

REVEALING EFL STUDENTS' LEARNING ENGAGEMENT IN A VIRTUAL SPEAKING CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Technology has made it possible for education to occur without boundaries; thus, virtual learning has become a common mode in the realm of English language teaching. This study aimed to investigate four EFL students' learning engagement in a virtual speaking classroom, highlighting four constructs of learning engagement: behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and agentic engagement. A phenomenological case study was employed with four EFL students enrolling in a virtual speaking classroom as participants to gain rich data collection. Non-participant observations and the data were gathered through a series of in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to answer the research question. The findings revealed that behaviour, cognitive, and agentic engagement in the EFL virtual speaking classroom were identified, yet emotional engagement and positive emotion were missing. Accordingly, more studies on learning engagement associated with other variables and different settings are recommended for future researchers

Keywords: Virtual Speaking Classroom, Learning Engagement, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

INTRODUCTION

In this era of extensive access to information, technology has become an integral part of everyday life. This has been impacting the educational life for several years. Accordingly, learning processes, which were initially carried out face-to-face, are now more in a virtual mode. Virtual learning, characterized by an absence of physical interaction, has made technology integration as a learning tool necessary. Ferrer et al. (2022) have observed that the adoption of virtual learning has transformed the learning process, with students either demonstrating exceptional performance or experiencing a decline in engagement. Engagement is defined as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the learner devotes to the academic experience, and is claimed as 'the holy grail of learning' (Sinatra et al., 2015) Learning engagement plays a critical role and is found to be strong and positively correlated with learning achievement (Lei et al., 2018).

Engagement is a multifaceted concept comprising three, and occasionally four, separate but related and mutually reinforcing facets of behavior, emotion, cognition, and agency (Fredricks et al., 2016; Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Lee, 2014; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). The behavioral engagement is concerned with the positive aspects of students' academic conduct, like their involvement, diligence, determination, or focus (Reeve et al., 2025; Reeve & Lee, 2014). It can be operationally assessed by observing the duration and level of student engagement with assignments (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Cognitive engagement is defined as the level of students' motivation to complete learning tasks, self-regulation, and learning techniques (Reeve et al., 2025; Reeve & Lee, 2014). The amount of effort students put into comprehending educational tasks is the most widely used indicator of this involvement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Reeve et al., 2025). The emotional engagement refers to the presence of a feeling of interest while participating in a task, as well as the absence of a negative emotional state, such as worry (Reeve et al., 2025; Reeve & Lee, 2014). The fourth and most recently proposed component of student involvement is agentic engagement, which refers to the extent to which students contribute positively to the flow of the teaching they receive by voicing preferences, asking questions, and communicating their needs and wants to the teacher (Montenegro, 2017; Reeve & Lee, 2014). Highlighting agentic engagement in their 2025 and 2022 works, Reeve et al. argue that this should be taken into consideration since it fosters three key educational benefits: supportive learning environments, motivational satisfaction, and effective functioning.

The vital role of learning engagement has fostered scholars to investigate it. The studies ranged from identifying learning engagement in language skills classrooms (Anjarwati & Sa'adah, 2021; Ngoc Kim Tuyen et al., 2024; Robillos, 2023) exploring learning engagement with other psychological variables, such as motivation and self-efficacy (Fredricks et al., 2016; Krauss et al., 2024; Salim et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021), factors influencing learning engagement (Scherer et al., 2017), strategies in enhancing learning engagement (Goyal & Krishnamurthy, 2018; Heflin & Macaluso, 2021; Pontual Falcão et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021), and the construct and measurement of learning engagement (Castro et al., 2017; Lei et al., 2018; Reeve & Lee, 2014; Veiga, 2016). Lei et al. (2018) found that student engagement and academic achievement were strongly and positively correlated overall. Furthermore, their analysis of the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement revealed that nearly all of these dimensions were positively associated with academic achievement. Confirming Lei et al. (2018), Wang et al. (2021) note that learning

engagement has been a popular topic due to positive psychology, a direct approach to learning that strongly predicts student achievement.

In terms of encouraging student learning engagement, virtual learning may provide pedagogical and technical barriers for both teachers and students. The nonphysical environment creates challenging emotional and intellectual situations that surround the learning process. Students' responses to virtual learning environments varied; some showed greater motivation, while others showed uneasiness. This environment is believed to influence the interaction between teachers and students, as well as among students, and how each party engages in the learning process. Moreover, e-learning tools can hinder engagement by causing boredom, stress, and distraction. Jezzini-Martinez et al., (2022) and Omona's (2022) study found that online discussions can be challenging due to rapid topic shifts and large class sizes. Some learners suggested regulating speaking time to prevent left-out students, while concerns about plagiarism emphasized the need for enhanced checks. Another study by Sardabi et al. (2025) exploring the implementation of effective corrective feedback practices in traditional and virtual classroom settings reveals that maintaining effective interaction and providing corrective feedback, despite the adaptability of L2 class discourse, was a great challenge.

