

Exploring EFL Supervisors' Feedback on Postgraduates' Research Proposals: Functions and Foci

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Abstract

Supervisory feedback plays a crucial role in supervising research in higher education. Feedback is a crucial component of successful teaching practices in the context of postgraduate research proposal writing. Effective supervisory feedback can promote supervisees' academic writing and enhance the quality of their research proposals. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the feedback functions and feedback foci that EFL supervisors employ in their written feedback when refining postgraduate research proposals. A qualitative approach and simple descriptive quantitative measures were adopted to address the study's aims and estimate the prevalence of feedback forms. The study's sample included (N = 5) supervisors (4 male and 1 female supervisor) supervising postgraduate students as part of an M.A. in Applied Linguistics program. Data were collected from five supervisory feedback reports on postgraduates' research proposals and proposal drafts. The finding revealed that the EFL supervisors predominantly used directive feedback (52%) in their feedback provision instead of referential (30%) and expressive feedback (18%). Additionally, the findings showed that the EFL supervisors primarily focused on content issues (53%), followed by organization (29%) and appropriateness (19%), and the lowest number of supervisory feedback responses focused on linguistic accuracy (16%). The study provides pedagogical implications for supervisors and recommendations for further studies.

Keywords: EFL supervisors, supervisory feedback, Thesis Proposal Writing

INTRODUCTION

Developing a research proposal is challenging for many postgraduates, mainly because of the limited time for supervision and the authority of supervisory unidirectional written feedback on postgraduates' research proposals (Qunayeer, 2020). In addition, thesis and proposal writing requires a high academic writing quality (Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2021). Furthermore, English is a non-native language in Saudi Arabia, so writing in English is more challenging.

Supervisors often face challenges when providing high-quality, timely, and supportive feedback on research proposals (Chugh et al., 2022; Deshpande, 2017). Researchers are beginning to understand the value of feedback in helping students develop their research proposals and theses (Gezahegn & Gedamu, 2023; Qunayeer, 2020; Saeed et al., 2021). This vital feedback plays a role at all levels of education in facilitating and supporting students (Deshpande, 2017; Chugh et al., 2022).

Despite its significance in scaffolding and guiding postgraduate students' research proposals and thesis writing, there still needs to be research on feedback (Kitchener, 2018; Saeed et al., 2021; Xu, 2017; Zheng et al., 2019). Therefore, more studies are required to understand the nature and practice of supervisors' feedback on research proposals (Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2021; Neupane & Hu, 2021).

Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021) emphasized the necessity of research to understand the focus of written feedback and its language functions. Hence, this study aims to contribute to the literature on how supervisors provide feedback by investigating their functions and foci of written feedback when refining postgraduate research proposals at the Department of English at Majmaah University.

In order to provide effective and successful supervisory feedback to postgraduate research proposals while actively involving the supervisees in the learning process, it is crucial to understand the theoretical underpinnings of supervisory feedback provision. This study is guided by the sociocultural theory developed by Vygotsky in 1980. It assists supervisors in constructing feedback through interactions between supervisors and supervisees. Written feedback is

emphasized in sociocultural research as a means for supervisors to mediate students' intellectual development (Saeed et al., 2021; Saeed et al., 2021). Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021) acknowledge that sociocultural theory can be employed as a framework for research on linguistic functions and feedback foci. In preparing research proposals for postgraduate programs, feedback is essential to effective instructional practices. (Basturkmen et al., 2014; Saeed et al., 2021). To describe the underlying theories of giving feedback, behavioral learning theory (Skinner, 2011) was another theory that served as the basis for this study. Feedback was initially believed to be associated with the behaviorist approach, which views writing instruction as a series of stimuli delivered by the teacher and the student's responses to these stimuli (Gezahegn & Gedamu, 2023; AbuSa'aleek & Alotaibi, 2022; AbuSa'aleek & Shariq, 2021).

Regarding behavioral learning, learners are passive feedback recipients because it is part of the stimulus-response process. Therefore, teachers use behaviorism to instruct learners on responding to various stimuli (Zellermayer, 1989). Feedback can be offered to boost student achievement while considering their recent actions. For example, students can enhance their writing if they receive feedback on their written work (Eggen & Kauchack, 2020).

