

Exploring the Effectiveness of Podcasts in University English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Podcasts as new forms of information technology, have led to gradual and radical changes in the field of education, especially in the last decade. Advanced technologies continue to promote educational activities beyond the university classroom. They are supported by experts in the field of linguodidactics and methods of teaching foreign languages: didactic materials are created with links to Internet resources and assignments involving work with online material. The teacher of foreign languages has to keep up with the times, organize the educational process, using advanced technologies of the global Internet, to achieve the main learning goal: teaching English to university students. Nowadays, podcasts are being discussed as a new promising e-learning tool, the didactic potential of which can change the learning process, as geographical and temporal boundaries of information dissemination and receipt are erased, which is very important for digital pedagogy in the 21st century. This allows us to speak about the relevance of this research topic. The use of innovative means of teaching English to university students at the present stage makes the learning process more effective. This article examines the possibilities of podcasts as a means of teaching listening comprehension skills to university students and presents the students' practical results. The article displays the results of an experiment on teaching students listening skills using experimental and control groups.

Keywords: digital pedagogy, innovative means of teaching, foreign language, podcast, listening comprehension

Introduction

From a historical point of view, podcasting appeared relatively recently – around 2004. Its creators Dave Winer and Adam Curry are the inventors of a way to upload files (audio and video) using the RSS (Rich Site Summary) format to describe news feeds, as well as other content. The term podcast comes from iPod and broadcast. The iPod music player and the broadcast have formed a podcast.

The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2003) defines *podcast* as "a radio programme that is stored in a digital form that you can download from the internet and play on a computer or on a mobile Phone".

In Reverso Context (2013) '*podcast*' is: noun – 1. (media) series of digital episodes that can be streamed; 2. (media file) digital audio or video file available for download; verb – 1. (technology) create audio files for internet distribution; 2. (deliver) deliver audio content regularly over the Internet.

Merriam- Webster (2022): Podcast: a program (as music or talk) made available in digital format for automatic download over the Internet.

Wiktionary, the free dictionary (<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/podcast>) gives short information about the origin of the term: Blend iPod ("portable music layer made by Apple") + broadcast, probably coined by the British technologist and broadcaster Ben Hammersley (born 1976) who proposed word podcasting in 2004.

Noun: *podcast* (plural podcasts) – 1. Program, especially an audio program, produced on a regular basis, delivered over the Internet in a compressed digital format and designed for playback on computers or portable devices such as mobile phones. In precise usage, the term podcast refers to the program itself, whereas each individual audio recording is referred to as an episode; in broad usage, metonymy blurs this distinction (as it also does with analogous terms such as broadcast and television show). Verb: 1. To deliver (information) in the form of a program, especially an audio program, over the Internet on a regular basis for playback on computers or portable devices such as mobile phones.

The forms of podcasts are diverse: interview, discussion, video and audio, dialogue, monologue, educational video, and story. The topics of podcasts are also diverse, they can be research and narrative, entertaining and educational. The duration of a podcast is from 15 minutes to an hour or even more.

There is a gap in research regarding the use of podcasting in teaching university students to perceive foreign speech by ear.

Podcasts, as a relatively new educational tool, attracts university students. As a result, the study below presents the effect on university students' listening skills.

Research Objective

The purpose of the research is to study the possibilities of podcasting technology in teaching listening comprehension skills to university students.

The set goal led to the following tasks:

- consideration of the effect of podcasts on listening skills;
- research of the didactic potential of podcasts in teaching listening comprehension skills to university students;
- analysis of university students' listening comprehension skills in the process of working with podcasts (test scores).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This article uses a research approach to show the features of using podcast technology in teaching foreign languages at a university. The action research aims to highlight some details of the use of podcasts in the process of teaching foreign languages (listening comprehension skills in particular) and to provide a visual representation of this process. The research includes the definition of the problem (the students' involvement, the effectiveness/non-effectiveness of the syllabus), data collection (interviews, observations), strategy implementation (changes aimed at solving a problem), evaluation and refinement (additional data collection and reflection), and correction and improvement.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at the Biysk branch of the Altai State Pedagogical University. The study involved students from a full-time university department, totaling of 40 students (age – from 19 to 21, level – from low-intermediate to intermediate) and two members of the teaching staff. The students were divided into two groups: experimental and control. The students in the experimental group actively used podcasts in their class and out-of-class activities. The students in the control group performed traditional tasks given in the textbooks and used standard audio and video materials. The initiator of the study was a young teacher of Chinese and English, who, after completing her bachelor's degree, continues her studies at the university's graduate school and is engaged in teaching. Her teaching experience at the university is three years. The second teacher, who has extensive experience in teaching foreign languages, has just started using podcast technology in her teaching activities. At the Biysk branch of AltSPU named after V. M. Shukshin teachers encountered a common problem typical of teaching Chinese and English, i.e., the lack of effectiveness of traditional methods in developing communication skills, especially listening and speaking.

