

Vocabulary Strategies for Efficient Reading in Nigeria

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Abstract

While it is true that reading occupies a very prominent place in the life of the individual, it is also true that the size of a reader's vocabulary has the capacity to influence both comprehension and fluency during reading activity. The importance of vocabulary acquisition and instruction is, therefore, the burden of this paper. The paper discusses vocabulary strategies and techniques that can enhance the reader's understanding of new words and concepts. Among other techniques, the paper dwells on affixation, conversion and compounding. Most importantly, three central strategies for teaching vocabulary instruction have been

identified and discussed exhaustively namely: the need for the teacher to teach the words that already exist in the learner's oral vocabulary, the need to teach words that are not in the learner's oral vocabulary but for which the learner has an available concept and, thirdly, the need to teach words that are alien or new and for which the learner has no available concept or prior experience. The conclusion is that it is necessary to introduce vocabulary development at the very beginning of the instructional unit or lesson and this task can be accomplished by providing language rich activities that teach new words in meaningful contexts.

Introduction

We can say with considerable justification that there is hardly any aspect of modern life that does not require the ability to read. Reading is important in modern society because there are certain activities one cannot perform without the ability to read. For example, if you buy a gas cooker or a mobile phone, the instructions for its use are clearly written out in a manual and you need to be literate to read the manual. This very factor explains why reading and writing are considered to be literacy skills while the other two language learning skills listening and speaking are referred to as oracy skills. Undoubtedly, reading occupies a very prominent place in our lives as human beings. The importance of reading as a language learning skill is closely bound up by the difficulty associated with defining the concept reading.

Many scholars have defined reading in several and diverse ways. For Oyetunde (1988), reading is a communication process requiring a restructuring of ended messages on the part of the reader (p. 47). According to Aukerman (1981), reading has to do with the ability to decode and pronounce words (112). But reading goes beyond seeing words clearly or calling and pronouncing printed words correctly or even recognizing the meaning of isolated words. Reading is a process on its own and as a process it requires the processing of information from a printed material by the reader who is determined to understand the writer's meaning. Again, this means that reading is an interactive activity because it involves both the writer and the reader. In this kind of interaction, the reader is processing information from the printed text in order to arrive at the writer's intended meaning.

If we take all these arguments together, we discover that reading means very many things rolled into one. It is a process of guessing on the part of the reader who at the same time has the capacity to bring something new and important to the text. It is also the decoding of information that is presented

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in writing. The obvious implication is that the pupil or young learner is through reading given the opportunity to learn and do very many things namely: recognition, literal comprehension, interpretation, evaluation and assimilation of information. In this paper we identify and discuss the various strategies and approaches through which vocabulary could enhance efficient reading.

Vocabulary Strategies for the Acquisition of Reading Skills

The first and by far the most important strategy for reading is the size of a reader's vocabulary. The learner's vocabulary has the capacity to influence both comprehension and fluency. But again developing one's vocabulary is no easy task. Again, opportunities for developing a rich vocabulary could come through listening, speaking, reading and writing in an integrated manner. Integrating vocabulary instruction provides students with numerous opportunities to manipulate and learn new vocabulary words.

Invariably, incorporating vocabulary instruction throughout the content areas will encourage readers to find connections between new and already known information, discuss meaning of new words, and demonstrate and appropriately apply the new words, providing multiple re-exposures to the words. But more than that, encouraging students to think strategically when learning new words is also essential. Truth is that vocabulary knowledge is cumulative and takes multiple exposures in a variety of meaningful contexts for words to be applicable and stored to long term memory (Akhavan, 88).

If students do not understand the meaning of the words they read, the reading process merely becomes meaningless decoding. Vocabulary is, therefore, a key component of effective reading instruction since both fluency and comprehension are affected by vocabulary knowledge (Robb 1997). Corroborating the importance of vocabulary in the reading process, Becker (2002) writes that vocabulary "is the glue that holds stories, ideas, and content together and that facilitates making comprehension accessible for pupils" (5). Besides, the National Reading Panel (NRP) report findings indicate that vocabulary seems to occupy an important middle ground in learning to read and

that oral vocabulary is a key to learning to make the transition from oral to written forms, whereas reading vocabulary is critical to the comprehension processes of a skilled reader.

