

THE FUTURE OF EAP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ITALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that the teaching of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) is related to academic disciplines having their own specificity and discourse practices and that it is mostly needed by students who intend to study an undergraduate or postgraduate degree course at universities where English is used as a medium of instruction (EMI). Therefore, EAP courses usually focus on improving the reading and speaking skills students may need to participate successfully in required academic activities and socialize in diverse and specific cultural contexts [1-2, 3, 4], as well as developing writing skills for assignments, such as essays, critiques and presentations. Otherwise, especially when taught in non-English speaking universities, the scope and content of a course are mainly designed for graduate students who need to succeed in writing publishable research.

Although scholarly debate has also encouraged teachers' engagement with issues of power and ideology and tried to raise interest in critical theory and discourse in EAP teaching [5], EAP continues to mostly coincide with ESP (English for Specific Purposes) practice in undergraduate classes, where it benefits from the boost of the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach, and it attempts to satisfy the expectations of the academic community to which international PhD students of the ESP aspire to belong through discipline-oriented genre focused analysis. Only a few authors, such as [6], have stressed the relation existing between academic writing competence and professional success of future graduates in non-academic fields.

The purpose of this article is threefold: 1) to provide an overview of Italian university English course organization and available EAP courses at major Italian Universities; 2) to examine the content of the most popular EAP manuals on the Italian market (a sample of thirty books has been used for this study); 3) to suggest a revision of the typical EAP textbook-based course on the basis of the changed social and professional contexts requiring expert users of EAP. These recommendations will take into account the professional writing skills needed by 21st century (Italian) H.E. students, the emerging new freelance digital professions, and the results of a survey on the interests and preferences of a group of EFL students enrolled at a local public Italian University who were administered a quantitative and qualitative questionnaire about the English course syllabus and assignment expectations.

Keywords: EAP, ESP, CLIL, Italian University English courses, students' needs analysis.

1 INTRODUCTION¹

An EAP course is generally needed by non-native English language undergraduate students who intend to attend a university course within a translational exchange program or aim to pursue higher education in an English-speaking country, in which case, they may attend such a course at home before departure or on arrival in the foreign country, where it is usually taught as a preparatory course to university lectures or as a university's "tasks" writing support course for the duration of the semester. Otherwise, EAP is needed by non-native English undergraduate or graduate students who attend university courses where English is a means of instruction and/ or who intend to pursue an academic career, which increasingly requires international journal publications.

There is no universal consensus on its degree of specificity when compared to English for General Purposes, given the homogenizing and localizing effects of the use of English as a Lingua Franca in academia, nor is there agreement on its precise difference from ESP (English for Specific Purposes) to which it belongs, when it is further subdivided into English for General Academic Purposes (EAGP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP),² given academic discourse variations determined by

¹ This paper has been developed from a preliminary, unpublished research study on Italian EAP course design presented with Felicetta Ripa at the poster session of EAP-Crete Conference in 2019.

² The former is focused on meeting the language needs of all ESP students and the latter is more concerned with the language needs of students of specific non-linguistic disciplines (see [7] and [8] on this)

many factors, among which discipline-related generic conventions, cultural factors and practitioners' expertise. Moreover, there is no consensus on didactics methodology and legitimacy of its teaching due to increasing concerns about risks of colonization and marginalization of non-English academic discourse, and pauperization and hybridization of national (specialized) (micro)languages.³

However, despite its debatable multiple definitions and scope of application, and despite scholars' and teachers' recent interest in issues of power and ideology and critical theory and discourse analysis [5], EAP is generally intended as aiming at filling the gaps of generic English language instruction as to the development of a linguistic competence "related to specific disciplines, occupations and activities".⁴ Hence, EAP courses usually focus on improving the reading and speaking skills students may need to succeed in their university life, as well as developing writing skills for assignments such as essays, critiques and presentations, contributing to any class final mark or grade. When targeted to graduate students, they generally aim at providing them with the language competence required by their academic community.

