The interaction of motivation, perception, and environment: One EFL learner’s experience

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Abstract

This paper discusses a Korean learner’s struggle to achieve English language proficiency over a 20-year period using an autobiographical approach. It concentrates on the issues of individual motivation and social learning environments and examines the interactions between this learner’s motivation and affect, self-confidence, and environment. The effect of this interaction on shaping English learning is also examined. The discussion of individual motivation and its relationship to social perceptions and values is expanded using both a socio-educational model in second language acquisition and attribution theory in educational/social psychology. The learning experiences in formal, self-instructional, and natural learning environments are also examined. Mastery of a foreign/second language seems to be an outcome of the interaction between individual motivation and educational environment embedded in a socio-cultural context. The paper suggests some practical implications for students and teachers; discusses how to foster perceptions that enhance foreign language learning while incorporating learners’ situated perceptions in their culture; and notes several possible ways to increase motivation.

Introduction

I once read in a newspaper that South Koreans (hereafter Koreans) have the second lowest rate of English language proficiency based on the TOEFL test in the world. This surprised me because I knew many Koreans who spent a great amount of time, money, and effort studying English. I wondered why our years of effort yielded so little success. English learning is one of the main requirements to advance in school and to secure a good career in Korea.

Research has consistently noted the significant role of motivation in learning (e.g., Clément, et al., 1980; Dörnyei, 1994; Dörnyei and Schmidt, 2001; Gardner, 1985; Gardner, et al., 1997). The findings suggest that motivation is a central variable in successful second language acquisition. However, despite apparently high levels of motivation, Koreans, as a rule, seem unable to achieve a high level of English language proficiency. Is the current motivational paradigm insufficient to explain the situation in Korea?
This paper will use an autobiographical approach to examine one Korean learner’s English learning experience over a 20-year period. The primary examination will include the role of motivation and its interaction with other variables such as perception and affect in various learning environments. Individual perceptions and the effects of motivation will be discussed using the perspectives of a socio-educational model in second language acquisition and attribution theory in social psychology.

**Theoretical Background**

The work of Gardner and his colleagues (cf. Clément, *et al.*, 1980; Gardner, 2001; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993; Gardner and Lambert, 1959; Gardner and Smythe, 1975; Gliksman, *et al.*, 1982; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989) has had a significant impact on explaining the roles and effects of motivation in second language learning. This body of work defines motivation as a constellation of effort to learn a language, desire to achieve the goal, and the positive affect created from learning the language (Gardner, 2001). Motivated learners exhibit these three elements in their second language learning. In other words, Gardner’s work asserts that effort, desire, or positive affect by themselves cannot be considered to reflect motivation.

Motivation is also influenced by two other factors: a learner’s integrativeness and attitudes toward the learning situation (Gardner, 2001). That is, a learner’s genuine interest in learning a second language, a favorable attitude toward the target language community and the learning situations create what Gardner refers to as a new variable called “integrative motivation.” This represents a complex multifaceted variable comprised of motivation, integrativeness, and attitudes.

This understanding of and approach to motivation underscores the complexity of the construct. Tremblay and Gardner (1995) pointed out that variables from other fields (e.g., social psychology) may be useful in developing a fuller understanding of how motivation functions to influence language learning. Attribution theory holds great promise despite the fact that it has not been widely studied by second language acquisition theorists (Williams and Burden, 1997).

Attribution theory focuses on individuals’ perceived causes for events (cf. Weiner, 1979; 1980; 1986). Success or failure at a task can be ascribed either to something controllable or uncontrollable. When individuals perceive that failure is caused by an uncontrollable factor, they are less likely to put forth effort to achieve the goal. By contrast, if individuals perceive that they
have control over an outcome, they may put forth more effort in the belief that effort will increase the probability of achieving the goal (Lim, 2000; Pekrun, 1992). How individuals perceive the causes of outcomes has a crucial effect on the motivation to learn and achievement of the goal. This suggests that for language learners, feelings of controllability over their performance play a crucial role in success in language learning.