Furthermore, a good store of the vocabulary of a language is an asset for effective communication and for passing examinations at whatever level of study one finds oneself. It also helps the language user to read without repeating words within - the same utterance. But more than that, the four language skills, writing, reading, speaking and listening, can only be effectively employed via a good grasp of the vocabulary of the language in use.

Closely related to vocabulary is the issue of word formation. In the English language, it is possible to derive new words from an existing one. This can be done in one of three ways: affixation, conversion and compounding. The head word which may be called base word, root word or core word is the foundation upon which other words can be formed. For example, *finish* is the base word. The prefix *un-* and the suffix *-ed* when added at the beginning and the end of the base word gives birth to the word *unfinished*. It is important to note that the reader should pay close attention to word formation and vocabulary development. One reason for this is that vocabulary knowledge is critical to reading and words are actually the building blocks of comprehension. The ability to recognize words in a continuous text quickly and accurately is vital if the goal of efficient reading is to be achieved (Olson & Roman, 72).

Lamentably, in many schools and classrooms vocabulary is not taught meaningfully because most teachers of English language teach all categories of words in the same way and it is doubtful whether students can be helped to gain ownership of words in this way. But most of the time, vocabulary items are taught out of context. For example, in a typical reading comprehension class, students are asked to mention the words they do not understand in the passage and the teacher simply defines or explains the words to the class. Sometimes, the teacher may ask the class to look up the words in the dictionary. But the dictionary may have different meanings for a given word. Vocabulary instruction, therefore, should aim at achieving two main objectives: to help pupils acquire a stock of words they can instantly

recognize, understand and relate to their overall background; to teach pupils how to independently determine the meaning of words they have not been taught (Cooper, 11).

For learners at the primary and secondary school level, there are three types of words that they can learn. These words require different instructional strategies and so it is important therefore that teachers choose methods that are appropriate for the type of words they want to teach the students. In the first place, teachers may need to teach words that are already in the pupils' oral vocabulary. These are words whose meanings pupils already know if spoken. They only need to learn to associate the meanings of such words with the graphic symbols of the words. Such words may simply be taught by guiding pupils to attempt to pronounce them with little attention given to meaning. However, in some instances, the meanings of these words may still need to be taught for the following reasons: (i) many beginning readers may not have the meanings clearly associated with the symbols of the words (ii) the pupils may have one meaning for words in their oral vocabulary, while the text in which they are used may have another. The teacher would therefore need to teach the meanings of such words emphasizing the sense in which they are used in the text (Oyetunde, 99).

Secondly, there are words that are not in the pupils' oral or reading vocabulary but for which they have an available concept. Words in this category express ideas or concepts which are within the pupils' background experiences. To teach these category of words, the teacher has two important functions to perform: (i) to help the pupils activate or call up from their past experiences the background needed for learning these words, and (ii) to help the pupils learn the written symbols (i.e. words) that express these ideas or concepts. For many pupils in the primary school, words like *escape*, *purchase*, *pardon*, *overlook*, *painting*, *blisters*, *stranded*, *tickets*, *burned*, and *conductor* may fall within this category (Oyetunde, 102).

Thirdly, there are words that are new or difficult and for which the pupils have no available concepts or prior experiences. In teaching words in this category, the teacher will need to build up in pupils the necessary background experiences.

Instructional efforts will first of all be directed at helping pupils get acquainted with these words at the oral level before they are exposed to their written symbols (Oyetunde, 111).

Fluency has been defined as the freedom from word identification problems that might hinder comprehension (Robb, 25). This definition implies that fluency includes comprehension as well. A fluent reader is one who is efficient and uses effective word recognition skills to help make meaning from the text. This is just one of the many different definitions of fluency but the one thing that they all have in common is that they each include the importance of vocabulary knowledge and comprehension going hand in hand. The National Reading Panel describes fluency as the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, with proper expression, and meaning. Many believe that becoming a fluent reader has much to do with meaning and recognition as it does with rate.

Vocabulary knowledge is cumulative and the more words you know, the easier it is to learn yet more words. Identifying and pronouncing a word does not indicate vocabulary knowledge, but signifies listening and decoding skills. The denser the number of unknown words, the more difficult it is to assign a meaning to them, and it is harder to get meaning from text.