In order to determine the aspects of how supervisors formulate their feedback on postgraduates' research proposals, studies on the formulation of feedback (see, Basturkmen et al., 2014; Bastola, 2020; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2021; Saeed et al., 2021; Xu, 2017) have examined the functions and foci of the feedback. In this sense, supervisory feedback targets weaknesses and issues associated with language, appropriateness, coherence, cohesion, content, organization, and concepts. In addition, Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021) reported that influential communication of the supervisory feedback to the postgraduates supervisees is essential as how to communicate the message (language function) is as significant as what to communicate (feedback focus).

Other studies have categorized the different functions of supervisory feedback into three main categories: referential, directive, and expressive (Bastola, 2020; Basturkmen et al., 2014; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2021; Saeed et al., 2021; Xu, 2017). Furthermore, Saeed et al. (2021:3) described these categories as "referential (feedback that provides information, corrections, and reformulation), directive (feedback eliciting information such as seeking students' clarification,

justification, and confirmation, and telling and suggesting what to do and not to do), and expressive (registering a positive or negative response)."

Another study has identified the language functions of eight supervisors' written feedback reports on students' theses. Nurie (2018) found that the language function for directive clarification was mainly used, whereas expressive approval was ignored or occasionally used. In other words, the feedback is mainly critical, with little compliments. This suggests that the feedback comments need to be balanced between compliments, criticism, and suggestions.

Concerning the focus/foci of the supervisors' feedback to the postgraduates' supervisees. Basturkmen et al. (2014) reported that supervisors commonly use directive feedback, which includes asking specific questions and making suggestions, to address coherence, cohesion, and content issues. Nevertheless, supervisors frequently use referential feedback to resolve the majority of language correctness and appropriateness-related challenges. The findings of Nurie's study (2018) showed that written feedback on the thesis genre, such as content, linguistic appropriateness, and accuracy, were frequently prioritized. Further studies by (Gul et al., 2016; Lee, 2009; Lucero et al., 2018) revealed that supervisors overemphasize form-focused, local, and surface aspects of the research proposals and thesis at the expense of other semantic, linguistic, or functional elements. Saeed et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative case study on feedback formulation at a Malaysian university. The feedback addresses content, organization, linguistic accuracy, and appropriateness in research proposal writing and is directive, referential, and expressive.

The present study tries to fill the current gap in understanding the impact of supervisory feedback functions and feedback foci, which EFL supervisors employ in their written feedback when refining postgraduate research proposals by using a qualitative approach to analyze the supervisors' feedback. The present study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What feedback functions do supervisors employ in their written feedback when refining postgraduate research proposals?

RQ2: What feedback foci do supervisors focus on in their written feedback when refining postgraduate research proposals?

RESEARCH METHOD

The present study used qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate and examine supervisory feedback practices in depth. Specifically, the study examined the feedback functions and foci EFL supervisors employ in their written feedback to refine postgraduate research proposals at the Department of English at Majmaah University.

According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) and Saldana (2011), employing quantitative and qualitative methods contributes to a better grasp of the study problem. It also enhances the validity and trustworthiness of the findings.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted at the Department of English at Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia, at the end of the second semester of 2022-2023. The study's sample included (N = 5) supervisors (4 male and 1 female supervisor) supervising postgraduate students as part of the M.A. in Applied Linguistics program to protect the supervisors' confidentiality and anonymity of the participating supervisors. Therefore, the researchers assigned pseudonyms to them (S1 to S5), especially in the findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data consisted of five supervisory feedback reports on postgraduates' research proposals, and proposal drafts were utilized as data sources were analyzed based on analytical frameworks of the previous studies (Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2021; Saeed et al., 2021; Xu, 2017). The supervisory feedback reports were coded into three linguistic functions: directive, expressive, and inferential. At the same time, the focus/foci of supervisory feedback were categorized into four categories: content, organization, linguistic accuracy, and appropriateness (Saeed et al., 2021; Xu, 2017).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented based on the two research questions.