2 ENGLISH COURSES IN ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

In Italy, the study of a modern foreign language is mandatory not only in Bachelor of Arts in Modern Languages but also in non-language degrees⁵. The foreign language can be taught as a pass/fail exam or a core module in non-linguistic degree courses, and also as an option or core module in post-graduate study. The Italian teaching of EAP, and of ESL in general, has been affected by a higher education reform movement started by Minister Berlinguer's Law no. 30 of the 10th of February 2000. This Law, partly repealed by Moratti Law no. 53/2003 and then revised by the Gelmini reform in 2010, split the taught courses of Foreign/English Language and Literature into two separate courses of Foreign/English Literature and Foreign/English Language and Translation. The separation has had some positive effects allowing the courses of foreign literature to focus on literary criticism and literature history, and the courses of foreign language and translation to develop CEFR levels and to focus research on language teaching, acquisition, functions, etc. [11]. However, the reform has also produced some disputable effects: an unscientific distinction of interrelated fields (language, translation and literature) and a lack of precise, unambiguous national specifications for the educational objectives, linguistic levels and organization of foreign language courses, especially in non-linguistic degree courses [12] where the teaching of ESL has mostly become ESP in short Pass/Fail courses or lengthier optional courses.

This would explain the heterogeneous situation as to language development goals and teaching material in use in Italian universities, revealed by a small sample survey of major Italian University English Language programs. Most higher institutions – such as the State University of Milan, Florence, Roma Sapienza, Federico II and Orientale in Naples, Bari and Palermo – have language centers (CLA) that are authorized Cambridge English Language Assessment Centers preparing for Cambridge ESOL exams and administering PET, FCE, CAE, and CPE tests. Some of them also administer TOEFL and IELTS exams (Florence) and offer specialized courses in English for Law, English for Economics and English for Medicine; some also offer courses preparing for TOEFL and TOEIC (Federico II). Some arrange general English courses of A1- B2 levels (Palermo); some administer proficiency tests in Advanced English (C1/C2 levels) and Advanced Anglo-American English (Milan), arranging short repairing courses for students who fail them. In most cases, passing a CLA language test and acquiring a language level certificate implies the automatic validation of the University foreign language exam and the acquisition of the corresponding credits.

EAP is usually taught in seminar or tutor-led courses preparing Doctoral students, whose instructors are generally foreign language readers (lettori). When EAP is part of the program of a core course in English Language and Translation and is taught in formal lectures, it is because of the individual choices of professors and lettori teaching language modules in Foreign Language degree courses both in 1st and 2nd level degree programs. At the University of Bergamo, for example, EAP is the title and content of the 1st year course of English language of the 1st level (undergraduate) degree in Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures; at the university of Ferrara, a 6-credit core course, is taught in the 2nd level degree (postgraduate) program of the Curriculum in Didactic of Languages and Literature, aiming at

³ See [9] for an overview of the dilemmas of using and teaching ELF (English as Lingua Franca) and EAP in academic settings.

⁴ P. Strevens, *ESP: State of the Art*, Singapore: SEAMO Language Center, 1988, cited in [10] p. 68

⁵ Art 7 of the Italian Ministerial decree 509/1999, confirmed by art. 7 of a later Ministerial decree 270/2004, indicates that "To obtain a first degree a student must have acquired 180 credits including those concerning the compulsory knowledge of a language of the European Union other than Italian, without prejudice to some special rules to safeguard linguistic minorities." Cfr. MIUR - Italian Higher Education - international guide - CIMEA - Text, available at www.miur.it/guida/annex_b.htm.

developing C1/C2 writing skills; at the Rome University of Tor Vergata a core course of Advanced Stylistics, in the 2nd level degree course of Literature and Philosophy, focuses on some of the typical content of an EAP course, such as textual analysis of various text genres; at Tuscia University, in Viterbo, EAP practice is part of the core language modules of the 2nd level two-year degree program in Language and Culture for International Communication, made available also to Doctoral students of non-language disciplines. Of the surveyed universities, only Naples' Federico II University CLA offers Pearson Tests of English Academic and the Florence University CLA has specific online and in-class courses on writing research papers, journal articles and editing of academic texts, open to graduate students, researchers and academic teaching staff of non-language disciplines, and Academic writing courses of B2/C1 level; a few other universities have allotted a significant number of credits and teaching hours to EAP courses in specific nonlinguistic degree programs, such as La Statale University in Milan, which has a 9 ECTS EAP course for the BA in Philosophy, the university of Calabria, which has a MOOC EAP course of B2 level, and the University of Padua, whose CLA offers a 40-hour course in EAP. Since 2014 this university has also been offering a Learning English for Academic Purpose course for lecturers teaching their subjects in English.