Despite the growing popularity of Chinese and English, textbooks and standard audio materials often do not provide a complete immersion in a live language environment. They do not allow students to get used to the natural speech of native speakers and limit the expansion of their vocabulary to current, modern vocabulary and idioms.

This problem was particularly acute in the Practice of Oral and Written Speech discipline, where students often experienced difficulties in understanding authentic speech and expressing their thoughts freely.

In search of innovative methods teachers decided to try to integrate podcasts into the educational process. This solution seems promising, as it provides a number of advantages that significantly improve the quality of students' training.

Unlike standard educational materials, podcasts provide students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in the language environment independently and easily. They allow you to listen to the natural speech of native speakers, get acquainted with a variety of topics, speech styles and current vocabulary, including phraseological units and idioms that are rarely found in textbooks.

Research Tools

The following research tools used in this study are: interviews, observation, and surveys (Likert scale), listening tasks, and language tests. In the process of using podcast technology, systematic monitoring of students in the classroom was carried out. The observation was objective, continuous, non-inclusive, and generalized. Before and after using podcast technology in the classroom, a survey of students was conducted to determine their attitude toward this technology.

The methodology of listening training was developed by Sysoev (2012) and can be used with podcasts. It consists of three stages:

- before listening;
- while listening;
- after listening.

Exercises which can be used in the experiment according to this formula:

Before listening

After students are given a list of words, they translate them, then work in pairs and test their knowledge of the words using flashcards. This interactive and engaging method of vocabulary practice not only helps students to remember the meaning of the words, but also allows them to actively engage with the material and incorporate it into their long-term memory. By working in pairs, students have the opportunity to discuss and clarify any uncertainties they may have, further solidifying their understanding of the vocabulary.

Additionally, using flashcards as a tool for testing their knowledge encourages students to actively recall the information, which has been shown to be a more effective way of learning compared to simply passive studying. This method also promotes a sense of competition and motivation among students, as they strive to remember the meanings of the words and beat their partner in the flashcard game.

Furthermore, working in pairs fosters collaboration and communication skills, as students must effectively communicate with each other to test their knowledge and discuss any challenges they may encounter. This not only enhances their understanding of the vocabulary words, but also helps them develop important social skills that are essential for success in both academic and professional settings.

Overall, this method of vocabulary practice not only improves students' retention of the material, but also promotes collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills essential for their academic and personal growth.

While listening

Listening to podcasts with gaps in the text is an engaging and interactive way for students to improve their listening skills and enhance their comprehension abilities. By actively participating in filling in the missing information, students are not only honing their listening skills, but also practicing their critical thinking and inference abilities.

This activity can be particularly beneficial for language learners, as it provides them with the opportunity to expose themselves to authentic language in a controlled and structured way. By listening to native speakers and trying to fill in the gaps, students can improve their pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall language proficiency.

Furthermore, filling in the gaps in a podcast can also help students develop their note-taking skills. As they listen attentively to the audio and try to capture the missing information, they are practicing important academic skills that can be valuable in a variety of contexts.

Overall, using podcasts with gaps in the text is a dynamic and effective way to engage students in their language learning journey. It allows them to actively participate in their learning process, while also providing them with valuable opportunities to improve their listening comprehension, and critical thinking skills.

After listening

After being provided with the list of words used in the podcast, students are tasked with not only recalling the words themselves, but also the specific context in which they were used. This exercise not only challenges students to remember the vocabulary they have encountered, but also encourages them to critically think about how the words were utilized in the conversation. By recalling the context in which the words were used, students are able to deepen their understanding of the language and its nuances.