Attribution theory suggests that no matter how much someone wants to learn a foreign language, if he/she believes that it is impossible to do so for reasons beyond his/her control, then there is no point in putting much effort into studying. Study will not produce better results. If learning is perceived as unlikely or impossible, then motivation decreases. This leads to a cycle of lack of effort → lack of success → verification of initial belief that the goal is unattainable → further lack of effort and so on. The reasons these perceptions vary among individuals and across situations are beyond the scope of this paper. However, readers wishing further information may consult Lim (2000; 2001; 2003) for a more in-depth analysis.

A brief word about goals is in order. Both the socio-educational model and attribution theory include goals as a feature of their approaches. Both suggest that the specific goal works to affect motivation. While a complete discussion of goals is beyond the scope of this paper (cf. Dweck, 1986; Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Lim, Forthcoming), goals and their importance are fluid. They change with perceptions, attributions, and salience.

Taken together these studies suggest that motivated learners will be more successful at learning a second language. Further, motivation must be understood to involve more than a simple desire to learn a language. It involves attitudes toward the target language culture, perceptions about the learning environment, and beliefs about the causes of language learning success. The profile of the most successful learner, therefore, would be a person with a strong desire to learn the foreign language and a positive attitude and curiosity toward the target culture; who is in a positive learning environment with good teachers, comfortable surroundings and interesting materials; and who believes that language learning is within his/her control.

Autobiographical studies may also be particularly insightful here. First, although the models of motivation extant in the literature are promising, they are also steeped in a Western orientation. They may not fit Eastern cultures, such as Korea, very well. Therefore, an autobiographical study can be used to examine what an individual is really feeling—to bypass the public face problem in Korea—and to understand the individual’s definition of the major
concepts such as motivation and success. Autobiographical studies can provide insight into what a subject really feels at the time, not what he/she is supposed to feel. Private definitions of the situation and beliefs can be more readily studied free from the public pressure of appropriate responses and their cumulative effects over a longer duration can be witnessed.

This paper attempts to look at my language learning experience in a retrospective way through my own eyes. The data are presented as a case study with longitudinal inquiry. I will attempt to discuss my learning experiences over an extended period in the context of the socio-educational model and attribution theory. In that way, I hope to be able to provide an entire album rather than a single photograph, with the goal of furthering our understanding of second language acquisition.

**Overall Learning Contexts**

When I was very young, I saw an English language show on the television. I was captured by those strange and alien sounds. I wanted to know what those people were talking about. I confess I thought it would be very special to be able to use those words in my own life. So, the spark of curiosity was lit.

My first English language learning started with memorizing the alphabet right before going to middle school. My older brother told me that if I didn’t learn the alphabet before I started English in school, I would be hopelessly behind. Learning at home and being able to create the letters was very fun and exciting. I happily wrote and rewrote all of the letters in both cursive and non-cursive scripts. I loved lowercase and uppercase letters. I was excited that I could reproduce these strange characters and that I knew their secrets. I was ready to study, to learn, and to succeed.

I studied English in the public school system from 1981 to 1986. At the time, the grammar-translation method was the primary means of instruction. After six years of secondary school English study, I studied English at university. During college, I also chose to attend a private institute where classes were taught by native English speakers. I attended these classes two hours a day, five days a week for about two years. I also tried self-instructional methods such as listening to tapes, watching movies, reading magazines, and watching public English learning shows on TV to enhance the level of my English proficiency.
I started teaching English after graduating with a degree in English education. This job lasted three and a half years and required me to speak only in English. I then entered graduate school to study Linguistics in Korea. After two years spent completing my M.A., I taught English for two more years before coming to the United States to continue my studies.

I have been studying for my Ph.D. in Foreign Language Education for four years at a large state university in the Southern United States. During this period, I have been completely immersed in a natural learning environment. I have not taken English courses. I have rarely used my native Korean language since coming here.

Overall, my English learning environments can be separated into three major phases: formal/school, informal/self-instructional, and natural learning environments. The formal learning environment corresponds to the six-year education period in secondary school. The informal/self-instructional learning environment includes the times that I attended a language institute and taught myself English through self-study. It also includes the time that I spent teaching English. The institute learning experience is included in the self-instructional environment because I was the one who chose the institute and could stop at any time had I desired to do so. Finally, the natural learning environment is the time that I have been immersed in the target language country. These learning environments have gradually moved from a relatively structured to a more naturalistic environment in which I have more control. These three environments will be discussed in the framework of motivation and perceptions to show how these variables have influenced my English learning experience and language achievement.