Indeed, in the last decade, the teaching of EAP at University level has also been affected by the latest higher education reform, the Gelmini reform (Law no. 240/2010), so called after its promoter, the then Minister of Education Maria Stella Gelmini. Besides restructuring department teaching, service functions and academic staff recruitment procedures, the Law has had the merit of promoting what is usually referred to in Italian as "internationalization", namely EMI (English-mediated instruction) in various non-linguistic university disciplines. Even if it does not make any explicit reference to degree programs to be taught entirely in English, the Law has boosted the development of short English-delivered undergraduate and graduate modules and even entire English-taught programs (ETPs) by encouraging universities to attract foreign students through mobility programs and the temporary employment of foreign scholars and professionals able to disseminate the language and culture of their country of origin. This response to the EU internationalization mandate has also increased the need for Academic English courses, which seemed to have faded after the long wave of pre-sessional and integrated EAP/Degree programs and the outsourcing of freshers' English language "induction" programs to private schools.

If there is a greater need for EAP courses in non-English speaking countries, what kind of courses should they be? What topics should they cover? What skills should they develop? What students should they target?

A report on the university Internationalization Process in Italy [13], published by CRUI (The Board of Italian University Rectors) in April 2018 and updated in 2019 [14], indicates that the number of degree courses totally delivered in English in Italian Universities in the academic years 2015-16 was 248, which rose to 398 in the academic year 2018-19, representing an increase of +178% when compared to the 143 courses available in 2013-14. This rise is even wider if compared to a survey conducted in 2007 which identified only 56 universities having full ETPs at Bachelor and Master level and 24 at Doctoral level [15]. The massive surge in ETPs (English-taught programs) highlighted in the CRUI Report is mainly recorded in 2nd level degree courses (with a total number of 157 course programs in 2016, mostly available in the study fields of engineering, economics, and finance) and seems more to satisfy the demand of Italian students than to meet the needs of foreign ones. Indeed, according to the CRUI report, a very small number of foreign students attends these EMI/ETP courses: only 6.5% is enrolled in English-taught undergraduate degree courses, and only 24.3% is enrolled in English-taught graduate degree programs (Rugge 2018, 26-28). Most times the courses are taught by the permanent academic staff, who adopt ELF as a means of instruction. Sometimes, however, when the local staff do not have sufficient foreign language competence, lecturers are either helped by language professionals or replaced by contract-based instructors who are selected for the expertise in the subject but also for their language competence.

Since the main consumers of these English-delivered courses are Italian (graduate) students, it is legitimate to wonder whether the EAP courses currently taught in Italy and popular textbooks can meet their needs, varying readiness levels and interests.

2.1 A brief review of EAP textbooks available on the Italian market

Thirty EAP textbooks available on the Italian market have been examined for the purposes of this article (their titles are indicated in the Appendix and numbered from 1 to 30) in order to identify general content and goals. Almost all focus on the development of writing skills with exercises and activities that range from building a sentence to writing a full paragraph, from summarizing to essay writing. Usually, a reflection on sentence structure and morpho-syntactic elements, text typologies and different types of essay precedes activities that consist in writing short essay building blocks (an intro with a leading

sentence, a body and a conclusion). In a few textbooks, these exercises are also used to teach memo/report writing. Exercises, such as note-taking, summarizing and reflections on genre, register, style and (inductive vs deductive) argumentative structures are included to develop writing skills (as in 5, 6, 9, 14, 28, 29, 30). Essay writing is undoubtedly the main focus of these EAP textbooks. Very few books also present writing models for different types of text: e.g. letters, emails and reports (as in 1 and 2, which show an application letter as model), book and literature reviews (as in 2, 11, 26, 27, 28, 29), interviews (as in 19), a summary and how to construct a research paper (27), a long research paper/report (as in 2, 4, 26), bibliographies, graphs and charts (as in 4), and visuals description (as in 11). Besides focusing on essay writing, textbooks 15 and 19 illustrate some more intimist and creative forms of writing, such as journal and autobiography, and textbook 7 introduces seminars and debates. Only 28 and 29 contain a brief description of research proposals and dissertation structure; only 26 and 27 introduce critique writing. Few textbooks also take editing into consideration (6 and 15). Study skills are discussed in 13 and 14, and critical thinking is targeted by reading discussion exercises in 17, 22 and 30. When the book takes all the 4 language skills into consideration, delivering a presentation is a typical task-based exercise. Cooperative writing is only examined in 2. Only 27 takes disciplinary differences into account.