However, an acceptable learning environment possibly provides a process that allows students to actively engage with valuable knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Ngoc Kim Tuyen et al. (2024) found that e-learning tools improve student engagement by facilitating communication and discussion, forming a sense of well-being, and encouraging students to invest in their work. As it was found by Robilos (2023) that using the FlipGrid app enhances students' speaking abilities, increases communication engagement, and transforms language learning classrooms into modern, tech-based settings through metacognitive methods. Bond & Bedenlier (2019) also note that educational technology can facilitate students' engagement in a virtual learning environment. According to Danesh et al. (2015), taking virtual classes can help students become more proficient communicators and positively impact their speaking abilities. Besides, Hamouda (2020) notes that virtual classes significantly improved EFL students' speaking skills, resulting in significant improvement in post-test scores compared to traditional speaking instruction alone.

Some studies (Anjarwati & Sa'adah, 2021; Fredricks et al., 2016; Goyal & Krishnamurthy, 2018; Lei et al., 2018; Ngoc Kim Tuyen et al., 2024; Pontual Falcão et al., 2018) have confirmed that learning engagement plays a vital role in the language education realm. The fast development of technology is inevitable, and is found as a positive alternative to conventional face-to-face

classrooms. However, several studies on the use of technology and learning engagement are still found to be inconsistent. Therefore, the present study would like to further investigate how EFL students' learning engagement in a virtual speaking classroom was, and what factors impeded their learning engagement. Unlike previous researches that mostly focus on three dimensions of learning engagement, the present research employed the latest dimensions of learning engagement (Reeve et al., 2025; Reeve & Lee, 2014). Thus, investigations on learning engagement in EFL speaking classrooms are noteworthy. Employing the theory from Reeve & Lee (2014) that mentions four dimensions of learning engagement, the present study aims to answer the following research questions; How do EFL students in a virtual speaking classroom exhibit behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic engagement, as conceptualized by Reeve's four dimensions?

METHOD

Aiming to depict how EFL students exhibit the four dimensions of learning engagement and identify factors that impede EFL students' learning engagement in the virtual speaking classroom, a phenomenological case study was employed. A phenomenological approach embedded within a case study allows the researchers to recognize and value the resemblances between learning experiences and the distinctiveness of each one (Yin, 2014). The unit of analysis was four EFL students enrolling in Speaking for Everyday Life, a course offered by the English Language Education department of a private university in East Java. The unit of analysis was purposively selected due to several parameters, i.e., were in the third year of study, joined the course fully in all the virtual sessions, and gave their consent.

The non-participant observations were carried out during six weekly virtual classroom sessions, each spanning one hundred minutes. The observation was done by watching the record of the virtual classroom meeting. Watching the recorded version of classroom interaction allowed the researcher to make a thorough observation. The observations were done to identify the presence of the four dimensions of learning engagement during the virtual teaching and learning process of the speaking course. Following the observations, multiple in-depth interviews were conducted to yield any evidence of learning engagement during teaching and learning done in the virtual classroom. The interviews were conducted with four purposively selected participants. Two of the participants were chosen because they shown a high degree of engagement, whereas the other two demonstrated an insufficient degree of engagement. Besides, the interviews following the observation worked as data triangulation before the conclusion was drawn (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Vargas-Bianchi, (2025) pattern-matching thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data. This method involved comparing the predicted patterns with those that have been observed empirically, as reported by Reeve & Lee (2014). It also involved identifying any variances or gaps. It began with printing out notes from the observations and transcribing the interview verbatim. The data was analyzed inductively by matching them with the four predetermined dimensions of engagement by Reeve & Lee (2014). Firstly, some data were reduced by scanning to identify salient text and condense descriptions. The texts were then categorized to yield themes. The next step was conclusion drawing by going back and forth, ensuring that the new findings matched the empirical findings (Reeve & Lee, 2014). In this case, the two researchers took turns analyzing the data and emerging findings. First, they analyzed the data individually using pattern matching. Then, they examined the identified themes and emerging findings collectively to verify the accuracy of the results. This process provided reliability, validity, and an additional layer of triangulation (Yin, 2014).

FINDINGS

EFL Students' Learning Engagement in the EFL Virtual Speaking Classroom

The data revealed that among the four components of the learning engagement, the behavior and cognitive components were mostly exhibited by the EFL students in the virtual speaking classroom. Meanwhile, the agentic engagement was not much exhibited by the EFL students.