*The Formal Learning Environment*

Many researchers would say that I exhibited an integrative motivation for learning English from the beginning. I had a keen desire to learn and a great curiosity, fondness, and positive orientation to the people who spoke the language. According to previous research, I should have been very enthusiastic about my English studies and should have enjoyed the classes. My belief that English speakers came from an advanced country and that learning English would help me be like them motivated me to study hard.

My motivation was substantially enhanced by my first middle school English teacher. She really liked the students and seemed to have a good command of English. I felt safe in this environment. I liked repeating after her with 70 other students with the loudest voice in class. I really had fun
bellowing out English. I believed that if I did what she wanted us to do, I would be good at English. I enjoyed this learning experience with her very much for two years.

While I put my effort into assignments such as memorizing vocabulary, sentences, and finishing drills in the textbooks, I found that one activity was becoming harder and more boring to me in my second year. The teacher sometimes had us memorize a whole chapter and recite it in front of the class. I remember one day that I had to memorize a three-page section about the four seasons in Korea. I spent at least six hours memorizing paragraphs about spring, summer, and fall. I was too exhausted to continue to memorize the last paragraph about winter.

In the beginning, memorization was tolerable. When I heard my recitation, I felt that I was speaking in English. As time went by, I had longer and longer sentences to memorize and had to spend more and more time thinking about the next sentence instead of enjoying my recital. I was frustrated with this time-consuming process. I often experienced mental blocks when I tried to recall sentences. I couldn’t perform very well unless I had perfectly memorized everything and practiced by myself. That’s why it took so long to finish these memorization tasks.

This unfortunate experience had the effect of diminishing my excitement about English. I thought that the only way to learn this new language was to memorize every single sentence in the universe. Koreans value memorizing and this is a common feature of our educational process. So, it was normal to think that this strategy was applicable to English, as well. However, I am not good at memorizing and so my enthusiasm for learning diminished somewhat at this time. I became ever more frustrated. According to attribution theory this should have made me decrease my efforts because I believed I couldn’t do the one thing critical to success—memorize.

We were instructed to memorize and it didn’t matter if we knew what the words meant. The focus was on reproduction not on understanding what the words and sentences meant. In retrospect, this may have had an interesting consequence. I knew that I was not good at memorizing but believed that memorizing was necessary to learn English to obtain good grades. However, since grades were not my focus, memorization may have had less of a negative effect on me. Although I may not have been able to articulate it at the time, or even recognize it, memorizing was not central to meeting my main goal—talking with and understanding people. It seems likely that I partitioned language learning goals at this point—one for me and what started my interest
and the other for the formal demands of school. At this juncture, a more instrumental motivation took over. Gardner and MacIntyre (1995) suggested that instrumental motivation may be particularly effective at increasing effort. I believe that I may have shifted my goal focus to one of achieving good grades. I became more instrumental in my study. I wonder if I would have been as persistent had I not been able to separate getting good grades from learning English.

When I first studied grammar, I had fun learning why some sentences made sense and others did not. However, those grammar books were summary books and listed tons of rules. When I had to study grammar books over and over, year after year for university exam preparation, I felt that my brain was a safe deposit room at a bank that was storing tons of valuable possessions in sealed cabinets. My knowledge about rules was somewhat logical but many times, rules were mechanical and had to be recalled easily when I took a test.

Furthermore, teachers became less focused on students and interaction decreased. The teacher was the main speaker and students were listeners in class. We never even read textbooks aloud together in class. We were supposed to be quiet and not ask questions. We were always busy writing down what teachers said as true knowledge. Infrequent interaction in class, the teacher's apparent disinterest in the students, mundane teaching methods, linear knowledge transmission, and a focus on memorizing rules and patterns did not help to maintain my interest in English very much. Moreover, my formal school learning environment didn't really satisfy the initial integrative motivation and goals that I had. Despite my diminished interest, I usually scored within the top 10% of my class. The English exam was not something that I feared. I knew if I put in a certain degree of effort and time, I would get a good score. Following the teachers' directives was the way to become good at English.