Are activities mainly focused on essay writing and development of argumentative skills enough to meet the needs of the 21st century Italian students attending a spiraling number of internationalized courses and bound to work in an increasingly digital (freelance) job market?

2.2 EFL students' survey on English language course expectations

Given that EAP and its wider application field, ESP, are mostly concerned with the development of academic/professional writing, a survey on interests and preferences for the English course, also aimed at ascertaining pre-acquired competences, was administered to first-year undergraduate students and postgraduate students on the first day of attendance of the English courses at departments of DEIM (Economics, Engineering, Society, Business Organization), SPRI (Political Science) and DEB (Ecological and Biological Science) of the University of Viterbo, where the author teaches. In order to encourage responses from a voluntary audience, the survey was conducted anonymously by using a questionnaire created with Google Forms and whose link was uploaded onto the Moodle page of each English course so that students enrolled could see it on their first access to the page. The questionnaire consisted of only 5 questions, two of which were quantitative (with multiple choice options), investigating writing practices conducted at school and preferences/expectations for the writing activities to be conducted in the University course; three were open answer questions, aiming at gaining more insight into the reasons for some answers. The data reported in this paper were collected in the first week of the Fall semester, between October 3rd-7th 2022, and consist of 146 responses, 59,6% being given by undergraduate students (Figure 1), with an age ranging between 18 and 22 (Figure 2).

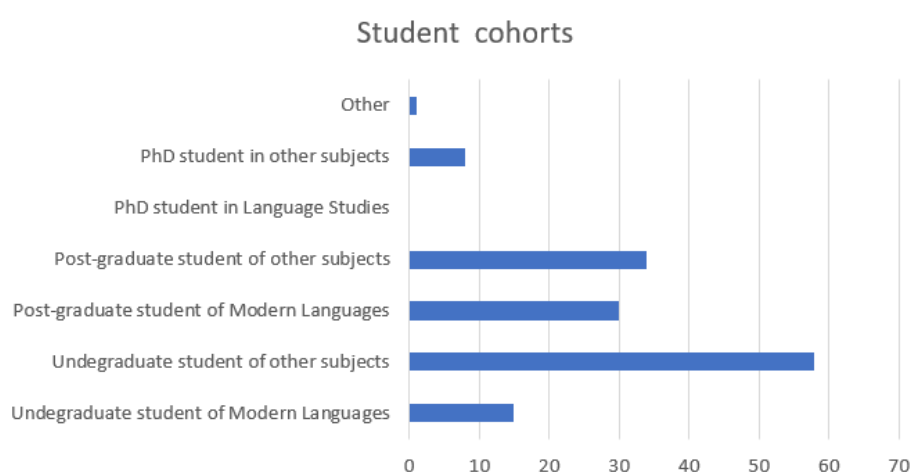


Figure 1 Students distribution by course of study.

Please indicate your age

146 risposte

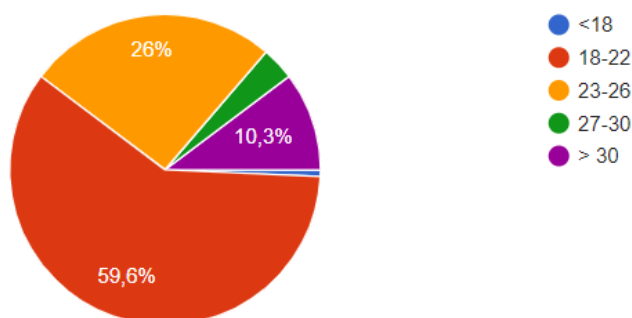


Figure 2 Student distribution by age.

