

# Teaching to the Masses: Managing the Large Sized EFL Class

## 大規模な講義：英語教育の多人数授業活性化

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### (Abstract)

If trends continue, it is likely that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors at Japanese universities will increasingly be required to teach large sized classes. However, most instructors will be poorly prepared to handle this situation. In this paper, the authors review the existing literature on teaching large classes and provide personal examples culled from practical experience, identifying the issues of concern to EFL teachers facing these lecture-sized classes and lending some guidance to the teaching professional who otherwise would have to haphazardly acquire the skills necessary in mastering large classes.

### (論文要旨)

今日、大学を取り巻く様々な状況から、日本の大学で働いている英語教員は、これからもっと多人数授業を受け持つことになる可能性がある。経験不足から、ほとんどの教員が対応に追われるであろう。この論文では、英語教育における多人数授業について文献調査を行い、実際の授業体験を紹介した。また多人数授業を受けもつ英語教員にとって課題になることを明らかにし、多人数授業の経験をもたない英語教員のために指針を示した。

Key Words : English education, large classes, Japanese universities

キーワード：英語教育、多人数授業、日本の大学

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## Teaching Large Classes: An Introduction

What constitutes a large class? For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, the answer depends mostly on the setting. In a private English language school, such as ECC or Berlitz, ten students may well be considered a large group. In teaching business English to company workers, twenty might be a large number. In the Japanese university system, English classes of 20 or 30 students have become increasingly common over the past twenty or so years, so classes with 40 or 50 students often seem rather large.

Unfortunately, university English teachers can no longer expect or demand these rather small-size classes. The environment is changing, and the number of students is likely to creep up, for several reasons. Most notably, Japanese universities are facing an uncertain future, with a declining student-age population and continued economic stagnation. For many universities, the decision to increase the size of EFL classes may indeed be based on a strategy of financial survival. Also, the trend towards content-based English lessons, as witnessed in the EFL textbook market as well as with initiatives such as the Global 30 Project, logically leads to less differentiation between English-based and Japanese-based classes.

In this situation, EFL teachers can no longer be solely experts at the mid-sized class. Due to the increase in content-based instruction, English language teachers may also increasingly find themselves teaching small seminar classes, but more significantly they will be saddled with duties in large, lecture-sized classes of perhaps 100 to 200 students. Ill-equipped from their training and previous experience, teachers will have to undergo what is essentially on-the-job training using a trial-and-error approach.

Through a review of the existing literature on teaching large classes and through examples culled from practical experience, this paper 1) attempts to identify the issues of concern to EFL teachers facing these lecture-sized classes, and 2) provides some guidance to teaching professionals who otherwise would have to learn willy-nilly the skills required for mastering large classes.

## The Power of Positive Thinking

Ideally, teachers should have sufficient training before tackling large sized classes. Graduate school practicum could provide prospective teachers with the skills needed for success. In actuality, graduate students in non-EFL fields in some foreign countries may have experience handling such classes before receiving their advanced degree, perhaps even with some true skills training involved. On the other hand, students in the EFL field—except perhaps those expecting assignment to developing countries—rarely ever receive large-class training.

Furthermore, universities or university-related consortiums can provide practicing professors with skills training through faculty development courses. The reality, however, is that most teachers learn the necessary skills in a much less efficient manner—through on-the-job training. Not surprisingly, though, research has indicated that many teachers cannot master the necessary skills through individual effort, and more leadership in this area of faculty development is required by the universities or consortiums (Japan Universities Association for Computer Education 2011). It can be reasonably assumed that some teachers never really learn how to effectively manage large-sized classes. It is likely that some of these teachers simply do not have a desire to improve their classes.

Therefore, the absolute pre-condition for mastering large-class skills is possession of a positive attitude towards improving one's own teaching skills. Successful teachers view large classes less as a burden and more as an intriguing challenge. Common sense supports this statement. Likewise, experts in the field stress the importance of a positive attitude. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2006), in its publication *Practical Tips for Teaching Large Classes*, notes that instructors should “above all, view the challenge of teaching a large class as an opportunity, not a problem.” Personal anecdotes from teachers support this viewpoint. A common experience is that teachers discover a turning point in their approach to large classes when they can admit that they need to develop their skills further.

