

## NOVICE EFL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN A MENTORING PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY IN THE MEKONG DELTA

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the experiences of English as a foreign language (EFL) novice teachers (NTs) participating in a mentoring program in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. A mixed-methods approach was employed, with quantitative data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 30 novice teachers, and qualitative insights gathered from semi-structured interviews with eight participants. The findings revealed high levels of satisfaction among the novice teachers regarding skill development, observational learning, and supportive feedback mechanisms. However, challenges such as communication barriers and time constraints were also identified. The study highlights the need for educational institutions to implement flexible program timeframes that are responsive to the diverse learning and developmental paces of novice teachers.

**Keywords:** novice teachers, mentoring program, professional development, teachers' retention, Mekong Delta.

### 1. Introduction

The transition from university training to the workforce represents a pivotal and often challenging phase for new graduates, particularly for novice teachers (hereafter called NTs). This period is frequently characterized by an 'inevitable shock' [1], stemming from the disparity between theoretical educational teachings and the practical expectations of the workplace. NTs commonly face a range of challenges, including inadequate subject knowledge, insufficient teaching techniques, heightened stress, and diminished self-efficacy [2]. Such challenges can significantly contribute to high attrition rates, with many beginning teachers losing their sense of purpose within their first year in the profession [3], [4]. Once obtaining a position in the field, there is a need for mentoring programs for newly-qualified teachers. Mentoring programs aim to boost beginning teachers' confidence, strengthen their instructional practices, offer essential professional support to promote retention, and enhance overall job satisfaction [3]. Schools with mentoring programs have lower attrition rates for NTs [5].

While mentoring has been recognized as a vital strategy for supporting NTs in Western contexts, its implementation and effectiveness within the Vietnamese educational landscape remain underexplored. The unique cultural and educational dynamics of Vietnam necessitate a tailored approach to mentoring that addresses the specific needs of NTs as they transition from pre-service to in-service roles. This research study aims to fill this gap in the literature by investigating the experiences of NTs participating in mentoring programs. The primary objective of this study is to explore novice EFL teachers' experiences in a mentoring program implemented

in the Mekong Delta region through the lens of SCT as well as their level of satisfaction with the program. The study addresses two research questions:

1. *To what extent are novice EFL teachers satisfied with the mentoring program?*
2. *What are the experiences of novice EFL teachers involved in the mentoring program?*

## **2. Content**

### **2.1. Literature review**

#### **2.1.1. Novice Teachers**

Novice teachers are individuals who are at the outset of their teaching careers. They are also known as new teachers, newly qualified teachers, neophytes, or early-career teachers [6]. One of the most important stages of teacher development is the transition from pre-service to in-service teaching. These early years present numerous challenges, including classroom management, lesson planning, and building rapport with students and colleagues. Research suggests that the first three to five years of teaching are critical for developing teaching effectiveness and determining long-term career trajectories [4].

#### **2.1.2. Mentoring**

The understanding of mentoring in education has evolved significantly over the past several decades, shifting from informal guidance relationships to more structured PD mechanisms. Attempts to define mentoring have led to various perspectives, highlighting its multifaceted nature [7]. Scholars have proposed diverse definitions, reflecting the complex role mentoring plays across different fields. Historically, mentoring was viewed as a hierarchical relationship in which experienced mentors transferred expertise to less experienced mentees [8]. Contemporary perspectives, however, emphasize a more reciprocal relationship, focusing on mutual learning [9]. In the context of English language teaching, mentoring is recognized as a socially embedded practice that operates on both interpersonal and individual levels [10]. Effective mentoring promotes professional growth, job satisfaction, and retention among NTs [11]. In this study, mentoring is viewed as an evolving and interactive process in which experienced teachers (the mentors) support NTs (the mentees) on their PD. This relationship is characterized by meaningful exchanges, where the mentee receives guidance, support, and knowledge, helping them navigate their professional journey effectively.