Behavioral Engagement

Referring to Reeve & Tseng, (2011), Reeve et al. (2025), Reeve & Lee (2014), behavioral engagement comprises five indicators: students listened carefully, put effort into school tasks, paid careful attention when the teacher presented a new topic, and when the class started a new project, they put forth a lot of effort. However, among those indicators, only three were identified in the virtual speaking classroom. The students demonstrated that they carefully listened to the teacher's explanation and worked attentively to complete their school tasks. They also admitted that they were more attentive when they found the materials easy to understand.

The students said that they listen carefully during teaching and learning activities, even though in virtual classes. As presented in the following excerpt.

R : "Do you listen or pay attention carefully during online teaching and learning?"

St1 : “Yes”

R : “What's the example?”

St1 : “I listen to the material if it is easy to understand, but if the material is difficult, it's a bit lazy to listen to the lesson.”

The excerpt from the students above reveals that the respondent paid attention in the virtual speaking class, due to the level of difficulty of the material covered. If the material was easy to understand, it was not difficult for the students to pay attention to the lecturer. Another interview excerpt reveals that the students work hard when starting something new in class.

R : “What do you do before the new material starts?”

St2 : “I usually prefer to look for the new material on YouTube while listening to the person explain and see the pictures, so I have to look at the material first.”

R : “Do you try hard when you get new material?”

St2 : “Yes, I learned the basics. For example, what debate is, I have to know first. If there is a problem, maybe I can ask my friends.”

Similarly, another student notes that she put some effort into preparing for the coming meeting.

R : “If you get new material, do you study hard about it?”

St2 : “I listened, but if I already know, just look for other references, maybe Google or YouTube.”

From the interview excerpts, the students said that as soon as they are taught something new in class, they put forth a lot of effort. They try to work hard before the class and study the basics of the new material in class. In the virtual speaking classroom during the teaching and learning process, the students stayed focused since they had prepared the materials.

R : “What is the percentage of your attention during the online speaking class?”

St3 : “75% pay attention, 25% not paying attention”

R : “Are you paying attention to online classes or not?”

St3 : “Alhamdulillah, I always pay attention, because if I don't pay attention to the instructions properly, I usually ask a lot of questions later to other friends. It's not

necessarily that our friends also understand, so we have to pay attention to it ourselves”.

R : “What is the percentage of your paying attention in one meeting?”

St4 : “If there is a presentation?”

R : “Yes”

St4 : “Maybe 20% up to 40%, but I don't pay attention.”

The observation and the interview reveal that In the virtual speaking classroom, the majority of the students' behavioral involvement was shown in the form of being interested and attentive. However, the intensity of the attention varied, which might be due to the level of difficulty of the learning materials. This indicator of behavioral engagement still exists in this class. The excerpts depict that behavioral engagement occurred during the teaching and learning process in the virtual speaking classroom. In other words, behavioral engagement occurs during teaching and learning activities in speaking courses with a virtual system.

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement has eight indicators (Reeve et al., 2011; Reeve & Lee, 2014; Reeve & Lee, 2014), namely (1) completing course works, the students try to relate what they are learning to what they already know, (2) when the students study, they try to connect what they are learning with their own experiences, (3) they try to make all the different ideas fit together and make sense when they study, (4) they make up their examples to help them understand the important concepts they study, (5) before they begin to study, they think about what they want to get done, (6) when they are working on their schoolwork, they stop once in a while and go over what they have been doing, (7) as they study, they keep track of how much they understand, not just if they are getting the right answers, and (8) if what they are working on is difficult to understand, they change the way they learn the material. The present study identified three of the aforementioned indicators that can be seen and occur in this virtual speaking classroom. The data from the interview yielded that the students tried to relate what they had learned to their existing knowledge and experiences. Besides, some students admitted that they changed the way they learned the material when it was difficult to understand. The cognitive engagement had given an acceptable contribution to the instructional activities in the virtual speaking classroom. The cognitive engagement was found to occur when students connected their current knowledge with new knowledge, applied what they had

learned to their own experiences, or changed the way they approached challenging materials. The following excerpts have been selected to illustrate how the students' cognitive involvement was attained throughout the virtual speaking classroom's teaching-learning process.

R : “When you do something or an assignment, do you usually connect it with what you already know about the material in the course?”

St2 : “Yes, I connected it.”

R : “What's the example?”

St2 : “Yes, I remind you that this was explained yesterday, for example, this means that it has to be like this, so it's easy to do it.”

R : “When you do assignments, do you relate what you learn to what you know?”

St3 : “Yes”

R : “Why?”

St3 : “because they are related and I connected both of them to make it easier to learn and to do the work”.

R : “Do you like connecting between material and what you already know?”

St4 : “Yes”

R : “What's the example?”

St4 : “For example, I know the debate material and then I match it with my previous knowledge, what is this, true or not, does it fit or not, I continue to compare and find out which one is right and which one is wrong.”