Furthermore, research has already revealed that socio-economic status plays a significant role in acquiring word knowledge. In other words, children from privileged homes who can afford to buy books and whose parents keep libraries at home will acquire a higher vocabulary than those from less privileged homes.

The issue of adequate vocabulary is a common problem that many teachers face in every subject at school from Reading to Biology. Students lack the vocabulary knowledge to understand or even read what they are asked to read. This situation has given birth to slower readers, the reluctant readers, and the non-comprehensive readers. The issue of inadequate vocabulary becomes a major challenge if we realize that the students must be able to understand approximately 95% of the running words in the text in order to understand and infer meaning (Cooper, 25).

But again, there are several obstacles that the teacher must overcome such as the need to know

and understand very many words. Students on average add 2000-3000 words per year to their reading vocabulary (Aukerman, 43). This is much less for our lower level readers. Teachers of reading skills must take up this challenge and do what is necessary in order to ameliorate this ugly situation.

But even at the actual stage of teaching vocabulary certain problems do arise especially concerning the multiple meaning of words. The one good thing about multiple words is that every time a word is repeated in the text it is used slightly differently in the context. This helps students develop a deeper and more accurate understanding of word meaning. In order to overcome the problem of multiple words the teacher could introduce vocabulary in context by asking students to link the new word to a concept that will help them understand the meaning of the word.

In studies such as those by Becker (2002) attention is drawn to the importance of vocabulary instruction as aid to reading. Most importantly, his studies have demonstrated that efficient reading has the potential to enhance academic performance in school. Becker comes to the conclusion that vocabulary deficiencies were the primary cause of academic failure of students in grade 3-12. Becker's study opened the flood gate for more in-depth research concerning the effects of vocabulary instruction in the past thirty years. Most studies in this area corroborate the view that reading achievement and vocabulary development are closely related to one another.

Vocabulary Instructional Strategies

Vocabulary instruction is an important part of a properly developed reading curriculum. It is expected that vocabulary development should form an integral part of the instructional unit or lesson and it should continue to be developed and reinforced throughout instruction. This can be accomplished by providing language rich activities that teach new words in meaningful contexts, and by helping the learners to understand the interrelationships among words including the words that they already know. In this regard, the teacher should be consciously aware that there are many activities that can activate prior knowledge such as brainstorming questions, categorizing activities and graphic organizers. Additionally,

semantic maps will help students to make associations among vocabulary words.

Researchers have also identified three levels of processing vocabulary and it is important that teachers should endeavor to constantly keep these levels in mind. Besides, researches have also uncovered some general guidelines and principles that offer support to educators and teachers of vocabulary. The first guideline is selecting vocabulary words from text. Although this may likely pose a problem for the teacher, the important thing to bear in mind is content, students and time. It is important to keep these three elements in mind when choosing words from a text. The second guideline for teaching vocabulary is to base vocabulary instruction on language activities as a primary means of word learning. Such language activities should include the use of new vocabulary words in speaking, listening, reading and writing activities. The third guideline is to build a conceptual base for learning the new words and, finally, provide a variety of instructional strategies to help students store the word knowledge (Robb, 88).

Again, vocabulary development is vital to reading comprehension as well as fluency. Vocabulary is the center stage of the true reading experience. Without vocabulary knowledge, the text is incomprehensible and therefore does not offer itself to reading for pleasure and reading to learn. A firm grasp of vocabulary knowledge will assist students with comprehension and fluency. Vocabulary instruction, therefore, has the capacity to expose students to a variety of listening, speaking and writing activities that will improve and increase their vocabulary-knowledge.

The guidelines for vocabulary instruction include the following:

1. Determine the type of words you want to teach and choose the appropriate methods.
2. Guide pupils to develop word ownership. This can be achieved through multiple exposures, and by relating new words to words already known. Provide activities that can help to establish a relationship among words.
3. Select for special attention basic or high frequency words that are considered necessary for pupils to know. These are words that pupils

are going to come in contact with from time to time, or that they need to use themselves. The best source of this category of words is the pupils' texts. Another source is the pupils themselves. This has to do with the words that they use frequently, but which the teacher has observed that they misuse, or which they need to understand more deeply. For example, some basic words have subtle shades of meaning. The word *escape* may mean *to get free* or *get away*, but it may also be used to mean *not to realize an oversight*, as in *what he said escaped my notice* or *I would have done it but it all escaped my notice*. Other words in this category may include *itch*, *scratch*, *ear* (*ears of corn*).