When asked about the writing skills developed at school (Figure 3), the majority indicated “Essay” (chosen by 38 respondents), followed by “Summary” and “PowerPoint presentations” (both selected by 26 respondents). More practical activities, such as “Job Application Letters” and “CV” writing were only chosen by 7 respondents, followed by an almost equal and very short number of choices for “Short Stories”, “Newspaper Articles”, “Business Letters”, and “Business Plan”, which may explain why replies to the question enquiring about the writing skills that “should be developed in a university course” (Figure 4) included foremost “Business Letters”, meaning by that the entire business transaction, with *enquiries*, *replies*, *orders*, *complaints* and *apologies* (83 replies), “Emails” (69), “Job Application Letters” (68), “CVs/Résumé” (64), “Business Plan” (55), followed by “Essay” (50), “Project Proposal” (44), “Academic Article” (42) and “Research Project” (37). Of course, a minor selection of “Review” (25), “Critique” (24) and “Dissertation” (17) can be justified by the reduced number of doctoral students participating in the survey, none of them being a Modern language PhD candidate. However, since undergraduate students have also to write a short final dissertation, which is given extra points when written in English, their indication about the writing skills to be developed in a tertiary education course reveals their need for less theoretical and speculative activities in favor of more practical ones to be employed in professional fields. A selection confirmed by the responses given to open question 3 (“Which writing skills do you consider essential for the 21st century job market?”) having business letters and emails as their top choices, and to open question 4 (“Which topic would you like to be discussed during a university English course?”) having email, business, and current events as the first three options, followed by marketing, finance and geopolitics. Quite unexpectedly, however, when asked open question 5 (“Which writing skills would you like to develop during a university English course?”) “Essay” became the first answer, followed by “Business Letters”, “Business Plan” and “Project Proposal”, with the additional definitions, used by many, of “writing useful to the job market”, “writing useful to perform future jobs”, “writing enriched with professional and technical vocabulary”, and “writing digital texts”. This might well be interpreted as a reference to discipline-specific essay writing or writing essays on topics and issues that could be relevant in students’ future professions, which are affected by digitalization especially in after-Covid times. It also reveals an understanding of university studies as being more theoretical and less practical than vocational schools. Students’ *desiderata* also included the development of the oral skills necessary to participate in debates, “being able to reply to formal questions pertaining to the occupational world” – a reference to job interviews but also to meaningful business talk, and “being able to deliver a professional speech with the lexicon of specific fields”, referring to the knowledge of the specialist vocabulary and technical terminology used in the different disciplines of their course of study and related working fields.

1. Which of the following writing activities have you practiced at school?

146 risposte

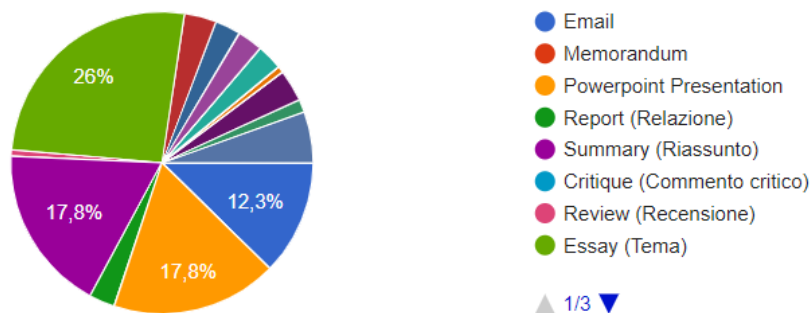


Figure 3 Secondary education most practiced writing skills.

2. Which of the following writing skills should be developed during a university course of English as a foreign language?