Furthermore, this activity promotes active listening skills as students must pay close attention to the podcast in order to accurately remember the context in which the words were used. It also serves as a valuable tool for improving comprehension and retention of new vocabulary. By engaging with the material in this way, students are able to make meaningful connections between the words they are learning and their real-world applications.

In addition, reflecting on the context in which words are used can provide insight into the broader themes and ideas presented in the podcast. This exercise encourages students to think critically about the content they are consuming and can lead to more meaningful discussions and analysis. Overall, by challenging students to recollect the context in which words are used, this activity not only strengthens their language skills but also enhances their overall comprehension and engagement with the material.

Data Collection

Before collecting the data, the students were informed that they would be interviewed and monitored. The data collection process included pre-class surveillance without podcast technology, classroom surveillance using podcasts, and data decoding and organization. There was a significant difference in the degree of activity and interest of students in the studied educational material without the use of podcasts and with their use.

Data Analysis

After conducting a series of lessons with podcasts, the teachers interviewed the students of the experimental group about the importance\uselessness of using this technology. The question was:

What aspect do you find most important when listening to a podcast in a foreign language?

The students' answers were:

1. Auditor's authentic speech

When listening to a podcast in a foreign language, 15% of AltSPU students believe that the authenticity of the speaker is crucial. This means that they value hearing a genuine, natural speech that reflects the nuances and rhythm of the language being spoken. An authentic speaker can provide valuable insight into the culture and language, making the listening experience more engaging and immersive.

For these students, the speaker's tone, intonation, and pronunciation are key factors in their enjoyment of the podcast. They appreciate when the speaker sounds like a native speaker, as it helps them better understand the language and improve their own pronunciation. Authentic speech can also make the content more relatable and easier to follow, as the listener feels more connected to the speaker.

Furthermore, an authentic speaker can convey emotions and nuances that may be lost in a more formal or robotic speech. This can make the podcast more interesting and dynamic, keeping the listener engaged throughout the episode. Additionally, hearing authentic speech can help students develop their listening skills and improve their comprehension of the language.

In conclusion, the authenticity of the speaker plays a significant role in how students perceive and engage with podcasts in a foreign language. By prioritizing authentic speech, students can enhance their language learning experience and make the most out of their listening practice.

2. Articulate speech

Listening to podcasts in a foreign language can be a challenging yet rewarding experience for many students. According to the results of the interview, 30% of AltSPU students believe that the articulate speech of the podcast host is the most crucial aspect when trying to understand and learn from the content. This finding highlights the importance of clear pronunciation, enunciation, and overall communication skills in effectively conveying information in a foreign language.

When the podcast host speaks clearly and articulately, students are better able to grasp the nuances of the language, understand the context of the conversation, and improve their own language skills. A well-spoken host can make complex concepts easier to comprehend, engage the listener's attention, and create a more enjoyable learning experience overall.

Furthermore, articulate speech not only aids in comprehension but also helps students develop their own speaking skills. By listening to a host who models proper pronunciation and intonation, students can improve their own ability to communicate effectively in the foreign language. This process of imitation and practice is essential for language acquisition and fluency.

In conclusion, the articulate speech of a podcast host plays a crucial role in enhancing the learning experience for students listening to content in a foreign language. By focusing on clear communication and pronunciation, podcast hosts can help students improve their language skills, deepen their understanding of the content, and ultimately become more confident and proficient in the target language.

3. Clean recording with no sound interfering

When students are learning a foreign language, listening to podcasts becomes an important tool for immersing themselves in the language environment. Our research shows that 30% of students believe that a clear recording without background noise is the most important aspect when listening to podcasts in a foreign language. This makes sense, as effective language learning requires clear and understandable audio content.

The presence of background noise or music can distract students and make it difficult to understand the content of the podcast. A clean recording allows students to focus on pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary, which significantly improves the quality of their foreign language learning.

Additionally, the absence of background noise in a podcast recording enhances the perception of foreign language speech. The clearer and more understandable the recording, the easier it is for students to adapt to the new language and improve their listening skills.