4. Select for special attention key-concept words with multiple meanings, but which have been introduced or used in one sense in the pupils' texts - these are particularly true of certain concepts in subjects like Science, Social Studies, etc. Examples of such concepts include *freedom*, *love*, *govern*, *democracy*, *government*, *culture*, *tradition*, *modern*.
5. Guide pupils in active construction of meanings for words. Pupils are likely to retain meanings for words and use these words themselves if they are actively involved in generating meanings for the new words during instruction. Discussion with pupils during vocabulary teaching is one simple but significant technique of achieving this. It is therefore the responsibility of the teacher to (a) explain or define the words or concepts being taught in their own words, (b) compare the definitions of the words with their own experiences, and (c) construct new sentences of their own to demonstrate that they clearly understand the new words.
6. Guide pupils to use context cues, or clues. Context cues are familiar words surrounding an unknown word which may help the reader to identify the meaning of the unknown word. In order to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word, the reader must (i) make use of the meaningful sense of the sentence or sentences (semantic cues) in which the difficult word is located, and (ii) consider the position of grammatical fit (syntactic cues) of the unfamiliar word in the sentence (Oyetunde

198). Consider the following: *Mary's mother is going to the market to buy pepper, salt, onions, and meat which she needs for making soup*. In this example, the reader to whom *market* is unfamiliar may assume that the word is a verb or an adjective by its position in the sentence. But its position shows clearly that it is a noun because its name a place.

On the other hand, semantic cues are expressed by statements that carry meaning, such as; the things which Mary's mother is going to buy and what she needs them for. Context cues are more frequently used by mature readers than any other skills for determining the meanings of troublesome words during reading. It is therefore important that the teacher should give priority attention to developing this skill in the pupils. Pupils need to be encouraged to keep reading backward to where cues may be found. It is also important to point out that pupils will need to be taught to use context cues in combination with phonic, structural analysis, or both, to figure out the meaning of an unknown word.

It is instructive to note that there are many other vocabulary strategies which have the potential to enhance efficient reading and academic performance. These include associating strategy, contextualizing strategy, categorizing strategy, visual imaging strategy, analyzing strategy and word strategy. We shall discuss them in detail in the following paragraphs.

Associating Strategy

The ability to associate words is an important strategy. Proficient readers develop flexibility in using and manipulating words as they apply various techniques to acquire word associations. Understanding how words connect enables the proficient reader to analyze and synthesize information while at the same time determining the ways in which words relate to one another. To associate and read words are processes in linguistic form that include print, meaning and nonlinguistic form that include visual and sensory images.

Word association allows readers to use alternative words to construct meaning from the text. To link prior experiences with new information, one may construct many kinds of word relationships. When

readers use analogies they draw inferences and this gives them ample opportunity for critical thinking. This process of attaching a new concept to an existing one allows the reading process to connect and bring meaning to the text.

Contextualizing Strategy

One of the most effective strategies to increase vocabulary comprehension is to use the context meaning. This discovery process transpires through clues contained in the context. The reader can use context in several ways to help convey meaning. For example, sometimes the meaning of a word is explained within the same sentence. This means that synonyms of the unknown word can clarify words within the sentence. Besides, a context clue may identify meaning. Sometimes the reader may need to make an inference arising from the relationship between the unknown word and clues around the unknown word. Strategy instruction is necessary to support the reader in explicitly using context within the text to comprehend meaning. Corroborating this view Becker (2002) has written that students need to "realize that it is okay to take a stab at unfamiliar words and figure out an approximate meaning from the context(p.67)". After students have identified the unknown word, they may also predict its possible meaning from the context. The context enables students to make an inquisitive stand towards word meaning and to monitor and verify predictions (Cooper,1993, p. 78). Furthermore, using a variety of contextual analysis techniques allows the student to be active, rather than passive, in the discovery of new words.