RQ1. What Feedback Functions Do Supervisors Employ in Their Written Feedback when Refining Postgraduate Research Proposals?

Table 1. Distribution of the feedback functions

Functions of feedback	Occurrences	Percentage
Referential	36	30%
Directive	70	52%
Expressive	29	18%
Total	135	100%

Quantifying the supervisory feedback on postgraduates' research proposals provides exciting insight into the intensive engagement of the supervisors in feedback on postgraduates' research proposals (Table 1). The supervisory feedback had an overall number of 135 feedback comments on postgraduates' research proposals. First, supervisors most frequently formulated feedback as a directive function (70, 52%), which urges the supervisees to take action toward the mentioned supervisory feedback; directive feedback outweighs feedback formulated as referential (36, 30%); and expressive functions (29, 18%).

Table 2. Number and Percentage of Supervisors' Functions of Feedback

Functions of feedback	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	Overall
Referential	9 (25%)	5 (14%)	9 (25%)	8 (22%)	5 (14%)	36 (27%)
Directive	20 (29%)	16 (23%)	17 (24%)	8 (11%)	9 (13%)	70 (52%)
Expressive	12 (41%)	10 (34%)	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	3 (10%)	29 (21%)
Total	41 (30%)	31 (23%)	28 (21%)	18 (13%)	17 (13%)	135 (100%)

The above supervisory feedback on postgraduates' research proposals (135 overall) was also quantified to determine the number and percentage of feedback responses provided by each supervisor in terms of supervisors' functions of feedback.

The distribution of the amount of supervisory feedback across the five supervisors is provided in Table 2. The findings show that among the five supervisors, the first supervisor provided the highest number of supervisory feedback responses on postgraduates' research proposals, 41 (30%), 20 (29%) of which was formulated as a directive function, while 12 (41%) of the supervisory feedback was formulated as expressive followed by referential functions 9 (25%). The second supervisor provided an overall number of 31 (23%) supervisory

feedback responses formulated as directive 16 (23%), expressive 10 (34%), and referential 5 (14%). In contrast, the third supervisor provided an overall number of 28 (21%) supervisory feedback responses formulated as directive 17 (24%), referential 9 (25%), and expressive 2 (7%). Finally, the last two supervisors provided almost closer overall numbers of supervisory feedback responses (18 13% and 17 (13%) respectively). Their supervisory feedback was formulated as directive, referential, and expressive. The above results show that when the supervisors formulated their feedback, they provided directive feedback. Moreover, such results suggest that the supervisors differ in referential and expressive formulations.

Table 3. Number and Percentage of Supervisors' Subcategories of Feedback Functions

Subcategories of feedback Functions	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	Overall
Directive eliciting information	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	5 (4%)
Directive seeking clarification	8 (89%)	1 (11%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	9 (7%)
Directive seeking justifications	8 (67%)	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	3 (25%)	12 (9%)
Directive suggesting what to do	3 (8%)	10 (27%)	15 (41%)	4 (11%)	5 (14%)	37 (27%)
Referential imperative telling what to do/ not to do	5 (20%)	8 (32%)	3 (12%)	4 (16%)	5 (20%)	25 (19%)
Referential providing information	2 (25%)	1 (13%)	4 (50%)	1 (13%)	0 (0%)	8 (6%)
Referential providing correction	3 (30%)	1 (10%)	3 (30%)	3 (30%)	0 (0%)	10 (7%)
Expressive criticism/ disapproval	11 (41%)	10 (37%)	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	27 (20%)
Expressive approval	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	2 (1%)
Overall	41 (30%)	31 (23%)	28 (21%)	18 (13%)	17 (13%)	135 (100%)

Table 3 shows the subcategories of directive, referential, and expressive feedback language functions. The findings (Table 3) showed that supervisors'

feedback on postgraduates' research proposals was dominantly directive, suggesting what to do—37 (27%)—followed by expressive criticism/disapproval—27 (20%)—and referential imperative telling what to do/not to do—25 (19%). These subcategories of feedback language functions call the supervisees to clarify their ideas and do multiple revisions as directed by supervisors' comments. In addition, they direct the supervisees to make necessary modifications to the postgraduates' research proposals. On the other hand, expressive approval supervisory feedback was found to be rare and insignificant—2 (1%)—in the feedback directed to postgraduates' research proposals. This implies that the provision of expressive criticism/disapproval feedback exceeds the feedback directed to acknowledge the strength of supervisees' attempts.

