 2016, every student that had completed their oral exams leading up to the final exam, which also includes students being taught Blackfoot in 2014 by student aide Robert Hall, had received 100% on each exam. It was only when taking their final oral exam that any student received less than 100% (for an actual final exam go to www.nsilc.org). It is as a result of experiencing such levels of student language learning successes that I, as well as past students understand the strength and hope that ASLA can hold for rejuvenating Indigenous languages.

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