#### **2.1.3. Social Cognitive Theory**

The main theoretical framework guiding this study is the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) proposed by Bandura in 1986 [12]. This framework helps explain learning in a social context through dynamic and reciprocal interactions among the individual, environment, and behavior. In the context of mentoring programs, especially for NTs, SCT's principles offer valuable insights. The central concept of reciprocal determinism demonstrates the interplay between the NTs' prior experiences and knowledge, the mentoring environment, and their teaching behaviors. This interaction fosters a conducive environment for professional growth and learning. The concept of behavioral capability is critical here, as it pertains to the NTs' ability to perform teaching tasks effectively. Additionally, observational learning is vividly demonstrated in mentoring relationships. NTs learn by observing their mentors, adopting effective teaching strategies and classroom management techniques demonstrated by more experienced teachers. The replication of these behaviors, observed in successful demonstrations, is facilitated through this modeling process. Reinforcements, both internal and external, significantly influence the mentoring relationship. Positive feedback from mentors and the successful application of new techniques act as powerful reinforcers, encouraging NTs to continuously improve and stay engaged in the mentoring process. Positive experiences and outcomes in the mentoring program can heighten their commitment to ongoing PD.

#### **2.1.4. Previous Studies**

Mentoring in EFL education has attracted growing scholarly attention internationally and within Vietnam, reflecting its recognized importance in supporting NTs' PD. Existing empirical research consistently indicates that mentoring facilitates NTs' transition into teaching by enhancing their confidence, pedagogical competence, and professional identity formation. For example, Hobson's systematic review of international studies highlights mentoring's positive impact on teacher retention and long-term professional growth [13]. Subsequent studies have reinforced that mentoring is the most effective when it is collaborative, reflective, and responsive to contextual realities [14].

Within the Vietnamese context, however, the relevant literature remains comparatively limited and fragmented. Nguyen's investigation into mentoring in higher education settings revealed inconsistencies in implementation and a lack of structured guidance for NTs, despite evidence that informal mentoring can reduce anxiety and foster confidence [15]. Her later work proposes context-sensitive mentoring models that align with Vietnam's institutional and socio-cultural realities, emphasizing the role of mentoring in shaping teachers' professional identity and agency.

Despite these contributions, existing research predominantly focuses on mentoring in public universities and teacher education programs, with little attention to private English language centers. These institutions, especially in semi-urban and rural areas such as the Mekong Delta, operate under distinct organizational structures and pedagogical conditions that may influence how mentoring is enacted and experienced. This gap highlights the need for context-specific research that critically examines how mentoring functions within private EFL centers, thereby extending theoretical and practical understanding of teacher mentoring in diverse educational settings.

## **2.2. Research Methodology**

### **2.2.1. Research design**

This study employs an explanatory mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively explore the experiences of NTs participating in a mentoring program in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam.

### **2.2.2. Participants**

Participants were NTs employed at a private English language center in the Mekong Delta region, which offers a structured annual mentoring program. 30 teachers volunteered for the study, including 10 males (33%) and 20 females (67%). All were within their first three years of teaching and had completed the mentoring program within the past two years, ensuring that their experiences were recent and relevant.

The mentoring program includes three stages: theory acquisition; observation and co-teaching; teaching demonstration and evaluation. During the co-teaching stage, each new teacher was paired with an experienced mentor who co-taught with them for 8 weeks before they proceeded to the final demonstration and evaluation.

### **2.2.3. Research instruments**

This study employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments to gather data on the participants' experiences with the mentoring program.

#### ***Questionnaire***

A questionnaire was developed based on SCT [12] to assess the overall satisfaction levels of NTs with the mentoring program. The questionnaire consisted of 52 items, measuring 06 dimensions of the mentoring experience, specifically NTs' satisfaction with: (1) collaborative interactions, (2) skill development opportunities, (3) learning through observation, (4) supportive

feedback mechanisms, (5) expected program outcomes and teaching performance, and (6) professional confidence building in the mentoring program. The questionnaire was presented in both English and Vietnamese to ensure clarity.