Besides potentially being a stimulating challenge, large classes clearly have other benefits for the EFL teacher. Most obviously, a large class has more students, so the teacher can have an effect on more students. Teachers can reach five or even ten times the number of students that they normally would. These classes have also been known to bring out the performer in some teachers, as only a large audience can.

If the teacher does a poor job, of course, there may be little benefit to teaching more students, but social science research shows that large class size does not significantly impact student learning. Papo (1999), in a study of undergraduate students, found that class size is not the determining factor in students' learning. Rather, teaching quality is the key factor. Todd (2006), an EFL instructor at Thailand's King Mongkut University of Technology, reviews the available literature and comes to a similar conclusion that the quality of teaching and kinds of activities used are more relevant than class size. Furthermore, it can be said that it is gradually becoming common knowledge in the field of education that the greatest factor in learning—beyond the size of the class, beyond the quality of infrastructure—is the quality of teaching.

In some cases, student satisfaction may be lower in large classes than in smaller classes (Feldman, 1984). Some skills, such as critical thinking, may be less teachable in a large class (McKeachie, 1980). However, overall, the quality of teaching is much more relevant than the class size as a factor in successfully imparting knowledge and skills. In fact,

some students even prefer the more anonymous and less-pressurized atmosphere of large classes (Feigenbaum & Friend, 1992). Thus, teachers should take comfort in knowing that, with the right attitude, skills for teaching large classes can be learned. Many of these skills can actually be transferred to or from medium-sized classes, so teaching a large class well is sometimes simply a matter of teaching well.

## Seeking Help

As most EFL teachers will unfortunately have to settle into the large class without proper training beforehand, on-the-job training becomes critical for success.

First, even a university lacking a structured teacher training program can informally provide assistance. Perhaps the best advice comes from veteran large-class instructors. Most of these professors will likely not be EFL teachers, but their advice is nonetheless useful. Tips could run the gamut from how to handle noisy classrooms to how to improve student attendance.

Additionally, office staff may be able to provide advice. More likely, however, the office staff can offer support services for the EFL teacher. Depending on the university, teachers of large classes may receive in-class support from the office staff or be permitted the use of a graduate assistant. In many cases, the assistant's duties are limited to the distribution and collection of papers during class, but any teacher who has worked with large classes knows that even this support is beneficial.

Poor student attendance is at least one problem that the office staff and/or teaching assistants can help alleviate by taking attendance or collecting assignments at both the beginning and end of the class. Some other very common large-class problems for which a beginning teacher might seek help include: noisy classrooms, students doing other class-work, napping, and lack of motivation (Otemon Gakuin University, 2006, 14). Veteran teachers and office staff can provide solutions to these problems. For example, a veteran teacher might suggest greater teacher assertiveness in warning noisy students. It might also be suggested that teachers stop talking until the class has truly quieted down. Another veteran teacher might suggest spacing students so that an aisle or an empty seat separates them, discouraging chatting. Moreover, a random, rotating seating chart might be recommended.

Certainly much of the art of teaching large classes requires assertiveness, leadership, and pro-active classroom management on the part of the instructor. This will be necessary when faced with students doing other class-work as well as students who are napping. As a veteran teacher might advise, clear rules should be enforced, and the majority of students will actually welcome the strictness (Otemon Gakuin University, 2006, 16). Heppner (2007), a veteran teacher himself, suggests the establishment of clear rules and

recommends that teachers start off strict and only become more lenient when it seems possible. Therefore, at the start of the semester, along with the syllabus, the rules of the classroom need to be explained. Class rules set a precedent for how the class will be handled and what kind of attitude and conduct is expected from the students. Written in both English and Japanese, these guidelines need to be not only distributed but explained and emphasized. It is important to design the rules to fit the concept of the class. These should be simply written. Some of the rules for a conversation class might be as follows:

1. No talking while the teacher is talking.  
先生の話は、静かに聞くこと。
2. Only English is spoken in class.  
授業中は、日本語禁止です。
3. Turn off your cell phones.  
携帯電話の電源は、必ず切ること。
4. Active participation is essential.  
熱心に授業に参加することが大事です。
5. Try to be outgoing in using English.  
積極的に英語を話しましょう。

Building rapport and being friendly with students is a key element for a smooth and harmonious class. However, starting strict and becoming friendly later is received well, and produces better results than suddenly becoming strict midway through the course.