Table 4. Sample of Supervisory feedback

Functions	Intentions	Samples
Directive	Providing corrections	S1: Concerning students' questionnaire. The scale consists of the following values which are incorrect. It should be vis versa
	Seeking clarification	S2: How significant is your study? How does it contribute to the field, community?
Referential	Telling what to do/ not to do	S1: The student must read the literature review of the recent articles about his/her area.
		S2: Try to add a section for all possible definitions and argue which one fits the context of your study.
Expressive	Criticism	S1: This is not the way to write the literature review.
		S2: Research instruments is not well written and not organized. S3: Overall, the proposal is not well-written and there is serious ethical issues.

Table 4 provides samples of supervisory feedback for different functions and intentions. The feedback examples in the table are divided into categories based on the function and intention behind the feedback: directive, referential, and expressive.

RQ2: What Feedback Foci Do Supervisors Focus in Their Written Feedback when Refining Postgraduate Research Proposals?

Concerning the four areas of the focus of supervisory feedback on postgraduates' research proposals (Table 5), content, organization, linguistic accuracy, and appropriateness, Table 5 indicates that the majority of the

supervisory feedback pertains to content-related issues (71, 53%), followed by the organization (29, 29%), appropriateness (19, 19%), and the least amount of feedback concentrates on linguistic accuracy (16, 16%).

Table 5. Distribution of the Foci/ Focus of Supervisory Feedback

Foci/ focus of feedback	Occurrences	Percentage
Content	71	53%
Organization	29	29%
Linguistic accuracy	16	16%
Appropriateness	19	19%
Total	135	100%

The supervisory feedback on postgraduates' research proposals (135 overall) was also quantified to determine the number and percentage of feedback responses provided by each supervisor in terms of supervisors' foci/focus of feedback. The distribution of the number of supervisory feedback responses across the five supervisors is provided in Table 6. The findings reveal that among the five supervisors, the first supervisor provided the highest number of supervisory feedback responses on postgraduates' research proposals, 41 (30%), 23 (32%) focused on content, followed by organization and appropriateness have almost closer overall numbers of supervisory feedback responses. However, the lowest amount of feedback focuses on linguistic accuracy. The second supervisor provided 31 (23%) supervisory feedback distributed as content 12(17%), followed by the organization. At the same time, linguistic accuracy and appropriateness have almost closer overall numbers of supervisory feedback responses.

The third supervisor scored the third highest level in providing supervisory feedback as indicated by the overall number of responses (28, 21%) that focused on content 14 (20%), organization 8 (28%), and linguistic accuracy 3 (19%) and appropriateness 3 (16%). The last two supervisors have almost closer overall supervisory feedback response numbers (18 13% and 17 (13%) respectively). Their supervisory feedback was focused mainly on the content.

The findings show that the supervisors' linguistic feedback formulation varied according to the writing issues they addressed. Specifically, directive feedback dominates the supervisory feedback when commenting on all facets of writing issues and organization, which the supervisors highly address. Finally, comparing the supervisors, it is interesting that the supervisors' foci/focus of feedback was

directed to the content issues compared to the organization, appropriateness and linguistic accuracy address issues. This indicates that postgraduates' research proposals have content issues. Moreover, such findings could be attributed to the supervisee's ability and writing skills in research proposals.