### ***Semi-structured interview***

A semi-structured interview protocol consisting of ten questions was developed to explain the quantitative findings in the second phase of this explanatory sequential design. The questions were constructed by mapping each item to the six dimensions measured in the questionnaire: collaborative interactions, skill development opportunities, learning through observation, supportive feedback mechanisms, expected teaching outcomes, and professional confidence building. These dimensions were informed by SCT, ensuring conceptual alignment between the quantitative constructs and the qualitative inquiry. To establish content validity, the protocol was reviewed by two qualitative research specialists, who evaluated its coherence with the SCT framework and its suitability for eliciting explanations of survey results. A pilot interview was conducted with one novice teacher to assess the clarity, relevance, and sequencing of the interview questions. The pilot test confirmed that the overall structure of the protocol was appropriate; however, minor revisions were made to improve clarity and alignment with the quantitative constructs. Specifically, two questions were reworded for greater precision, and probing prompts were added to better capture participants' experiences related to observation and feedback. No substantial changes were required, and the refined protocol was subsequently used for the full data collection.

### **2.2.3. Data collection procedure**

The data collection process consisted of three phases: piloting the questionnaire, administering the official questionnaire, and conducting interviews. The quantitative phase consisted of two stages: piloting and administering the questionnaire.

To ensure the suitability and content validity of the questionnaire, its content was established through a review by two subject-matter experts (SMEs) in the field of teacher education. Following this review, a pilot test was conducted with five novice teachers (NTs) to evaluate the questionnaire's content and format from the participant perspective. The primary aims were to ensure item clarity, eliminate ambiguous wording, and confirm the feasibility of the time required for completion.

In the final phase, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 8 randomly selected participants. Five NTs were interviewed face-to-face, and three NTs were interviewed via the Google Meet platform. To support the NTs, the language used in the interviews was Vietnamese. Data was collected through notetaking and recording. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data, which involved identifying recurring themes across the interview transcripts.

## **2.3. Results and discussion**

### **2.3.1. Results from the questionnaire**

#### ***Novice Teachers' Satisfaction with the Mentoring Program***

Overall, the results from the descriptive statistics of the data collected from the questionnaire indicate that the surveyed NTs had a high level of satisfaction with the mentoring program ( $M = 4.32$ ). Specifically, the NTs expressed strong satisfaction with the mentoring program regarding positive feedback from mentors and the successful application of new techniques, which acted as powerful reinforcers ( $M = 4.45$ ). This is followed by satisfaction with NTs' self-efficacy ( $M = 4.38$ ), knowledge and skill development through observational learning ( $M = 4.33$ ), and the NTs' ability to perform teaching tasks effectively ( $M = 4.32$ ). Additionally, NTs expressed positive attitudes toward the anticipated positive experiences ( $M = 4.24$ ), followed by the fostering of a conducive environment for professional growth and learning ( $M = 4.21$ ).

**Table 1. General result of novice EFL teachers' satisfaction with the mentoring program**

<b>Clusters</b>	<b>Mean scores</b>
Novice teachers' satisfaction with collaborative interactions	4.21
Novice teachers' satisfaction with skill development opportunities	4.32
Novice teachers' satisfaction with learning through observation	4.33
Novice teachers' satisfaction with supportive feedback mechanisms	4.45
Novice teachers' satisfaction with expected program outcomes and teaching performance	4.24
Novice teachers' satisfaction with professional confidence building	4.38
<b>Overall</b>	<b>4.32</b>

***Novice Teachers' Satisfaction with Collaborative Interactions***

The results indicate a high level of satisfaction among the participating NTs with respect to the reciprocal interplay between personal factors and the teaching environment, aligning with Bandura's principle of reciprocal determinism. Strong agreement on criteria related to interactive learning and individual-environment connections suggests that these NTs perceived the mentoring program as cultivating a dynamic and mutually supportive learning context.

The high mean scores for collaborative mentoring relationships (M = 4.50) and cooperative exchanges that reshape instructional perspectives (M = 4.50) further illustrate mechanisms of observational learning and social modeling, through which mentees internalize professional behaviors and pedagogical strategies. Likewise, positive responses regarding experimentation with new instructional techniques (M = 4.40) and feedback-seeking behaviors (M = 4.40) reflect increased self-efficacy, an essential construct in SCT, as mentor support helped build the NTs' confidence in applying new practices.

However, the moderate score reported for collaboration difficulties (M = 3.50) indicates that limited teaching experience may have hindered some NTs from fully translating modeled strategies into autonomous practice. This underscores the importance of sustained scaffolding to strengthen their sense of agency and professional competence.