Categorizing Strategy

Categorizing is a strategy that actively engages students and encourages them to organize new concepts and experiences in relation to prior knowledge about the concept. Thus strategy enlists the use of graphic organizers as visual representations of relationships. Such graphic organizers may include concept maps, webs, and Venn diagrams all of which have the capacity to make thinking visible to students. Again Cooper has cautioned that in doing this "the limits of the learner's cognitive capacity should be addressed in the design of graphic organizers(p.79)". Students can also gain cognitive knowledge by properly designing their own graphic organizers as they

process the text. Categorizing features of vocabulary words enables students to use higher order thinking and promotes cognitive word awareness in a visible manner. To categorize successfully, students need to be able to internalize the patterns under study and begin to make connections. Categorizing vocabulary words gives students an opportunity to develop an understanding of the essential attributes, qualities and characteristics of a word meaning,

Visual Imaging Strategy

Visualizing vocabulary words enables students who are stronger in spatial rather than in verbal intelligence to find or draw pictures that illustrate the definitions of words. Visual imaging is also referred to as mind, mental, or concept imagery. A student creates an image that represents the definition of the word and calls up this image whenever he/she encounters the word. This means that the strategy of visualization provides opportunities for students to use their imaginations to facilitate both vocabulary development and comprehension across the curriculum. This strategy has the capacity to assist readers in assessing understanding of vocabulary knowledge, learning word meaning, making predictions and inferences and concept acquisition.

When pupils use visual imaging, they think of a word that looks like, or even sounds like, the word they are learning. The more vivid the imagery, the more likely students will be able to connect and mentally recall the vocabulary word to meaning. Different types of art activate different parts of the brain and this sensory connection is beneficial for visual learners. Needless to state that linking verbal and visual images have the potential to increase students' ability to store and retrieve information. Similarly, transforming ideas from reading art work, poetry or drawings is an evaluative, interpretive act that can reveal the students' level of understanding.

Analyzing strategy

Pupils use analyzing strategy to examine the structure of words they are studying. Analyzing the structure or word parts is a way to determine the meaning of a word. There are three main word parts: prefixes, suffixes and roots, Studying the morphemes of words (that is the smallest meaning

unit in language) allows students to acquire information about the meaning, its phonological representation, and part of speech of new words from their prefixes, roots, and suffixes. These word parts help to contribute to the meaning of word. The obvious implication is that "morphological awareness should play a more prominent role in decoding morphological complex words because it helps beginning readers pause strings of letters at the right syllabic boundary for example, *mishandle* versus *handle*" (Kuo & Anderson, 2006, p.172).

A proper knowledge of morphemes, prefixes, suffixes and the base is a good teaching method because it helps students establish structural connections among words. Students need to learn to use word parts strategically, cautiously, and thoughtfully. Implementing techniques that support the connection between the structural analysis concepts and the basic definition will help students in understanding the word.

Word awareness strategy

Pupils gain a sense of ownership of a word when they can transfer a new vocabulary word to their writing and speaking in a meaningful way. Word awareness, also known as word consciousness, is a strategy that brings one's thinking about the usage of a word to an application level and personalizes word learning. Effective readers acquire up to seven new vocabulary words each day. To enhance vocabulary, students need to have a desire to know words and gain from the experience. Truth is that learners derive enjoyment and satisfaction from using new words correctly and from hearing them used well by others. When students know a word, they are able to use that word in speech and writing and to understand the word in text when it appears. This means that word conscious students know as many words and they are aware of the subtitles of word meaning and the power words can have. On the whole, applying word awareness strategy is a natural motivating way to support students while they are building their vocabulary and increasing their comprehension.

From all these arguments taken together, we can infer that vocabulary is a key component of effective reading instruction and that both fluency and comprehension are affected by vocabulary knowledge. In other words, vocabulary is the

backbone that holds and facilitates the reading process making comprehension accessible for pupils. This means that vocabulary is necessary in order to facilitate the development of vocabulary skills and oral comprehension.

It is in recognition of the importance of reading as a language learning skill that the National Reading Panel (NRP) report findings conclude that vocabulary seems to occupy an important middle ground in learning to read. Oral vocabulary is a key to learning to make the transition from oral to written forms, whereas reading vocabulary is crucial to the comprehension processes of a skilled reader. Vocabulary, therefore, is a key component of effective reading instruction since both fluency and comprehension are affected by vocabulary knowledge.