As I think about it, according to both attribution theory and motivation theory, I should have become sorely disinterested in English by this point. This disinterest and frustration should have lowered my efforts and changed my perceptions about learning. I didn’t like the teachers, the activities, or the learning style in class. I developed a negative attitude and I did just what I had to do in order to survive. I persisted and didn’t lose my initial interest in English. I thought that school was actually interfering with my goal (i.e., learning to communicate in a foreign language with real people). None of the school activities we were doing seemed relevant. So I probably did develop the kind of response predicted by the models but only for school—not for the primary goal, of which I never lost sight. It is difficult to say for sure, but my
experience suggests that it is central that a learner discover his own goals and that they not be given to him by someone or something else. It was my belief that I wanted to do something for myself that allowed me to persist. Both success at school and learning English were important for me. Yet, I was able to separate these goals and this separation allowed me to persist and become successful at both tasks. Traditional research instruments may not be sensitive enough to pick up these different goals. After all, on the surface, both goals may seem to be the same—learning English. However, the way they were understood in my mind was very different. I am not sure if I even understood what was happening at the time but looking back on the experience has helped me to realize how my motivations to achieve two different goals were interrelated.

Other crucial perceptions influenced my learning at school. These included performance oriented motivation, perfectionism, and public face. I focused on getting good grades. I knew I could never speak with perfect pronunciation (it was beyond my control as a Korean). I was expected to be ashamed of my imperfect performances and to believe that I would ultimately fail at the task before me—the acquisition of perfect English. It is common in Korea for teachers to announce that English acquisition is beyond the capacity of Koreans. There was a widespread societal belief that learning English in the target culture is a necessary, but hardly sufficient, condition for proficiency. Since, at that time, Koreans were not generally able to travel outside of Korea, it was, therefore, relatively impossible to meet the minimum condition for proficiency. Sadly, this belief persists even today.

According to attribution theory, I should have decreased my effort because no matter how much I tried I could do nothing to improve my chances of being a perfect English speaker. Yet, I tried even harder. In the face of the apparent impossibility of success and in the light of certain failure, I increased my effort. Many of the students did, in fact, give up at this point. I could see they really weren’t studying much and they blamed their failure on the fact that it just was not possible to learn English. Of course, they might have had different and less intense motivations than me from the beginning. However, the point remains that while attribution theory correctly predicted other students’ reactions, it appeared to inaccurately predict mine.

It is not entirely clear how I can explain this phenomenon or where the weakness might be in the theory. However, I think it has something to do with the fact that there was a subtle shift in goals for me. I became motivated to perform well in school, to get good grades, and to be perceived as a good student by teachers. English became incidental to this. I studied hard and did
what I had to do to get the grades. Somehow, I had managed to separate learning English from my actual English classes. The goal of learning English was submerged for a while as I attempted to be a successful student. English became no different for me than math or social studies. It simply became a grade. As Koreans, we believe that effort determines grades so there was no conflict for me here. I believed good grades were within my control so I continued to persist in my efforts despite the fact that I knew getting good grades was not really related to achieving my ultimate goal.

I had no idea how my ultimate goal quest was progressing as I had never had the opportunity to try it out. I still had never been in a situation where I had to speak with a foreigner. I had never experienced failure. I believed that I could communicate with foreigners. Because I had not yet been disabused of my belief that I had achieved a modicum of success, I went on.

The Informal/Self-Instructional Learning Environment

After graduating from high school, I was very happy to regain control of my English study. I started trying new things that I thought I would enjoy more for improving my English. I wrote articles in English as a campus reporter, read books and magazines, listened to English pop music, and watched Hollywood movies and educational programs on TV. I enjoyed what I was doing. I didn’t know the best way to improve listening and speaking but I liked trying different things and exploring how they worked for me.

Because I had never had a chance to speak with native speakers of English, I also decided to attend an institute with English classes taught by English speakers. This institute focused on increasing students’ communicative proficiency. They had a strict “pass-repeat” system wherein a teacher evaluated a student’s competency based on attendance and communicative accuracy ability.