***Novice Teachers' Satisfaction with Skill Development Opportunities***

The findings reveal that these NTs reported a high level of satisfaction with the skill development opportunities offered through the mentoring program. This strong positive reception is consistent with recent studies emphasizing the critical role of structured mentoring in orienting new teachers, developing their skills and abilities, and boosting job satisfaction and retention among early-career educators [16], [17]. They expressed strong confidence in core teaching competencies, particularly in managing classrooms to promote student engagement (M = 4.80) and planning lessons that meet students' needs (M = 4.70). From the perspective of SCT, these results indicate that the mentees strengthened their self-efficacy through observational learning and mastery experiences gained from mentor modeling and guided practice. Their proficiency in implementing diverse instructional strategies (M = 4.60) and delivering meaningful feedback (M = 4.50) demonstrated the interaction between personal capability, behavior, and environmental support described in Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism. However, slightly lower mean scores for handling student difficulties (M = 4.30) suggested that some mentees still required targeted mentor guidance to confidently apply learned strategies in complex classroom situations, highlighting the ongoing process of efficacy development.

***Novice Teachers' Satisfaction with Learning through Observation***

The results indicate that the NTs gained a very high level of satisfaction with the learning opportunities through observation provided by the mentoring program in the Mekong Delta

region. They reported particularly high satisfaction with mentors' modeling of problem-solving in challenging situations ( $M = 4.80$ ), as well as with the effectiveness of demonstration lessons ( $M = 4.70$ ). The NTs also expressed confidence in identifying effective teaching strategies ( $M = 4.30$ ), applying observed techniques ( $M = 4.60$ ), and adapting mentor practices to suit their own instructional contexts ( $M = 4.00$ ). These findings support Bandura's SCT, which highlights observational learning as a key mechanism through which individuals acquire new skills and behaviors by watching competent models. Mentors serve as effective models, allowing NTs to observe, imitate, and gradually build self-efficacy in their teaching performance. This progression reflects the principles of experiential learning theory, which posits that observation, reflection, and experimentation form a cyclical process of professional growth. Notably, the NTs reported substantial satisfaction with gaining deeper insights into principles of effective teaching through observation ( $M = 4.40$ ), which contributed to improved instructional skills ( $M = 4.20$ ) and learning how to foster a positive classroom culture ( $M = 4.10$ ). While most aspects of observational learning were rated highly, the ability to engage in self-analysis and reflective comparison received a comparatively lower mean score ( $M = 3.90$ ).

#### ***Novice Teachers' Satisfaction with Supportive Feedback Mechanisms***

The findings show that the surveyed NTs reported high satisfaction with the supportive feedback mechanisms of the mentoring program. They highly valued mentor feedback on their strengths and weaknesses as a source of motivation ( $M = 4.90$ ) and appreciated its constructive role in fostering PD ( $M = 4.80$ ). This aligns with previous research highlighting that strength-based feedback, when coupled with specific areas for improvement, is more effective than deficit-focused critique in promoting teacher self-efficacy and sustained behavioral change [18]. These NTs also appreciated encouragement to experiment with new teaching approaches ( $M = 4.60$ ) and the positive reinforcement received from mentors ( $M = 4.60$ ), reflecting the importance of affirmative feedback in cultivating a growth-oriented mindset. Assistance in implementing new strategies ( $M = 4.50$ ), identifying areas for improvement through constructive feedback ( $M = 4.40$ ), and successfully applying mentor advice ( $M = 4.30$ ) were seen as important benefits. Furthermore, the respondents felt the program provided a safe and supportive space to take risks and learn from mistakes ( $M = 4.30$ ). These findings indicate that NTs feel more confident and willing to try new teaching methods after receiving supportive feedback from their mentors. However, mentor recognition of their achievements ( $M = 4.10$ ) and acknowledgment of teaching improvements ( $M = 4.00$ ) received comparatively lower ratings. Overall, these results suggest that feedback mechanisms effectively balance critique and affirmation, fostering confidence, motivation, and professional growth.