Another point to consider is that, while the teachers and students in large classes often consider noisy classrooms to be the greatest hindrance, in many cases this is only the result, masking the root cause of the bad behavior. In large classes, lack of student motivation is often the primary factor in not just noisy classrooms but also other sorts of undesirable classroom behavior. Clearly, this is one of the main problems facing educators today, and an entire sub-field of education deals with how to motivate students. Research has indicated that this is a problem encountered in classrooms of all sizes (Japan Universities Association for Computer Education, 2011), although it likely is more intractable in the larger, more impersonal classes. Furthermore, as an Australian specialist in large classes maintains, “to stimulate and sustain interest in learning materials is the first priority to address with large class teaching.” (Islam, 2002)

However, a veteran teacher—summarizing much of the research on this subject—might suggest as a countermeasure the need for students to develop goals and see actual progress. A related, more specific step might be to change grading to encompass various forms of evaluation including class participation and mini-quizzes, rather than just a final semester exam. Nation and Macalister (2010, 50-51) support this notion, stating that clear

and achievable goals and short-term achievement tests can often have a strong effect on motivation.

The EFL teacher, not just relying on the wisdom of more experienced lecturers, can also gather useful advice through education-related texts. Unfortunately, few good EFL books address this issue, and likewise very little EFL-specific advice is on the internet.

Perhaps the most popular EFL text for teaching large classes is *Teaching Large Multilevel Classes* (2001), written by Natalie Hess and published by Cambridge University Press. Roughly the first 20 pages provide an overview of the issues involving large classes, but even the author of this book does not direct her attention solely to large lecture-sized classes of perhaps 100 or more students. In fact, Hess (2001, 2) defines a large class as thirty or more students. The bulk of the book—a solid 120 pages—mentions specific activities for large EFL classes, but most of these activities, including a ball-tossing name game, are clearly directed towards “large” classes of 40 to 50 students.

Outside the EFL field, several education-related textbooks exist, imparting the knowledge necessary for successfully teaching large classes in fields such as psychology and chemistry. These texts can be adapted for the EFL class, especially considering that many large-sized EFL classes have a strong content-related component.

One such book, *Teaching the Large College Class* (2007), was written by Frank Heppner, a veteran biology professor, and published by Jossey-Bass Publishers, a company offering many other tomes in the education field. This book is not directed towards the EFL class, so its lecture-centered approach might be anathema to some EFL teachers. Nonetheless, it remains a fine text with an emphasis on practical matters that all teachers of large classes probably encounter.

The internet also is a key source of information on mastering large-size classes, but once again little of this is specifically directed towards EFL teachers. Many universities and organizations throughout the world have created teaching development homepages that do a solid job of relaying the main concerns involved in teaching large classes. Just for some examples, Australia's Teaching Large Classes AUTC Project ([www.tedi.uq.edu.au/largeclasses](http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/largeclasses)), University of Maryland's Center for Teaching Excellence ([www.cte.umd.edu/library/teachingLargeClass/index.html](http://www.cte.umd.edu/library/teachingLargeClass/index.html)), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's *Practical Tips for Teaching Large Classes* ([www2.unesco.org/elib/publications/095/Teaching\\_Large\\_Classes.pdf](http://www2.unesco.org/elib/publications/095/Teaching_Large_Classes.pdf)) all provide a good introduction to the topic. The University of Warwick's Teaching English in Large Classes Research Network ([bit.ly/telcnet-home](http://bit.ly/telcnet-home)) is worth a look as one of the few sites concentrating on the EFL community.

## Be Prepared

Seeking advice is important, but teachers of large classes also must take the individual initiative and get prepared. Large classes, it goes almost without saying, take more preparation. Heppner (2007) mentions that large classes need to be set up and operated with the same care as a small business. He estimates that every class hour will require anywhere from two to ten hours of preparation, meaning that large classes take much more planning and thought than smaller classes.