I spent about two years in the one-year program because I had to repeat levels several times. I experienced a great deal of frustration while going through that system. I experienced constant failure at communication tasks. I was told that perfect pronunciation and sentence structure were essential to being fluent. The same message that I had learned in school was being repeated—perfection. I believed I was too old to achieve this feat so I became very frustrated. The teacher’s constant focus on error correction made me think that my pronunciation was not good enough. I hesitated to speak in class. I remember that I spoke more freely during the first two months and later become more hesitant because the more I spoke, the more mistakes I made.
Again, I believe that I became instrumentally motivated. I simply wanted to graduate from this institute. This goal became proximal. Additionally, I believed what the instructors were telling me (i.e., that perfect pronunciation was central). I believed that I could never accomplish perfection in pronunciation so transferring to another institute was pointless. So, I persisted in my efforts at this institute to meet my more proximal goal. Although I was told that my English was good, I no longer believed it. While many people acknowledged my high level of English proficiency, I was secretly thinking that I was far from my goal and experienced the fear that I might not be able to reach my life’s goal because I had not learned the target language in the target culture.

At this point two things helped me overcome my frustration and maintain a positive attitude. First, my teaching experience boosted my confidence. Teaching methods that I used and communicating with native English-speaking friends gave me chances to understand English better. Constant use of English in class, in front of parents, and colleagues helped me become more comfortable. More importantly, I learned better when I taught because I had to understand the usages of the language.

The second thing was my decision to travel alone to Australia. This trip changed my perceptions about learning a foreign language. I was very surprised by the fact that I didn’t have much trouble traveling by myself for a month. I could speak with other English speakers and made friends with no problem. I started to believe that my English must not be so bad and I didn’t have to produce perfect pronunciation and sentences to be understood. Because I no longer believed that perfection was necessary to communicate, and because I had shown that I could communicate, I now regained control over my own learning. It didn’t matter that I was not perfect. I learned that even native English speakers were not perfect, and moreover, there was more than one “version” of English, so even native English speakers experienced difficulties across countries.

This newfound self-confidence showed me that I could control my learning. I came to believe that I may not be able to be perfect and I may never be accent free but it didn’t matter. I could do what I wanted—communicate with others. That experience—managing with my English—gave me great inspiration and motivation to continue to improve. I discovered that what my teachers had been telling me was not true. I could reach my goal without being perfect.
However, I had a nagging doubt. One month on vacation was one thing but was I really certain I could live and function in English every day in an environment in which little, if anything, was familiar to me? There was only one way to find out. I had to go to an English-speaking country and try to live there for a sustained period of time. I believed this would also enhance my learning by putting me in the target culture experience. This was all that was missing. I believed that I could only overcome the limits of my Korean educational experience by learning in the target culture. I applied for a Ph.D. program in the U.S. and was accepted. I was on my way.

The Natural Learning Environment

My learning experience in the United States was very exciting to me. I was where I thought a foreign language should be learned: the target culture. Everything that I encountered had to be done in English. I had to use English to survive in daily life: going shopping, paying bills, seeing doctors, calling insurance companies, and so on.

My biggest frustration came from the lack of cultural awareness embedded in the language. Colloquial idioms usually have cultural events linked to them. Reading listeners’ gestures or facial expressions was sometimes more important than the spoken words. I realized there was a great deal more to functioning in English than a big vocabulary based on denotative dictionary meanings.

What I did discover was that there were really two English languages here. One was for daily use among friends and acquaintances. The other was a more academic language in my work and study setting. Delivering papers and presentations, giving lectures, teaching, and communicating with American undergraduate students were all exciting. In the beginning, I was frightened that I would not be understood by my students and that they would think I was less intelligent because of the inevitable speaking errors. To my astonishment, no one ever complained about having a hard time understanding me. In fact, we all got along quite well. I stopped focusing on ME and MY problems. At that moment, my English abilities and confidence soared.

I realized that there were many skills I needed to be an effective communicator in English. I discovered that I needed to understand culture and context in a more extensive way. I knew this was a matter of exposure and time. Both were controllable so I believed that, over time, I would acquire greater language skills. In the meantime, I realized that I was doing the one
thing that I had always wanted to do: communicating with people in English in the target culture.

Discussion

My initial motivation to learn English was closely related to the desire to communicate with native English speakers and know about their culture. This motivation set a goal. Because my formal learning environment didn’t help me achieve the goal, I kept looking for other ways to achieve it.