Thus, a clear recording without extraneous noise is a key factor when choosing podcasts for learning a foreign language. This aspect helps students to effectively use the audio material in their learning and achieve better results in learning a foreign language.

4. Actual topic

For 12.5% of students, finding a relevant topic is a key aspect when listening to a podcast in a foreign language. This is because it is important for them to have an interest in the topics discussed in the podcast in order to maintain their attention and motivation in learning a foreign language. Understanding and discussing relevant topics helps them to expand their vocabulary, improve their language comprehension, and develop their communication skills. For these students, choosing podcasts that cover topics that are relevant to their interests or personal experiences is crucial. They aim to ensure that the information they receive from podcasts is not only useful for language learning, but also relevant and applicable to their daily lives. Additionally, listening to podcasts on current topics can motivate students to continue learning the language, as they see how they can put their knowledge into practice.

Therefore, the relevance of the topic in podcasts for foreign language learners is crucial and can have a significant impact on their motivation and learning outcomes.

5. Familiar vocabulary

When it comes to listening to podcasts in a foreign language, familiarity with vocabulary plays a crucial role in comprehension and overall enjoyment for many students. According to a recent survey, 12.5% of students emphasized the importance of familiar vocabulary when tuning into podcasts in a language that is not their native tongue.

For these students, hearing words and phrases that they are already familiar with can greatly enhance their listening experience. It helps them to feel more confident in their ability to understand and follow along with the content being presented. Familiar vocabulary acts as a bridge that connects them to the new language, making it easier to grasp the overall message and context of the podcast.

Furthermore, having a strong foundation of familiar vocabulary can also boost students' motivation and engagement levels. When they are able to recognize and comprehend key words or phrases, it instills a sense of accomplishment and encourages them to continue learning and improving their language skills.

In addition, familiar vocabulary can serve as a valuable tool for expanding one's language proficiency. By repeatedly encountering and using familiar words in different contexts, students can solidify their understanding and retention of those terms. This, in turn, can help them to gradually build their vocabulary and become more fluent in the foreign language.

In conclusion, while familiar vocabulary may only be one aspect of listening to podcasts in a foreign language, its significance should not be underestimated. For many students, it serves as a cornerstone for successful language learning and can greatly enhance their overall listening experience.

Table 1*Express Your Attitude towards Using Podcasts in English Class (Likert scale)*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Do you think working with podcasts is an interesting and unusual way to work?	18	12	4	4	2
Do you think that recording a podcast and discussing it throughout the semester has helped you feel more confident in your listening and speaking skills?	14	16	5	3	2
Are you ready to repeat your experience with podcasts and even prefer them to completing written assignments from a textbook?	17	15	3	2	2
Do you find that working with podcasts has become a pleasant distraction from your regular study routine?	17	13	4	5	1
Do you see podcast creation as an opportunity to earn extra points for your semester work?	20	10	6	4	0

The vast majority of the students (80%) confirmed the effectiveness of using podcasts in the process of teaching foreign languages. In addition, since the university trains prospective foreign language teachers, most students confidently stated that they would necessarily use this technology in school lessons. Many students have already used and are using podcasts quite effectively during their teaching practice at school.

Research Results

Numerous investigations have demonstrated the efficacy of incorporating podcasts into English language instruction. For instance, a study conducted by Chen and Chung (2008) revealed that the use of podcasts substantially enhances students' listening abilities and broadens their vocabulary. Li and Chan (2007) spoke about the importance of podcasts emphasizing the importance of reducing student anxiety. Additionally, a study by Rosell-Aguilar (2007, 2015) demonstrated that podcasts boost students' motivation and self-assurance.

In our experiment special attention was given to exercises directed to the development of listening comprehension skills. The task was: be able to select and remember certain parts of information presented in an audio text, e.g. 6 Minute English <https://www.afarinesh.org/podcast/bbc-6-minute-2015-podcast-53/>

The Way We Look

After listening to the podcast *The Way We Look* students have to answer the questions:

What did men do to improve their physical appearance in the 18th and 19th century?

What does “suited and booted” mean?

