

## **Supervisors' views of the generic difficulties in thesis/dissertation writing of Chinese EFL research students**

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The present study was a part of a larger investigation which was chiefly conducted in 2010 in one leading mainland Chinese university of foreign studies. It explores the generic difficulties in thesis/dissertation writing perceived by the graduate supervisors of their research students in their advanced academic literacy process. The data was chiefly based on in-depth interviews. The results reveal that the thesis/dissertation writing generic difficulties demonstrated by the research students related to narrative literature review and lack of conceptual framework. The possible causes were examined. The results imply that Chinese EFL graduate students rely academically heavily on their supervisors in writing a thesis/dissertation regardless of how they perform on the graduate entrance examination. Pedagogical implications are offered.

**Key Words:** supervisors' views; generic difficulties; thesis/dissertation writing; mainland Chinese EFL research students; EAP

### **Introduction**

A thesis/dissertation is a research-process genre with “demanding intellectual and rhetorical tasks” that is a “formidable task... not only because of the daunting size of the document but also because of the high standard to which the thesis/dissertation is held” (Dong, 1998, p. 369). The challenge is magnified when writing in a foreign language. In this paper, the terms thesis and dissertation are used to describe doctoral writing and masters writing respectively. More space will be devoted to the former.

In recent years there has been increasing research interest in whether, and the extent to which L2 students writing a thesis in English experience difficulties in understanding and meeting the requirements of the genre (Bitchener & Baskurkmen, 2006). Supervisors report student difficulties in structuring a consistent and balanced argument in extended texts, particularly in organising appropriate content for specific chapters (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995, 1997; Dong, 1998; Jenkins, K., & Weiland, 1993; Parry, 1998; Thompson, 1999). This may arise from insufficient knowledge of the genre (Paltridge, 2002; Swales, 2004). Supervisors also report student difficulties in positioning arguments in relation to those of the literature. This may be caused by a failure to use appropriate modal verbs when making claims about the findings of their research (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995, 1997; Parry, 1998; Thompson, 1999). However, it may also stem from students' different conceptualization of the new academic community to that of their supervisors or uncertainty about their target audience and expectations (Casanave, 1992, 1995, 2002; Fox, 1994; Gale, 1994; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Shen, 1989). Chinese postgraduate students are found to have trouble in developing arguments and counter-arguments, using evidence to support arguments and critically evaluating theories, models and methodologies, and this is probably caused by

their traditional Chinese culture in which “they have been taught to respect and not question the ideas and opinions of their academic superiors” (Cadman, 1997; Dong, 1998; Frost, 1999; Knight, 1999; O’Connell & L., 2001; Smith, 1999). Students may not develop explicit knowledge of the functions, content and organization of the thesis genre for the following reasons: supervisors do not verbalise their tacit knowledge of the characteristics of thesis genre (Lilis, 2001; Parry, 1998; Prior, 1994); students fail to apply skills learned in the research methods course into thesis writing; students fail to notice the characteristic features of different sections of the writing; and limited details are provided about specific sections of a thesis in guides and handbooks on thesis writing (Basturkmen, 2009; Paltridge, 2002).

Only recently has an increasing but limited attention been paid to the lexical, syntactical and discursal difficulties postgraduate students undergo in their thesis writing in the mainland Chinese academic community (see, for example, Jia & Qiao, 2014; Lei, 2012; X. K. Li, 2012; Z. Li, 2013, 2014; Qiao, 2013; X. Zhang, 2013). Compared with the existing research into thesis writing in the Anglophone world, the genre of the Chinese EFL academic community has been under-explored. In addition, the research article is “the key genre both quantitatively and qualitatively” (Swales, 1990, p. 177), while the thesis/dissertation “certainly remains little discussed” (Swales, 2004, p. 102). Against this background, this paper will report supervisors’ perspectives of the generic difficulties in writing a literature review and conceptual framework experienced by Chinese EFL research students. The data is derived from in-depth interviews. The study will also probe the possible causes and propose relevant pedagogical suggestions, in an attempt to inform the teaching and support of such students within the framework of instruction in English for academic purposes.