More than with smaller classes, very clear plans must be created for each and every class in the semester. This takes additional time before the semester starts, and requires a clear, detailed syllabus. Additionally, a clear grading system becomes imperative since problems with grading can create a poor atmosphere. Simply put, confusion and lack of clarity are much bigger problems in a class of 200 than one of 40 students.

Once the semester begins, teachers will also often find their large classes taking more out-of-class time. The specific amount of time depends on several factors, including the style of teaching and the subject taught, so this varies by teacher. However, to use a personal example, preparation right before class might take approximately one hour, and another hour might be expended directly after class. In addition, another 30 minutes or one hour may be needed during the week. Thus, for a 90-minute class, budgeting 150 to 180 minutes of preparation is by no means extreme. This does not include the preparation involved before the semester began, which would probably take at least another hour per class. Smaller classes may take only one-third this time, so indeed larger classes require a greater investment of time.

Some organizational concerns that take a teacher's planning time include how to give directions in clear, simple English, how to write the day's schedule on the board, how to collect and distribute papers, how to organize groups (in group-work activities), and how to give feedback. Pacing of the class is also a concern, and generally it is the case that larger classes have a slower pace. The first few and the last few classes of the semester may also require extra time set aside for administrative matters, explaining things such as how to buy the textbook, how to add or drop the class, and what to do as a make-up for a missed assignment.

One more concern with large classes is the students' lack of access to the teacher, so the teacher should make plans to address any likely problems during the class. Also, since it is unreasonable for a teacher to meet all 100 or 200 of the students on a personal basis, a system for meeting students' needs (e.g., an email address or a class blog) is an effective tool. Likewise, it helps if the teacher arrives to class five or ten minutes early, and lingers five or ten minutes after class, to give students a chance to approach and ask questions. It is unlikely that a student in a class of 100 will have enough courage to ask questions

during class.

## Technology is Your Friend

Before entering class, it is preferable to prepare for the use of various forms of technology by becoming familiar with all the devices available. Their use will bring a favorable dynamic to the classroom. However, it is best to expect that audiovisual devices might not work and to be prepared with a backup plan to keep the class moving efficiently.

The most important technological tool in the large class is an old standby—the microphone. Classes of 40 to 50 students do not require microphones, but those with 100 or more students certainly are much better with them. It is possible for a teacher to project their voice in a large class, but the ability to hold students' attention is greatly decreased. As Heppner (2007, 45) notes, teachers without microphones end up shouting, and “it is extremely tiring for the audience to have to listen to a shouting voice for 50 minutes.”

Another concern is that large classrooms often suffer from a lack of teacher-student interaction, so any technology increasing this aspect is worth considering. Classes with the proper equipment can use computers interactively. More likely is the use of clickers, popular in the United States, or cell phones, an emerging tool in Japanese classrooms. These allow short interactions with students and can be tallied into data. Teachers can also check students' comprehension. With cell phones, short twitter-like responses from students are also possible. Moreover, many teachers find Moodle and other e-learning experiences to be beneficial.

A survey of teachers using information technology (IT) for their classes shows that a majority of these teachers have adopted the IT in order to increase student motivation (Japan Universities Association for Computer Education, 2011, 5). It is expected that these tools will improve in quality, and more teachers will use them, especially in larger classes. Over-reliance on these semi-interactive methods is not recommended, but moderate usage can provide at least some of the teacher-student interaction found more often in smaller classes.

Likewise, various forms of audio and visual materials appeal to the numerous learning styles and provide a way to stifle student boredom. The use of DVDs and PowerPoint presentations are just two examples that now have a strong foundation in the classroom (Japan Universities Association for Computer Education, 2011).

In this modern age, there are also numerous ways to use technology to help with the more administrative task of taking attendance. Attendance sheets or cards can be distributed and later efficiently checked by machine. Another option is a card reader; Students simply swipe their identification card to record their attendance. Some schools have taken advantage of hand-held device (HHD) technology, such as clickers and cell



phones, to record information. With these, the teacher might announce that it is time to take attendance. Then everyone will take out their HHD, log on to the class site, and be ready to input a random number assigned by the teacher at that time. The random number, time, and date—along with other student information—are stored on the university's secure site and can be accessed by the student and teacher anytime. This method makes students responsible for their own attendance and lets them check their information.