By and large, vocabulary in everyday language refers to words and their meanings. It may also involve figuring out unfamiliar words meaning in the text itself. But most importantly, vocabulary has to do with the lexical items in a language, which carry the meanings. The words represent concepts, and concepts grow as youngsters grow. We can make an over-exaggeration that it also involves content and it is much more than making form-meaning correspondences and simply piling up individual words. Knowing a word means knowing at least its form, its meaning, and its basic usage in context receptively and productively. A crucial distinction that is often made between knowing a word and using a word is that learners may know a word and its spelling but cannot use it in proper context either in writing or speaking.

Besides, vocabulary items may mean different things to different people, and may also acquire a different meaning in different contexts. Vocabulary is the knowledge of the relationship among ideas and reasoning power that enables one acquire concepts and associated vocabulary. Every paraphrasing that one makes involves one in the interpretation of author's meaning to be able to search and guess for the correct meaning of words which enhances reading effectiveness, and helps learners to express themselves clearly in various ways.

In addition, vocabulary encourages the learner to acquire a good command of the language either in speech or in writing, it also enables the learner to

grasp and quickly give meaning to the words when listening. Words have different meaning relation to other words and the prevailing circumstances that induce their use. In instances where meanings of words are not sorted out by the reader, the time spent in reading would become unrewarding. If a learner has a good knowledge of vocabulary, his reading is influenced positively as well as his being able to perform a number of intellectual functions (Gomwalk 33).

The other advantages of this kind of strategy is that it enables the pupil to behave in such a way that he or she can participate to some degree and for certain purposes as a member of a community other than his own and also develop a set of performance skills. Vocabulary development or acquisition, therefore, is an integral part of reading and language program. It is also an important component in a pupil's or a student's success in school.

What is important for now is that productive reading should yield skills such as recognition of words, contextualization of clues and analysis of structures. It should also enable the learner to bring out the meaning of words and to differentiate figurative language from other forms of expression. All these mean that the size of a person's vocabulary may well indicate growth. A learner can acquire vocabulary only as he can grasp the concepts denoted, and this understanding will depend upon experience and logical development.

It is important to stress that vocabulary development and acquisition can be enhanced only when the learner is provided with a variety of firsthand experiences. These experiences are quite enriching and they include providing the learner with the opportunities for extensive reading of fiction and non-fiction materials. In this regard, it is expected that learners should be guided adequately on word study (Gomwalk, 24).

Finally, teachers and parents should realize that listening vocabulary begins from the early stages of the learner's linguistic development at home when he or she listens, watches and tries to work out the meanings of the words he or she hears by means of voices, tones and choice of words. Listening vocabulary therefore implies the ability of the

learner to pay good attention to the instructor's purpose and to identify the exact words, and follow the line of reasoning or thought. At the tertiary school level, the listening activity also involves note taking, completing a work sheet or carrying out some task. All these demonstrate abundantly that speaking vocabulary enhances the pupil's linguistic ability.

Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that reading like many other language learning skills is a necessary requirement for the individual to fit into contemporary society. It is also true that, as important as reading is in our daily lives, there is an absence of a reading culture in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, a recent study revealed that Nigerians have a television-watching culture, rather than a reading culture. The reasons for this ugly situation are many and varied. In this particular paper we have drawn attention to vocabulary strategies and skills that if fully adopted will ameliorate this ugly situation. In pursuing this concern, the paper dwells on several methods and approaches through which vocabulary development could be enhanced. Prominent among them are strategies like association, contextualization, categorization and many others. Most importantly, the paper addresses the teacher of reading skills directly by pointing out that in teaching reading teachers should work very closely with the learner to identify (a) the words that the learner already knows (b) the words that are not in the learner's vocabulary but which the learner already knows and (c) words that are new or difficult for which the learner has no available concept.

The conclusion is that Nigerian learners who intend to become efficient readers should pay close attention to vocabulary strategies. As a matter of fact, to become proficient in any language one must need to master the vocabulary of the language including its morphemes, words, phrases, sentences and all other grammatical structures. Vocabulary is only one aspect of all these. It is hoped that the vocabulary strategies discussed here will do the learner an immense amount of good. The paper will be justified only if it promotes this aim.

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