#### ***Novice Teachers' Satisfaction with Expected Program Outcomes and Teaching Performance***

The research findings demonstrate a positive satisfaction level among the respondent NTs regarding the alignment between program outcomes and professional expectations. These NTs expressed the highest satisfaction level with the program's role in developing professional strengths and improving weaknesses ( $M=4.60$ ); and enhancing teaching skills ( $M=4.60$ ). They also expressed strong appreciation for the program's influence on their teaching practices ( $M = 4.50$ ) and the cultivation of a collaborative learning environment ( $M = 4.30$ ), echoing findings from studies that highlight the role of mentorship in promoting collegiality, shared inquiry, and professional dialogue [19]. These elements are critical for building a supportive culture of continuous learning and innovation. However, the analysis also points to areas for improvement, particularly in supporting the achievement of career goals ( $M=3.90$ ) and meeting specific PD needs ( $M=4.00$ ). Notably, the satisfaction levels concerning the accessibility and responsiveness of mentors ( $M=4.10$ ) and the provision of a clearly structured program framework ( $M=4.10$ ) suggest potential for organizational refinement, while still maintaining overall positive outcomes.

### ***Novice Teachers' Satisfaction with Professional Confidence Building***

The findings demonstrate that the responding NTs experienced a significant improvement in professional confidence thanks to the mentoring program. High satisfaction ratings in overall teaching abilities ( $M = 4.40$ ) and proactive engagement in PD ( $M = 4.70$ ) suggest that the program effectively nurtured self-efficacy, a critical component of teacher readiness and resilience. According to SCT, self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and emotional regulation, all of which were evident in the mentoring process. High levels of confidence were also noted in handling challenging classroom situations ( $M = 4.60$ ), teaching independently ( $M = 4.60$ ), and implementing teaching strategies and techniques effectively in the classroom ( $M = 4.40$ ). The NTs also expressed enhanced confidence in making a positive impact on student learning ( $M = 4.40$ ), engaging and motivating students ( $M = 4.40$ ), and taking risks to try new teaching strategies ( $M = 4.30$ ). This pattern reflects SCT's emphasis on reciprocal interactions between personal beliefs, behavioral capabilities, and environmental support, where mentors' guidance and modeling contributed to NTs' growing belief in their own teaching competence. However, slightly lower mean scores were observed for making decisions as a teacher ( $M = 4.00$ ) and creating a positive and supportive classroom culture ( $M = 3.90$ ), suggesting areas for further support. Overall, these results highlighted the mentoring program's effectiveness in strengthening teacher self-efficacy across key professional domains.

#### **2.3.2. Findings from Interviews: NTs' Experiences through a Mentoring Program**

##### ***Challenges***

The qualitative data revealed three key challenges encountered by NTs in the mentoring program: communication barriers, gender dynamics, and time constraints.

*Communication barriers* emerged as a major initial obstacle to developing effective mentoring relationships. Many NTs reported hesitation in asking questions or seeking clarification, primarily due to concerns about appearing overly dependent or burdensome. As Teacher 1 noted, "I was very shy about asking questions to my mentor... I didn't know if asking too many questions would bother them." This reluctance reflects the strong influence of Confucian values on Vietnamese social norms, particularly the cultural emphasis on maintaining face and avoiding face-threatening situations [20]. As a result, novice teachers may avoid asking too many questions to protect their self-image and prevent negative evaluation. This hesitation is also reinforced by perceived hierarchical distance, as new teachers often believe senior colleagues are too busy or may judge them for their inexperience [21].

*Gender dynamics* further compounded communication difficulties, particularly in cross-gender mentoring relationships. Teacher 3 shared, "At first, I was quite reserved and hesitant to ask questions because I am a man and my mentor is a woman." This example illustrates how traditional gender norms in Vietnam can affect comfort levels in professional interactions and shape the way novice teachers perceive appropriate communication with mentors of a different gender. Teacher 3 suggested that "If the program arranges mentors and mentees of the same gender, I think it would be more convenient," indicating a desire for greater relational ease and reduced discomfort. This perspective aligns with Li et al. [22], who found that mentees in cross-gender mentoring relationships may experience heightened vulnerability, which can restrict the depth of discussion and delay the development of trust. Research in educational mentorship also highlights that gendered expectations surrounding emotional expression and professional demeanor can shape relationship patterns and influence mentees' willingness to seek support [23]. These insights suggest that mentoring programs in Vietnam may benefit from more gender-sensitive pairing strategies, particularly during the early phases of relationship formation.