### **Research on generic difficulties in thesis writing**

The thesis is a significant form of English for academic purposes (EAP). There is considerable linguistic research of thesis writing difficulties faced by L2 postgraduate students. Since the 1980s the emphasis of EAP research has moved to genre analysis (X. K. Li, 2012), which has been “the most productive research approach to thesis and dissertation writing to date” (Thompson, 2013, p. 287). Prior studies demonstrate that generic challenges encountered by students are even more problematic than linguistic obstacles.

### ***Features at the vocabulary, sentence and discourse levels***

Chinese EFL empirical studies indicate that research students tend to encounter difficulties in writing that can be grouped as lexical, syntactical and discursal. Lexical difficulties are identified in precision of word choice and expressions (X. K. Li, 2012; X. Zhang, 2013); choice of proper words and expressions, limited vocabulary, lack of diversity in choice of words and expressions (X. Zhang, 2013); misuse of articles and prepositions (Jia & Qiao, 2014; Z. Li, 2013, 2014; Qiao, 2013); overall frequency, underuse, overuse and misuse of linking adverbials (Lei, 2012); infrequently using negations, pronouns (first person in particular) to express author’s stance and position (X. K. Li, 2012); and substantial use, less use, overuse and misuse of lexical bundles (H. Y. Zhang, 2014). Syntactical difficulties can be found on the misuse of sentence fragments, run-on sentences, sentence patterns and paraphrasing (Jia & Qiao, 2014; Z. Li, 2013, 2014; Qiao, 2013; X. Zhang, 2013), and sentence variety in thesis writing (X. K. Li, 2012). Difficulties in discourse concern a mixture of discourse categories,

discourse inconsistency, discourse ambiguities, discourse over-generalizations, and subject shifting in discourse (Wang, 2004).

Possible causes of lexical and syntactical problems include incomplete knowledge of certain grammatical items, casual attitude towards uncertainties, negative thinking patterns transfer from Chinese, carelessness in writing and reviewing, and lack of genre knowledge (Jia & Qiao, 2014; Z. Li, 2013, 2014). These linguistic difficulties are meta-discourse ones in writing, that is, about the text rather than the content (Swales, 1990). The studies are mainly corpus-based, with a small number of perceptual studies (X. Zhang, 2013).

### ***Generic features and attributing factors***

Besides the difficulties at the linguistic level in thesis writing, other problems specifically relating to the thesis genre of research students have been acknowledged in various studies in terms of: introduction, literature review, research methods and discussion.

#### *The introduction*

Xu, Guo and Xu's study (2007) investigates the current situation of the Introduction in English majors' MA theses in six universities or colleges in north China based on Swales' CARS genre-analysis model (1990). The study reveals that in the 80 random samples covering such fields as linguistics, literature and translation, the probability value ( $p=0.425$ ) of the qualified samples is somewhat low and there are significant differences in the relative frequency of the obligatory steps of writing the Introduction genre. The problems result from some students' insufficient consciousness of the genre structure, social functions and cognitive schema of academic papers, hence their difficulty in achieving the communicative purpose of their academic writing. This difficulty is also observed by Samraj (2008), who found that not all the L2 dissertation introductions in her sample complied with Swales' CARS model. X. K. Li's research (2012) also argues that much of the introduction in Chinese thesis writing focuses on the real world instead of identifying a niche or gap in the territory.

#### *The literature review*

The problems pertaining to this section largely concentrate on argument support, theoretical framework, move development, and author identity. As Thompson's inquiry (2009) shows, L1 students problems lie with writing about findings and theories, as well as referring to previous research. X. K. Li (2012) compared the generic features of MA theses in linguistics by Chinese students and native speakers of English. The results display the following problems with Chinese students in writing English theses: (1) the construction of a theoretical framework which is merely the elaboration of the literature review; (2) failing to create a research space or reinforce the research space established because of a lack, or ineffective development of important moves; (3) tending to favour elite authors or journals. Therefore, Chinese students have trouble constructing identity as an author which is caused by a lack of academic training and weak academic foundations which arise from such factors as inadequate policy environment, curriculum design, ineffective student-faculty interaction and lack of students' autonomy (X. K. Li, 2012).