At the Biysk Branch of AltSPU, we introduced a new approach to teaching based on the use of English podcasts. Our goal was to not only develop listening comprehension skills but also to improve pronunciation and improve accuracy. Podcasts, due to their interactivity and variety, became an essential tool that enriched the learning experience and made it more enjoyable for students. We carefully choose podcasts that match the level and interests of our students. Each podcast has its own strengths and is selected because of its benefits for learning. Below, we will discuss each resource we used, focusing on its strengths and suitability for different levels.

One of the first resources used during classes was the BBC's “6 Minute English” podcast (2008). Its short length (only 6 minutes per episode) was not a disadvantage but an advantage, especially for beginner students. Students who are just starting their journey often struggle with long listening times. “6 Minute English” solves this problem with short but informative and engaging segments that allow students to develop their listening skills without feeling overwhelmed or losing concentration. The topics covered in the podcast are varied and cover important social issues, helping students expand their vocabulary and horizons. The convenient length allows it to be included in the curriculum even with limited time.

(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/6-minute-english>)

Another resource we actively use is “*English Class 101*” (2009). Unlike the previous resource, this one is aimed at different levels of students. Its structure is designed so that each episode focuses on a specific topic and analyzes the necessary vocabulary and grammar. This is valuable for organizing knowledge and consolidating material. In addition, “*English Class 101*” emphasizes cultural aspects, helping students not only learn words and expressions but also understand their usage in context and cultural nuances. This brings students closer to real-life English communication.
(<https://www.englishclass101.com/dashboard>)

“*The English We Speak*” (2016), another BBC podcast, stands out for its focus on natural, informal language. Each episode teaches interesting expressions, phrases, and idioms commonly used in spoken English. Knowledge of these expressions enriches students’ speech and makes it more natural. Like the previous two podcasts, “*The English We Speak*” goes beyond vocabulary and introduces students to cultural realities, helping them understand communication contexts.

(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/the-english-we-speak>)

“*All Ears English*” (2013) is a valuable resource for improving conversational skills. It emphasizes practical language use in various social settings. Episodes often include sections on etiquette and behavior rules in different contexts, from business negotiations to casual conversations with friends. For students planning to use English outside the classroom, this podcast helps them feel confident when communicating with native speakers, avoiding awkward situations. By boosting confidence, it encourages students to actively use English.

(<https://www.allearsenglish.com/>)

“*Luke’s ENGLISH Podcast*” (2009) – the podcasts are presented by Luke Thompson, a stand-up comedian and English teacher. Here one can find numerous transcripts, audio and premium episodes focusing on vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Students are sure to find useful grammatical forms and vocabulary. Luke’s podcast has won 5 awards – a British Council ELTon nomination. More than 150 million downloads in total prove Luke’s podcast’s huge popularity.

(<https://teacherluke.co.uk/>)

Lastly, “*TED Talks Daily*” (2014) is a podcast featuring short but insightful talks covering a wide range of topics. Listening to TED talks not only improves listening skills but also broadens horizons, exposing students to different perspectives and interesting speakers. The vocabulary used in these talks is diverse, making them suitable for intermediate-level students. TED Talks encourages critical thinking and the ability to process information in English. Thus, using TED Talks in the classroom contributes not only linguistically but also personally to student development.

(<https://www.ted.com/>)

Discussions

Using podcasts gives students the opportunity to choose their own path when learning a foreign language: they can listen to podcasts at a convenient time, in a convenient place, and work with the podcast as many times as they need to learn information.

The methodology of listening training was developed by Sysoev (2012) and can be used with podcasts. It consists of three stages:

- before listening;
- while listening;
- after listening.

In accordance with the methodology of listening training developed by Sysoev (2012), appropriate exercises have been developed during the experiment.

At the first stage, students are immersed in the context of the selected podcast. The students are offered the following assignments:

- read the headline and offer your suggestions about the content of the podcast;
- look at the illustration and the title, predict what the story will be about;
- make a list of questions about the intended content of the story.

The second stage involves listening to the podcast directly. The following tasks are used at this stage:

- answer a question about the main idea of the story;
- identify correct and incorrect statements;
- complete sentences using information from the podcast;
- read the sentence and correct factual errors and identify information not present in the podcast.