*Time constraints* also emerged as a critical challenge, with many NTs reporting that the program duration was insufficient for meaningful professional development. Several participants expressed a desire for extended mentoring support to better accommodate individual learning

needs. As Teacher 6 stated, “I think it should take a little longer based on each participant’s ability,” and Teacher 2 similarly suggested, “It would be appropriate to extend the mentoring period a little longer.” These concerns align with research showing that novice teachers in Vietnam often struggle to balance heavy teaching workloads, administrative responsibilities, and ongoing learning requirements, creating limited opportunities for sustained engagement in mentoring activities [24].

Overall, these findings indicate that mentoring remains a valuable support mechanism for novice teachers in Vietnam, yet its effectiveness is shaped by cultural norms, institutional structures, and practical constraints. Addressing communication challenges, adopting gender-sensitive pairing practices, and extending the duration of mentoring may strengthen the overall mentoring experience and better support novice teachers’ professional growth.

### ***Benefits***

The analysis revealed four primary benefits of the mentoring program for NTs. In terms of skill development, the participant NTs reported significant improvements in classroom management and teaching techniques. For instance, Teacher 8 emphasized this growth, stating “The program helped me improve my lesson planning, classroom management, and handling situations in class more calmly”. This outcome corroborates previous research which identifies structured mentorship as a vital mechanism for translating theoretical knowledge into practical classroom competence [25, 26]. Furthermore, the mentors’ observation and provision of constructive feedback played a pivotal role in enabling mentees to identify and effectively address deficiencies in their pedagogical approaches. Teacher 5 said, “I am profoundly grateful for the mentors’ feedback, as their insights illuminated areas for improvement that, as an inexperienced individual, I had not yet discerned”. This aligns with Sempowicz and Hudson’s (2012) assertion that mentor feedback serves as a foundation for reflective practice, allowing beginning teachers to critically examine their teaching, make informed adjustments, and gradually refine their instructional competence [27]. Concurrently, the mentoring program significantly bolstered NTs’ self-efficacy, empowering them to transcend perceived teaching inadequacies and proactively explore innovative instructional methodologies. As Teacher 7 reflected, “After joining the mentoring program, I became much more confident in teaching. It helped me gain knowledge and skills that, even now, make me more confident and proficient in preparing lesson plans, teaching in class, and solving problems”. This outcome directly addresses the challenge of low confidence that is frequently cited as a driver of early-career attrition [28].

These qualitative findings complement the quantitative results, reinforcing the mentoring program’s positive influence on NTs’ PD through the lens of SCT. Quantitatively, high mean scores for interactive learning and collaboration reflected the mentees’ recognition of reciprocal interactions between personal and environmental factors. Qualitatively, the participants described similar processes of observational learning and self-reflection, whereby the mentors’ feedback and modeling enhanced their teaching efficacy and confidence. Together, these findings illustrate Bandura’s principle of reciprocal determinism, demonstrating how supportive mentoring environments foster NTs’ personal growth, professional competence, and evolving teacher identity.

## **3. Conclusion**

This study focuses on NTs in the Mekong Delta and their experiences within a mentoring program, drawing on SCT for analysis. The findings provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of mentoring programs for NTs’ development. First, the effectiveness of mentoring programs is substantially influenced by the quality and consistency of feedback mechanisms and observational learning opportunities. Second, while mentoring can enhance teaching competencies and professional confidence, its impact may be moderated by program duration.

Third, gender dynamics in mentor-mentee relationships can significantly affect communication patterns and learning outcomes, underscoring the necessity for thoughtful consideration in mentor-mentee assignment. Based on these findings, several practical recommendations emerge for enhancing mentoring program effectiveness. Educational institutions should consider implementing flexible program timeframes that accommodate individual learning needs and development rates, as fixed durations may not suit all NTs. The findings also suggest the importance of the consideration in mentor-mentee pairing processes, particularly regarding communication preferences and interpersonal dynamics. Future research could extend this work by focusing on determining the optimal structure of mentoring programs for diverse new teachers and analyzing the role of gender in mentoring relationships.

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