X. Zhang's interview study (2013) is concerned with difficulties in the literature reviews of Chinese EFL advanced learners. Dealing with literature is regarded as one of

the most challenging tasks, including searching out related literature, and systematizing and classifying literature in a coherent and logical way. Factors leading to difficulties can be personal or external (X. Zhang, 2013). The personal difficulties include poor English proficiency and academic capacity and inadequate experience in reading and writing. External difficulties include limited access to academic resources, inappropriate schedules and ineffective curricula.

#### *Writing about research methods*

EFL advanced learners difficulties with writing about research methods concern data collection and analysis (X. Zhang, 2013). Those who focus on empirical research seem to have higher levels of difficulties in data collection and data analysis which comprise an essential part of their dissertation. Suitability of the research method and validity of the data collected are believed to be challenging to graduate students.

#### *Writing discussion sections*

A supervisor-student-paired study reveals the following results about L2 research students' ability to write a discussion: (1) students' understanding of the function of the discussion section is more circumscribed than that of their supervisors; (2) supervisors and students share restricted understanding about the nature and cause of the students' difficulty; and (3) students typically ascribe their difficulties to problems with proficiency whereas three out of the four supervisors believe the problems are not related to L2 proficiency (Bitchener & Baskurkmen, 2006). Other research found discussion sections by EFL academic writers to be somewhat subjective and unconvincing (X. K. Li, 2012) and this may be, at least in part, related to the perception among Chinese EFL students of the discussion as the most difficult part (X. Zhang, 2013).

#### ***Gap in the literature***

It is clear from the literature reviewed above that Chinese EFL research students experience a number of linguistic and generic difficulties in writing a thesis in English. However, it must be acknowledged that the quantity of literature relating directly to Chinese EFL academic writers is limited and that those studies are mostly textual and statistical, with a little qualitative data (X. Zhang, 2013) and none view the problem from the perspective of supervisors.

The study reported here attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What frequent generic difficulties do EFL research students encounter in their thesis writing?
2. What are the possible causes of the frequent generic difficulties?

#### **Methods**

The current study took place in a nationally renowned university of foreign studies located in one of the capital cities of south China. Twelve PhD supervisors and one MA supervisor participated in a one-on-one interview at least once, of whom 11 were male and two were female professors, and of whom three had recently retired when the interviews took place. Ten supervisors' interviews were conducted in their office, one supervisor' interview was done in a lecture room and two supervisors' interviews took

place at home. The total length of interview time amounted to more than 22 hours and the transcripts of Chinese text amounted to 235,220 Chinese words. This paper reports only one part of the overall investigation.

The instrument used in this research for all supervisor informants included an interview guide, an informed consent form and a copy of the interview questions. All were in Chinese. In-depth interviews began in June 2010 and lasted until December 2010. Most of the interviewees were interviewed only once, although a few were interviewed three times. All interviews were followed up by triangulations in the form of occasional emails between 2011 and 2014. Data was analysed in three steps: data transcription, coding and presentation of results. In this paper data sources are indicated using a three-digit code, for example, #210 meaning the interview data of supervisor informant No.10. Letters appended to the codes, e.g. A, B, C, identify particular interviews, that is, the first, second or third. Free nodes were raised into tree nodes driven by the Discourse System (DS) (see Scollon & Scollon, 2000 for a fuller description). Then tree nodes were integrated into categories. The data was then integrated and re-categorized based on the principles of grounded theory (as defined by Charmaz, 2000). Emerging and recurring patterns and abstract themes resulted from data analysis. Major categories were decided after their theme was repeated by over five informants. Finally, the Chinese text was then translated into English in verbatim and presented in the text by following the conventions summarized by (Richards, 2003, pp. 173-174). For more details of the methods used, see Peng (2016). The actual words, phrases and pauses were transcribed, but not the phonological features.

## **Results**

The perceptions supervisors have towards the thesis writings of their EFL graduate students are examined below and an overall dissatisfaction with academically dependent students becomes clear. It must be said that supervisors' perceptions of the postgraduate writing were mostly related to the doctoral students rather than their master students. It must also be stressed that while there is a preponderance of excerpts from the data of supervisors #210 and #212 they were selected only because they represent the informants' views most succinctly but a number of other interview informants shared the same views.