One more point: Grading of quizzes and tests through computerized mark-sheets, while perhaps not adding to the students' classroom experience, does save instructors a significant amount of time during the school year, and makes the final grading easier through Excel data sheets. It allows teachers to administer more quizzes in order to check student comprehension and focus students on the key information.

## The Non-Lecture in the Lecture-Sized Class

Research has consistently shown that it is nearly impossible to expect students to concentrate for 90 minutes. Studies have found that concentration lasts perhaps 20 to 30 minutes, at best (University of Maryland, Center for Teaching Excellence, 2008). Furthermore, it is thought that students in a lecture spend approximately 60 percent of their time on idle thoughts (Bloom, 1953).

This makes a good argument for the 45-minute or 50-minute classroom, as is popular in several countries. However, the EFL teacher in Japan will not be able to force such time-schedule changes, so it is necessary to plan a 90-minute class that somehow overcomes students' inability to concentrate.

In many fields of study, lecture-sized classes tend to be 90 minutes of lecture, with the teacher having rehearsed the script from a detailed outline. This is the so-called “talk and chalk” method, and certainly it has techniques that should be mastered. However, as Sutherland and Badger (2004) argue, this “one-way transmission of information” is an outdated model of teaching.

Fortunately, the EFL teacher, not bound by the tradition of lecture, can apply several education methods in creating a varied and interesting classroom. It is crucial to remember that variety is the spice that adds flavor to the large class, EFL or otherwise (Ward & Jenkins, 1992). For example, lectures may be necessary, but can be limited to 20 or 30 minutes per class. Ideally, these short lectures should contain only the essential points and should come at the beginning of the class when students' attention is generally highest. In general, even these short lectures can be made more interesting if the teacher connects the topic to the students' lives and makes it applicable to their situation. Additionally, teachers should include students' active thinking and problem solving into the

lecture whenever possible. According to the University of Maryland's Center for Teaching Excellence (2008), research clearly shows that techniques promoting active learning in large classes lead to better results. Furthermore, teacher-student interaction increases, and students can concentrate for longer.

Other techniques for making lectures stimulating include the distribution of a lecture outline, with perhaps key points blanked out for students to fill in through listening, and the so-called minute paper at the end of the lecture. Lectures, by their nature, are one-sided, teacher-directed events, but a certain amount of student interaction can be implemented. Moreover, it is best to separate any rather long lecture into 15- or 20-minute sections, with a break to change the pace and recapture the students' attention (Heppner, 2007, 35).

Audiovisual material provides students with a break from lectures, and exercises students' eyes and ears in a way lectures are often unable. Our library has an abundance of educational and documentary DVDs in both English and Japanese that when connected to the course materials can be an effective tool. PowerPoint presentations are also possible, but obviously are different from the moving pictures of DVDs. Much like lectures, however, DVDs and PowerPoint should not be over-used, since a variety of activities is the ultimate goal with a 90-minute class. McKeachie (1999), an expert on educational theory and methods, agrees that learning is improved and memory increased with the addition of audiovisual materials.

Furthermore, pair work and group work provide student-to-student interaction, which is generally lacking in larger classes. Students become engaged, increasing motivation. The lecture-sized class can be effectively transformed from a teacher-directed activity to a student-oriented one.

Many teachers, both inside and outside the EFL field, already recognize the significance of participatory classrooms (Japan Universities Association for Computer Education, 2011, 2). In a learning pyramid, obviously, the act of doing permits greater retention than the more passive act of listening. If a lecture involves mostly students' hearing, and a DVD involves seeing, then certain pair work and group work activities lead to actual "doing," generally considered a better form of learning.

Some pair work and group work activities that are effective in large EFL classes include the following: information exchange (so-called jigsaw activities), peer reviewing, project work, and map/graph work. These activities hopefully can also lead to greater learner autonomy—another education-related issue that is a concern for classes of all sizes but even more so with larger classes (Japan Universities Association for Computer Education, 2011, 3). Certainly, in the Japanese setting, it can be difficult to arrange group work in a so-called fishbowl or buzz group or to adopt think-pair-share activities, but Japanese education experts have mentioned that practical attention to the type of activity and the

grouping allows collaborative classroom projects even in classrooms of 150 to 200 students (Sugie et al, 2009, 43).