When a learner sets an ultimate goal for learning, the motivation to learn grows and changes. Motivation is not static. That is, making a goal is a commitment to achieving that goal. In other words, explicitly identifying a goal is tantamount to giving oneself an assignment requiring completion. My goal was communicating with and understanding people in English. If achieving that goal is salient, then others may do as I did. They may develop more proximal goals. All of this appears to have been a coping mechanism that kept me motivated but not always directed toward my ultimate goal.

Although Gardner (2001) suggests one must always have a positive attitude toward the learning environment, I did not. After my first English teacher, I couldn’t trust my English teachers. I didn’t like the materials that I had to use. However, I continued to try to study hard because (a) being good in English was valued very highly in school and (b) we learned that obeying authority and fulfilling responsibility were very important in all situations. Instrumentally-oriented motivation took over and helped me not to give up studying. I had never lost interest in learning English, just in studying in the school system. School seemed to take me further away from my primary goal. However, my perceptions about appropriate behaviors in school led me to do what I was supposed to do as a student: study hard. More importantly, the main reason that I kept continuing to study after my formal school learning environment was that I hadn’t yet obtained my language learning goal. Now that school no longer stood in my way, I couldn’t stop just because I didn’t like my language learning environment. Rather than positive attitudes toward the learning situations, positive attitudes toward the achievement of life goals seemed to be a more important reason for working on improving my English ability.

Conclusion

Motivation to learn and to achieve a goal is a key to foreign language learning. In this paper, data showed how integrative motivation shaped
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learning through various stages and learning environments. Motivation is dynamic and flexible and adjusts to one’s goals. Further, motivation may shift from being more integrative to becoming instrumental, depending on a variety of environmental factors.

It is worth noting that instrumental motivation has been shown to have a limited capacity to sustain effort. Once the goal has been attained or it is clear that the goal is unattainable, effort diminishes substantially (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1995). Therefore, building environments that depend solely on instrumental factors will ultimately fail to produce the desired effects.

Similarly, creating perceptions about the causes of learning may be equally critical. In order to create and sustain motivation of any kind, it may be that individuals must believe they can control the outcomes, at least to some extent. Constantly being told that something is impossible or that it is beyond one’s control, could diminish motivation, reduce effort and ultimately, lower performances. This can create a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). Teachers should take care to focus on rewarding students for effort and assuring them that effort will lead to some success. This provides a greater perception of control, and leads to increased motivation, to greater effort, and to better performances. Many research studies have shown that there is a positive relation between the autonomy-orientation of the classroom environment and students’ motivation to learn (deCharms, 1968; Grolnick and Ryan, 1987; Paris and Turner, 1994; Ryan and Grolnick, 1986). Such motivation creates interest, raises self-confidence and self-esteem, and leads to learners who pursue their learning for a lifetime.

When I think about the newspaper article claiming that Koreans have the second lowest level of English proficiency and when I think about my own situation, I would explain it like this. My overriding goal was to be able to use English to communicate with people from the target language cultures. For many Koreans the goal is to get a good job. This may not require them actually to use English but only to obtain a certain test score. Success at English becomes equated with scores on tests and grades in classes. My relative success seems to have resulted from being able to form a goal outside the educational system. Although I adopted at times and in part the educational goals for English as defined by the school, I always kept a somewhat distinct goal. Therefore, my motivation was sustainable because it was not based entirely on the rewards mediated by others. So, this gave me a greater perception of control over my learning leading to increased effort and greater performance.
Finally, it should be noted that we need more work defining and measuring effort. Effort is not just working towards some end. Koreans spend hundreds of hours a month looking at books, studying in the library, and listening to English language broadcasts. Yet, there remains a question as to whether this is really effort. To some extent, researchers need to focus on the rational nature of the effort. Can effort be measured simply by the amount of time spent, or by diligence? If Koreans offer any clue, the answer would be no.

This study supports the findings that motivation is central to language learning. The motivation must ultimately be self-regulated in order to be sustainable over time. Perceptions about the cause and controllability of outcomes are also central. Learners must believe they have the ability to affect their outcomes. This means that teachers should create and foster such perceptions among students. Finally, it is clear that goal setting, the importance of the goals, and perceived causes of success and failure all affect motivation, behavior, and goal achievement.

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