### **Excerpt 1: #210**

We have some difficult students here, that is to say, their examinations results are satisfactory when they attend the entrance examinations. After they are admitted, they have no problem of reading, but they lack personal research competence, which is shown in preparing research proposals. This happens, some cannot write out proposals, though they have done some reading, they are not good at thinking, they cannot write out proposals. Their supervisors have to try every possible means finding topics and guiding them to write out proposals.

Supervisors found that their supervisees had no idea how to do research, though they were already MA or PhD students accepted with high marks in the entrance examination. There was an absence of academic socialization in their supervision process, which was displayed by an inability to review literature critically and failure to construct their own theoretical framework for their research.

### ***Narrative literature review / evaluative literature review***

The first big problem expressed by supervisors was their supervisees' poor ability of integrating and generalizing the existing literature. As supervisor 10 explained:

Excerpt 2: #210

If they are asked to read chapter 2, 3, 4, and write a summary, then they can do it very well, very well, summary. But if I say to them, read these three books, after reading, tell me what you think, they basically can't do it. They don't know how to do it, unless I give them very explicit instructions: for this book, they are required to write a book report for me, which is divided into how many parts, in part one, what is told, in part two... they can do this, this they can do, and do it well, but if I ask them their specific opinions, no, they don't have. So, I think this is critical.

Supervisor 12 substantiated this point by giving an example:

Excerpt 3: #212

One student was already an associate professor when he came, and he had more than ten years of English teaching experience. I gave him tens of articles in our research field and asked him to read. The first time, I gave him a topic and asked him to write an article based on the given literature in two weeks' time. After a few days, he complained to me, the articles assigned were not enough, the words were too small, he couldn't recognize, a little could be written with one article, his time was short and near, he did not have enough time to finish, he still had classes. In a word, he sent me emails from time to time, and then procrastinated. I said, you persisted, go on. Later I found, he was indeed lack of many things. The second time, I gave him some chapters or articles, asked him to give a topic for himself to write, and he could not continue.

In supervisor 10's view, the ability to integrate the existing literature and to identify problems was most needed for students' whole lifetime. The key was to develop abilities for solving unknown things, abilities such as: observation, integration, generalization, and insights of inter-relatedness of things. It was important for them to identify problems based on extensive reading, and to integrate and summarize major research points of predecessors' work. The ability of summarizing was absent in PhD students, as demonstrated in the following example:

Excerpt 4: #210

their literature review, is often a shopping list, person A says this, person B says that, if you ask them what regularities can be seen from these, they are very weak in this regard, that is to say, they are not good at generalizing from the existing research, which is a big concern to me.

Supervisor 3 supported this point by saying that students' literature review was separated from their own research. The core of the problem was a lack of a critical view, which led to poor design of research questions. Their literature review was general, as it did not explicitly state the relation between it and their own research. He explained:

Excerpt 5: #203B

First of all, LR should be connected with their own topic which cannot be like two pieces of cake cut lying separately there. Many LR I have read seemed smooth, but what questions in LR led to their present study? Initially the role of this part is to discuss how their questions have come from, how they come from, they should raise their questions starting from the previous literature, and there should be a close connection. Now, sometimes they are separated.

As a consequence, there were two different kinds of styles in the literature review and the report of their own research within dissertations, which indicated a gap between what could be written and what could be expressed, as he added:

Excerpt 6: #210

They often copy the original texts. In their dissertations, there are two kinds of style: the part of literature review is written smoothly, because some parts are borrowed; when it comes to their own things, we do empirical studies, when he writes his own research, such as participants, instruments, findings, discussions, there are many mistakes, many mistakes.

Thus, supervisees were regarded as unable to generate evaluative literature reviews as expected by their supervisors. They could only copy or narrate what was written without giving comments on what they had read.

### ***No conceptual framework / conceptual framework***

A further problem, which is closely connected to doing literature review uncritically and which has been criticized and has remained essentially unchanged, was supervisees' inability to construct their own conceptual framework in their research proposals as a result of their weak ability to generalize the literature. According to supervisor 10:

Excerpt 7: #210

They were not good at generalizing predecessors' findings themselves. They were not good at establishing their own theoretical framework, and they always wanted the existing ones, no matter whether the theory was suitable or not...It has been still so until now, it has been still so until now, all the doctoral students in their stage of research proposal defence are criticized on this point, you can go and see, and it hasn't changed fundamentally for more than ten years...conceptually unclear. They don't know how to integrate and generalize the related things from literature and construct their own conceptual framework.