Table 6 Number and Percentage of Supervisors' Subcategories of Foci/ Focus of Feedback

Subcategories of foci/ focus of feedback		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	Overall
Content	Clarity of expressions & Consistency	7 (47)	2 (13)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)	15 (11%)
	Elaboration	13 (39%)	6 (18%)	1 (3%)	5 (15%)	8 (24%)	33 (24%)
	supporting argument	2 (11%)	3 (16%)	10 (53%)	3 (16%)	1 (5%)	19 (14%)
	Relevance of ideas	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)	4 (3%)
Organization	Structure	1 (6%)	8 (44%)	8 (44%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)	18 (13%)
	cohesion & coherence	4 (44%)	3 (33%)	1 (11%)	0 (0%)	1 (11%)	9 (7%)
Linguistic accuracy	Grammar & Sentence structure	4 (29%)	2 (14%)	3 (21%)	5 (36%)	0 (0%)	14 (10%)
	Vocabulary choice, Spelling & punctuation	0 (0%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	4 (3%)
Appropriateness	Academic and discipline conventions	8 (42%)	4 (21)	3 (16%)	1 (5%)	3 (16%)	19 (14%)
Overall		41 (30%)	31 (23%)	28 (21%)	18 (13%)	17 (13%)	135 (100)

Table 6 depicts that four attributes were used to measure postgraduates' research proposals regarding feedback foci/focus. Table 6 presents the subcategories of content, organization, linguistic accuracy, and appropriateness feedback focus. The findings in Table 6 showed that supervisors' feedback on postgraduates' research proposals was dominantly content elaboration 33 (24%),

followed by content supporting argument 19 (14%) and appropriateness of academic and discipline conventions 19 (14%). Organization Structure 18 (13%) was the fourth most frequent supervisor feedback focus on postgraduates' research proposals, followed by the clarity of expressions & consistency 15 (11%) and Grammar & Sentence structure 14 (10%). On the other hand, the supervisory feedback rarely focusses on cohesion & coherence 9 (7%), vocabulary choice, Spelling & punctuation 4 (3%), the relevance of ideas 4 (3%) and was found to be rare and insignificant in the feedback directed to postgraduates' research proposals. This implies that the provision of content and organization feedback focus exceeds the feedback directed to linguistic accuracy and appropriateness.

Table 7. Sample of Focus of Supervisory feedback

Focus	Sample
Content	S1: The student needs to mention the previous studies conducted in the Saudi context. S2: The difference between statement of problem and significance was not clear.
Organization	S1: The Abstract consists of (aims, methodology, sample of the study, tools or instruments of the study, findings, and recommendations). S2: These paragraphs better be moved to lit review section
Appropriateness	S2: Questionnaire is not always quantitative. It could be qualitative if open ended questions were used. S1: APA style APA citation?
Linguistic accuracy	S1: Delete Al from (Al Majma'ah University) throughout the proposal. The correct name of the university is Majmaah University. S2: Tense, word order

Table 7 provides samples of focus of supervisory feedback for different focus. The feedback examples in the table are divided into four categories content, organization, appropriateness and linguistic accuracy.

Discussion

This study aimed to determine the feedback functions and feedback foci that EFL supervisors employ in their written feedback when refining postgraduate research proposals. The findings show that the distribution of supervisory feedback functions can be categorized into three types: directive, referential, and expressive, as found in EFL supervisors' written feedback. The findings are consistent with previous research (Bastola, 2020; Basturkmen et al., 2014; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2021; Lucero et al., 2018; Nurie, 2018; Saeed et al., 2021; Xu, 2017).

Additionally, the analysis of supervisors' feedback indicated that they primarily utilized directive feedback rather than referential or expressive feedback when giving feedback. This finding does not align with previous research (Kumar & Stracke, 2007), which indicated that supervisors emphasized directive and expressive feedback functions equally. In contrast, Basturkmen et al. (2014) focused on referential feedback, while Bastola (2020) highlighted expressive feedback as the dominant form. Furthermore, Saeed et al. (2021) reported that excessive use of questioning by supervisors in engaging postgraduate students during the feedback process resulted in a heavy reliance on directive feedback.