The third stage of working with a podcast involves analyzing the listened podcast in oral or written form. Students can express their attitude to the text they have listened to, and suggest what might happen to the character next.

As an example of working on a podcast with students of the Biysk branch of AltSPU, a series of exercises developed in the course of teaching the discipline "English text reading Workshop" can serve. Luke Thompson's podcast "The Mountain" was chosen for the work. Luke used the Commaful platform (2016) (<https://commaful.com/>). The story is presented in <https://commaful.com/play/aknierz-the-mountain/>. Students highly appreciated Luke's podcasts and mentioned that Luke is a very emotional speaker, who knows how to captivate the listener.

As a native English speaker he demonstrates his perfect pronunciation. Since students are learning the discipline of reading texts in English, the choice of educational material is important. In interviews, students note that Luke's chosen texts are always interesting, immediately attract their attention, motivate them to work with the texts. In the process of presenting the text of the story, Luke makes all the necessary explanations if in his opinion a particular word may cause difficulty in understanding for a non-native speaker.

The texts selected by Luke arouse a burning desire among students to discuss the problem raised in a particular story. After an oral discussion, students are given the task of expressing their point of view in writing in the form of an essay. Thus, using the example of one short story presented in Luke Thompson's podcast, the teacher trains students in mastering the skills of all types of speech activity: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

So, using the tools of observation and survey, we investigated how using podcasts impacted university students in their classes. We wanted to see if listening to these audio lessons helped them do better. We gathered data from surveys, looked at their grades, and even read some of their comments on the experience.

What we found was very interesting. It seemed like the students who consistently tuned into the podcasts generally got higher scores on the midterm exam. There was also a link between how often they listened and their overall grade – the more they listened, the better they tended to do. Now, we did consider that maybe the students who were already good at the subject were just more likely to listen to the podcasts in the first place, so we factored that in. Even then, using podcasts seemed to give a small boost to their grades.

But it wasn't just about the numbers. We also dug into what the students themselves thought about using podcasts. Many students said that hearing the information explained in a different way, with real-world examples, really helped them understand the trickier concepts. They also liked being able to listen on the go, like when they were commuting or hitting the gym. Students were using their time more effectively.

Of course, not all the students liked working with podcasts. Some students found them distracting and preferred to stick to reading textbooks. And a few people suggested it would be helpful to have written notes alongside the podcasts, to make it easier to take notes.

Overall, it appears that podcasts can be a useful learning tool for many university students, especially for prospective foreign language teachers. They can help students grasp concepts, make learning more convenient, and maybe even improve their grades. However, they're not a magic bullet – what works for one student might not work for another. So, it's important to think about how to design podcasts in a way that suits different learning styles and to offer other learning resources as well.”

Recommendations

Using podcasts in teaching English has several advantages:

Authenticity: Podcasts often contain authentic material that reflects the speech of native speakers.

Availability: Podcasts are available at any time and anywhere, allowing students to study independently at their own pace.

Variety: There are a wide variety of podcasts on various topics and at different levels, allowing you to choose material that meets the needs of individual students.

Motivation: Interesting and engaging content helps increase student motivation and involvement in the learning process.

Efficiency: Research shows that using podcasts in English classes contributes to the development of listening, vocabulary, and pronunciation skills.

For effective use of podcasts in English language teaching, it is recommended to:

- choose podcasts that match the students' language proficiency;
- invite students to listen to podcasts on topics of interest;
- use podcasts to develop various listening skills (global understanding, detailed understanding, selective understanding);
- offer students to complete various tasks based on the podcasts they have listened to (answer questions, retell, compile a glossary, participate in a discussion);
- combine listening to podcasts with using other educational materials (textbooks, dictionaries, online resources).

In conclusion, we can say that the use of podcasts in teaching English in the Biysk branch of AltSPU named after V. M. Shukshin proved to be an effective method that allowed improving the quality of education, increasing students' interest in the subject, and developing not only their linguistic but also communication skills. The variety of podcasts used has provided a comprehensive approach to learning, allowing students to improve their listening skills, expand their vocabulary, learn about the cultural characteristics of English-speaking countries, and develop confidence in communicating in English. This approach allows teachers to adapt the learning process to the individual needs of each student, which is key to successful learning.

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