In consequence, students were unable to address their research questions by reason of unclear or no conceptual framework which was regarded as most desired in their PhD academic socialization. As supervisor 10 aptly put it:

Excerpt 8: #210

Your [research] results are secondary, and your findings are secondary. It is the ability to find problems, integrate existing literature and develop your own framework that counts for your whole lifetime, for a whole lifetime.

According to him, PhD study was only once in one's lifetime, but there were many new problems awaiting afterwards. Successful students would, after graduation, be approached by others as academic authorities but without the appropriate skills they would be unable to solve the new problems.

### ***Possible causes for the generic difficulties***

It is concluded from the above that the EFL graduate students are perceived to have trouble in writing an evaluative literature review and establishing a feasible conceptual framework in writing their thesis. To understand these generic difficulties the reasons for them need exploring.

Excerpt 9: #203A

The proficiency level of doctoral students did fall behind instead of making progress from the earliest admission to the present expansion. Just say one sentence that does not sound good: one generation is inferior to another generation. This is not an insult, and this is the case.

Supervisors were dissatisfied with supervisees' weakness in English writing abilities. First, they were weak in language foundation due to the expansion of

enrolment in undergraduates and graduate students since 1999 in China. For instance, there were many grammatical mistakes or nonstandard language phenomena in their writing, such as the wrong use of definite and indefinite articles or wrong spelling, which made it very hard for the supervisors to make revisions of their long theses. “It felt like correcting thesis rather than reading thesis. We had to spend much time correcting their mistakes instead of reading their dissertations,” one senior supervisor complained. After the expansion of research student places, more undergraduates were admitted as graduate students while teachers were not increased proportionately. Therefore, teachers did not want to correct students’ writing assignments because bigger classes meant a heavier workload. Then foreign teachers were recruited, so students were treated as foreigners, their writing was considered acceptable as long as it was comprehensible according to English native speakers’ standards, which were different from those of Chinese teachers. Only a few occasions for writing corrections were available during one semester. Therefore, students’ opportunities for writing and language improvement were meagre. Students’ writing abilities deteriorated as a result of less support and teachers’ perfunctory attitudes towards grading tasks.

Excerpt 10: #203B

When I was an undergraduate, there were more than 20 students in my class. We wrote [compositions] every other week. Teachers made corrections in between and made comments on them the third week. So, for a whole semester, we could write 7 or 8 compositions. But now, there are no opportunities.

Graduate students could not be excluded. Even though they were admitted as doctoral students, their language problems remained to be resolved in the doctoral stage. Supervisor 12 illustrated it with examples:

Excerpt 11: #212

The language proficiency level is different now. When I was a MA student, it was different from the current MA students. We were “*bai li tiao yi*” (selected as one in a hundred students). When I was a MA student [in U/C], there were 18 students in total, after graduation, only nine stayed, the other half were eliminated. That is to say, your strength and creativity should be relatively strong. So, supervisors were effort-saving: they had no more to do except giving a framework.

Supervisor 3 emphasized that it was the expansion that led to the fall of quality, which in turn caused supervisees’ difficulties in study, even though there were good and poor PhD students. “The unsolved elementary problems were left to advanced levels, but how to solve them? That is like correcting a thesis, so thick a book, what to do with it?” Sometimes, students’ writing was so pitiful that supervisors had to take over the responsibility of bringing it to an acceptable level. Supervisor 10 gave an example:

Excerpt 12: #210

How poor his English writing was! I criticized him severely...How many mistakes there were in his dissertation! I made corrections, and I helped make corrections for a few chapters from the beginning to the end. I wrote every word for him, which made me very angry, namely word-by-word correction! That dissertation was hard to read on! Language was poor, and it also had flaws everywhere. Later, later, he felt embarrassed himself. I wrote, wrote, he was very touched in the end..



Supervisor 12 echoed in this regard, he made corrections not only for one student, but for a group of students:

Excerpt 13: #212

I made corrections for his dissertation, he always did not know how to revise...In the end, I had to say all, how to write introduction, literature review, idea expressions, no choice, but in fact I wrote them out. Other people said this was confining their thinking, but, but, he didn't actually have such a thinking. These years, thesis of our research students have been looking standard, all I corrected, I corrected tens of our research students' thesis here, and I did almost all. They were approved not only by their supervisors but also by me, who found out their problems. So, the quality of our thesis has been relatively high these years, which has something to do with my corrections.