Concerning the subcategories of feedback functions, the study's findings indicated that supervisors mostly provided directive suggestions on what should be done for postgraduate research proposals. Expressive criticism or disapproval and referential feedback providing imperative statements about what to do were also present but to a lesser extent. The findings are consistent with previous studies (Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2021; Saeed et al., 2021). According to Saeed et al. (2021), the lowest type of expressive feedback describes supervisor-supervisee relationships in different settings. In Gedamu and Gezahegn's (2021) study, expressive approval (praise) was seen as rare.

Postgraduate students should receive positive evaluations and constructive criticism for their research proposals. While it is essential to acknowledge and praise their strengths, it is equally important to provide critical feedback that highlights areas for improvement and points out weaknesses in their writing. Previous research studies by Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021) and Ghazal et al. (2014) have highlighted that supervisors provide feedback without offering suggestions for improvement in their supervisees' work. In contrast, Hyland and Hyland (2001) reported that praise feedback is commonly utilized when providing feedback.

The focus of supervisors' feedback can be categorized into four areas: content organization, linguistic accuracy, and appropriateness. The findings of the study indicate that EFL supervisors primarily focus on addressing content-related issues in research proposals, followed by attention given to organization, appropriateness, and linguistic accuracy. These results suggest content-related issues in research proposals made by postgraduates.

Concerning the subcategories within the feedback focus, the study demonstrates that EFL supervisors mainly elaborate on content aspects in their feedback for research proposals, followed by supporting arguments within the content and assessing adherence to disciplinary conventions. Feedback related to structure and organization ranked fourth in frequency, followed by considerations of clarity of expression, consistency, grammar usage, and sentence structure.

Furthermore, these findings could be attributed to differences in supervisees' abilities and writing skills when crafting research proposals.

The results of this study align with the research conducted by Basturkmen et al. (2014) and Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021). Gedamu and Gezahegn's study (2021) found that supervisors primarily focused on content knowledge followed by accuracy and appropriateness. Similarly, the current study supports Basturkmen et al.'s (2014) findings that significant attention is given to content and idea development in feedback. However, these results contradict Lucero et al.'s (2018), Saeed et al. (2021), and Xu's (2017) findings, where feedback predominantly revolved around issues related to accuracy followed by content and appropriateness, while organizations received the least attention.

The findings of this study suggest that postgraduate students may benefit from enhancing their content development when working on their research proposals. Additionally, EFL supervisors should consider offering feedback to assist students in improving their writing skills. To conclude, these findings guide supervisors and postgraduate students to adopt an approach to feedback incorporating referential, directive, and expressive styles which successfully tackle aspects such as organization, appropriateness, linguistic accuracy, and content.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this study was to examine how EFL supervisors provide feedback on research proposals. The analysis of the feedback given by EFL supervisors revealed that they primarily used directive feedback rather than referential and expressive feedback. Additionally, concerning the focus of supervisors' feedback, the study found that the supervisors primarily addressed content-related issues, followed by organization, appropriateness, and linguistic accuracy.

The feedback provided by supervisors on students' research proposals has implications for teaching and learning. Effective supervisory feedback can improve students' academic writing skills and enhance the quality of their research proposals. Therefore, it is recommended that supervisors strike a balance between types of feedback styles, such as expressive and referential feedback, which improve proposal quality, encourage students, and increase their confidence. Since effective feedback formulation is crucial for postgraduate proposal writing, postgraduate students and supervisors should consider participating in workshops and seeking peer support to enhance their feedback skills. Furthermore, supervisors are advised to carefully formulate their feedback to actively and critically attract the postgraduates to engage in their proposal writing (Saeed et al., 2021).

Despite the study's contribution to earlier research on supervisory feedback in the context of postgraduate research proposals, several limitations need to be addressed for future investigation. First, the findings on feedback formulation are based on five supervisors' feedback data and reports, and there may need to be more comprehensive data. Therefore, future research should use a mixed-methods approach and interview supervisors to gain an engaging understanding of supervisory feedback. Second, it is necessary to investigate how postgraduate students perceive supervisory feedback and how it affects their learning outcomes. Moreover, examining supervisors' perspectives on the feedback they offer is essential.

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