One actual example of activities for fifteen 90-minute classes (one semester) in an EFL setting is as follows:

Two tests (two 90-minute classes)

Seven quizzes (seven 15-minute periods)

Seven short, relatively traditional lectures (seven 20-minute periods)

Two PowerPoint presentations (two 30-minute lectures)

Five short DVDs (five 20- to 30-minute periods)

Five pair work/ group work activities (five 30- to 45-minute periods)

One peer-reviewed student poster presentation, with half the students one week and the other half the next week (two 90-minute classes)

This class uses class readers, but does not have a textbook per se. In fact, most mainstream EFL textbooks would need significant adaptation for a large class. Students in the above-mentioned class can expect approximately three different activities per day, with most activities lasting no more than 30 minutes. Ideally, in this schedule, students can move from lecture (hearing about an idea) to audiovisual (seeing the idea) to pair work and group work (actual hands-on practice). This permits interconnectedness and stresses reinforcement and the recycling of vocabulary, all concepts dear to the EFL teacher's heart. It can be seen that large classes, like smaller classes, still need an even balance of what Nation and Macalister (2010, 51) call the "four strands of meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output, and fluency activities." Therefore, the challenge is how to provide these in the larger class.

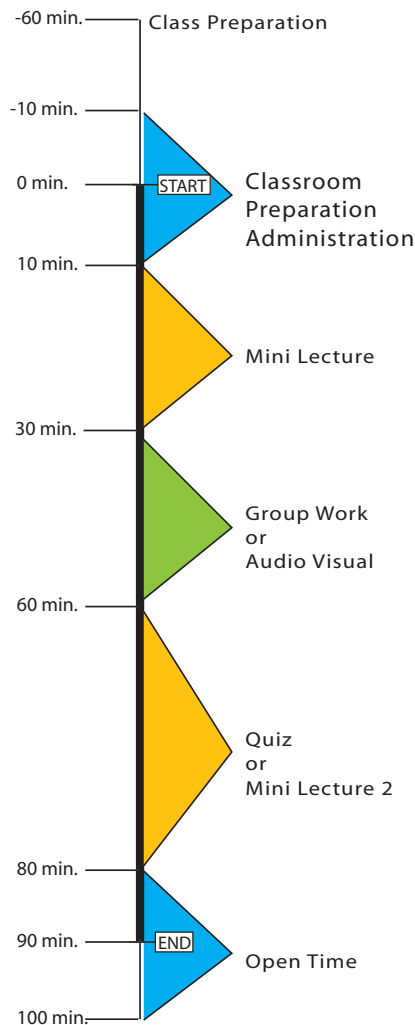
In order to provide a balanced class and allow activities to run smoothly, a timeline for the 90 minutes can be established as a basic guide each week (see Appendix 1). As previously stated, usually one hour is allotted before the start of class, then at minus 10 minutes classroom preparation and administration begins, allowing for personal student needs, audiovisual setup, and attendance. After attendance and all procedural matters have been handled, class can start with the first mini-lecture. By this time, most students should be settled and attentive. The next step might involve breaking from the lecture with group work or audiovisual aids, which will change the pace and allow for students to catch up and compare notes. At the 60-minute point, a quiz or supplementary lecture would be options. Ideally, at the 80-minute mark, it is time to start to wrap things up and give time for questions and attention to personal student needs.

## Conclusion: The Challenge

Undoubtedly, smaller EFL classes effortlessly optimize student-teacher interaction and remain the ideal for mastering languages. However, it is likely that EFL teachers will see an increase in the number of large sized classes they are required to teach and will have to adapt to the new conditions. They can either dread the experience, or answer the challenge. In the end, a positive attitude—facing the challenge—is the better approach. The skills involved are not impossible to learn. Many EFL teachers already have a strong knowledge of educational methods, and thus conceivably have a head start, so to speak.

No matter how much effort a teacher expends, however, it is unlikely that the perfect large class exists. Problems will arise, and the teacher will have to respond. In this way, teaching large classes is a continuous learning experience. It is a process of growth that never ends, and even veteran teachers learn new methods and find new tools for their large classes. However, this is part of the excitement of teaching to the masses—a challenge that can be tackled successfully but never perfectly.

Appendix 1



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