146 risposte

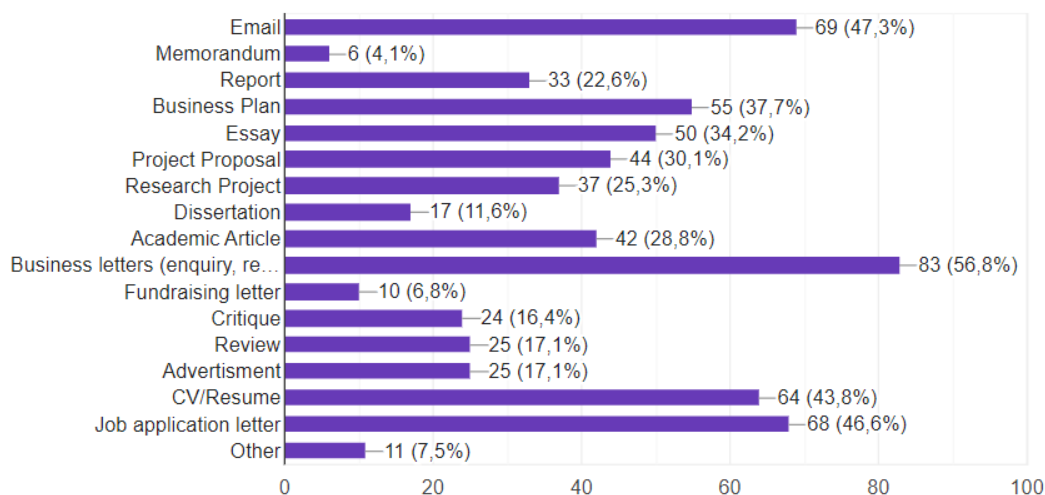


Figure 4 Student' selection of necessary writing activities.

3 A FEW COMMENTS ON SURVEY RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

EAP has originally developed to help non-native English speakers cope with the coursework of UK/US University courses, whose workload generally relies on written texts consisting in in-course assignments and final essays. In other words, the development of EAP programs from their very inception has been explicitly aimed at providing students, both native speakers and English language learners (ELLs), with survival skills by preparing them for college-level work, with the understanding that reading and writing are absolutely essential abilities in academic success. The prevailing content of EAP textbooks mirrors the needs of its preferred target: foreign students and ELLs enrolling or planning to enroll in Anglo-American universities, who need to increase top-down reading processing skills to understand the course reading material, to acquire critical thinking, listening and oral interaction skills to actively participate in lectures and seminars, and develop writing skills necessary for effective note-taking and paper drafting.

Despite a teaching methodology rejuvenation movement, boosted by multiple EU documents and the Italian "Good School Reform" (Law 107/2015), Italian university lessons are more formal and less interactive than Anglo-American lessons, and the Italian university's preferred assessment method is the oral discussion of assigned coursebook material. Even if teamwork and group project presentations are becoming popular assessment tools in 2nd level degree courses and master programs, and more and more exams include written open questions on course main content, oral examinations are generally

used both at Bachelor and Master level to verify students' outcomes, especially in humanities. Written tests are typically used to verify the mastery of the course program in so-called hard and scientific disciplines, in micro-economics and finance courses and, obviously, in language and translation modules. Therefore, Italian university students and attendees of Italian internationalized courses have different language learning motivations: they need academic speaking skills that go beyond the ability to deliver an oral presentation and that include the micro-language competence to reply to content-based and discipline related oral questions and the development of argumentative and persuasive texts (both oral and written) to cope with exams and final dissertation drafting and oral defense, which may require culturally-tailored skills, given that the Italian academic writing practice still differs from the pragmatically and argumentatively structured Anglo-American one.

Graduate students, in particular, may be involved in fundraising activities and grant-based research projects and, when they do not aim for an academic career, they may start to look for specialist jobs, for which the practice of writing fundraising letters, fundable research proposals, feasibility (business) plans and very detailed technical reports is required.

The future of EAP in Italy seems, therefore, to be in the development of EAPP (English for Academic Professional Purposes) or ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) and different academic literacies that have long been taken into consideration in American University teaching – with the 1980s' Writing Across the Curriculum movement, which later became the “discipline specific literacy” approach [16-17, 18], stressing the importance of teaching students how to write according to the conventions of the different scientific discourse communities.

EAP teaching material needs also to tackle the growing skills gap of 21st century professionals-to-be, who will have to adjust to wikinomics cloud/crowd-working environments and compete in a “uberized” and increasingly digitalized job market. Recent research insists on students' need to develop higher-order thinking skills, cross-cultural communication and cooperation skills, decision making and flexibility [19-20] to become competent and competitive in growing high-digital level occupations [21-22]. EAP courses and textbooks should also take that into account.⁶

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APPENDIX

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