So he concluded that the real role played by supervisors was different from the assumed role:

Excerpt 14: #212

The real role played by the supervisors is different from the assumed role, which acts only as a guide and facilitator. I will correct everything, sometimes, I corrected an article, almost every sentence I had to correct, full of red ink. I corrected line by line, very densely. In fact, supervisor should not have done so, this was not done right, but the writing was such that it could not be read without correction. So there is a distance between ideal and reality.

Worst of all, some supervisees were able to write anything resembling a dissertation to the extent that supervisors were unable to do anything with it. One senior supervisor grumbled:

Excerpt 15: #208A

If he is a sweet melon, you won't worry, if he is bitter gourd, you will be anxious about him ... What I'm anxious about is those who cannot write out dissertations in any way ... some could not produce a dissertation-like stuff, some could not write out in their eighth or ninth year. Then I told them not to continue their study [PhD], but they insisted to stay, what could I do?

## **Discussion**

The findings imply that supervisors are extremely frustrated with their research students' poor use of the generic characteristics of thesis writing despite being admitted with satisfactory entrance examination performance. They are also frustrated with language proficiency mistakes. Students start to have trouble in research writing even from the very beginning of the research process, such as topic selection and research proposal preparation, not to mention the subsequent more complicated steps like literature review and conceptual framework.

Firstly, they consider students lack the ability to evaluate literature critically. They are unable to integrate, generalize and systematize the existing literature of several sources well, which is regarded as a basic research skill. They are capable of reading as well as writing individual chapter summaries or book reports, but they lack opinions on what they have read. When reviewing sources, all they can do is to describe or copy the original text directly from the literature. Thus, their review is a narrative rather than evaluative, although it tends to read more smoothly than their own problematic writing. The findings reveal that students lack critical thinking skills. To engage successfully in the advanced academic literacy process there is a need to improve their research competence, including abilities of comprehension, problem-finding, problem-solving, and generalizing. Secondly, they are unable to construct their own conceptual

framework based on a wide range of existing literature by raising their own questions. They fail to see the interrelatedness between the previous research and their own research and thus fail to establish their conceptual framework. They are also not conceptually clear about how to do research. In the end, their supervisors have to take up the responsibility to bring the thesis up to the required standard. And this is for not only one student but for many.

To sum up, students are believed to rely academically heavily on their supervisors in terms of literature review and conceptual framework due to their weak English writing foundation and research competence regardless of their strength in doing entrance examinations well. This suggests a deficiency in the advanced academic literacy process in graduate education, or possibly, by extension, in the secondary education in China.

In light of these findings, pedagogical implications are offered to supervisors. Firstly, it is recommended that learners' changing needs be recognized for their overall academic writing competence, reviewing literature and conceptualizing framework in particular, so that tailor-made learning objectives can be established accordingly in curriculum design, textbook selection and teaching materials. Secondly, supervisors are recommended to adopt a genre-based teaching approach in their EAP classes, which currently is inadequately accommodated in the Chinese knowledge-based academic writing classroom. Thirdly, supervisors are recommended to offer more academic writing opportunities to advanced learners so that there is ample practice available for them to improve their writing competence. Finally, intensive and systematic training in English for academic purposes should be augmented to improve students' research and writing competence, such as developing a dissertation writing support program for EFL graduate research students (see, for example, Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998) which can provide EAP writing support prior to commencing as well as later in the process (Thompson, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this preliminary study has gained in-depth contextual knowledge of the common generic difficulties in thesis writing of Chinese EFL research students from the perspective of supervisors. This could help teachers design effective curricula and devise appropriate pedagogy to cater for EAP writing needs of their students. There is an increasing awareness of the need to clarify the construct of genre difficulties, which can be operationalized from both skills and concepts perspectives. Specific difficulties at the level of genre need to be categorized on the basis of its different components, communicative functions, argument support and move development by using contextual analysis. Future investigations might consider limiting their focus to particular sections, or even sub-sections, of the thesis for deeper insights.

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