The students joining the virtual speaking classroom admitted that they relate what they learn to what they know. This shows that they indeed made cognitive engagement during the class. Further, the students were able to connect what they were learning to their personal experience could be found in the following excerpt.

R : “If you have an assignment, do you relate it to your experiences?”

St1 : “Yes”

R : “What's the example?”

St1 : “I relate to my experience. For example, make a video. When I was in junior high school, I joined in documentation team and also joined to wall magazine class. Those

experiences make me love making videos and making some news now.” (See appendix 1, respondent 1).

R : “Have you ever connected the material with the experience you've had?”

St2 : “Yes, I have, for example, made an assignment, watch first, watch TV, oh it turns out like this, oh it has to be like this, the clothes are like this.”

R : “When you study, do you relate it to your own experience?”

St3 : “Yes, I do, because there used to be a task like that, so connect it.”

R : “How about relate to your experience?”

St3 : “Yes, also.”

R : “What's the example?”

St4 : “If it's experience, I'll relate it to experience rather than theory.”

R : “What example? If you relate experience and theory”

St4 : “The debate, maybe in theory it should be like this, in fact, in my experience, the debate is not like that.”

From the excerpt can be explained that the students connected their experience with what they are learning. All of the representative students said that they connected it. Meanwhile, students were also noted they somehow change the way they learnt the materials if they found the materials were challenging. This is demonstrated in the excerpt below.

A : “Have you ever changed it in another way?”

St1 : “Another way is with friends, so it's a discussion like that, in groups, sometimes it's also a bit connected, but it's better if I study alone.”

A : “If you have difficulty learning, have you ever changed the way you study?”

St2 : “Yes, for example, at this hour, I feel tired, so I'll just close it later, maybe I'll study later tonight, maybe my mood will be better.”

A : “If you have difficulty understanding, do you change the way you learning?”

St3 : “Yes, I often change my understanding like that, so if I don't understand during reading, I will watch the video.” (see appendix 1, respondent 3).

A : “Have you ever changed the way you study with the aim of more understanding?”

St4 : “Yes”

A : “What's the example?”

St4 : “That's my way of learning, it's easier on YouTube and Google than the lecturer's explanation on Zoom.”

From the excerpt, the students said that they change the way they learn to get a better understanding of the material. They noted that they did many things. They changed the time of the study. They also changed the source of the material. And they changed the style of their study.

Agentic Engagement

Agentic engagement came from the students themselves. Agentic engagement has four indicators (Montenegro, 2017; Reeve & Lee, 2014; Reeve & Tseng, 2011), namely: (1) the students ask questions during the class, (2) the students share what they enjoy and dislike to the teacher, (3) the students express their personal choices and views, and (4) The students provide recommendations on how they could enhance the class. As previously mentioned, observations and interviews were conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the agentic interaction that occurs throughout this virtual setting. The observations revealed that the number of students who asked questions at every meeting during the virtual speaking classroom varied. However, the students who raised the questions were not the same. This showed that each student had the initiative to enhance their understanding of the materials. The students also shared their preference for the application used for the virtual speaking class. This was revealed in the interview. Another indicator revealed through the interview was that they negotiated how they would complete their speaking tasks. The following are some excerpts from the interview.

R : “Have you shared your feelings with the class or with the lecturer?”

St1 : “Not to my lecture, but to my classmate.” To the class leader, I mean. She will give the lecture then.

- R : Can you describe what you meant? When was it?’
- St1 : So, hmmm..., our class (speaking class) was conducted using Zoom, but due to the internet connection, some of us could not do the dialogue smoothly. At that time, the issue was shared with our lecturer by our class leader.
- A : “During online teaching and learning activities in speaking courses, do you often ask questions in class?”
- St2 : “Not too often, but sometimes if there's something I don't understand, I'll ask.”
- St3 : “No, because I rarely ask.”
- R : “What factors influence you to rarely ask?”
- St2 : “I think I already understand the instruction”.
- St3 : “If the explanation is clear enough, so if it's complete, there's nothing to ask”.

The excerpt above explained that the students joining the virtual speaking classroom established agentic engagement by asking questions during teaching and learning activities, even though the frequency of each student is different. Besides, they shared their feeling about the virtual teaching and learning process.

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement describes students' emotional states throughout instruction and learning events, notably in virtual meetings of the speaking course. In this aspect, the positive emotions felt by the students did not occur.

- A : “Do you like joining the virtual speaking classes?”
- D : “Actually not, because we talk, we communicate, so it's better offline. It's hard to be online.” (see appendix 1).
- A : “Is learning in speaking courses fun or not?”
- R : “Not at all.”
- A : “Why?”
- R : “Because the speaking material is difficult to understand and the lecturer is also a bit like that.” (see appendix 1).
- A : “Do you think this online speaking class is fun?”
- T : “No, not fun” (see appendix 1).

The students felt normal felt bored in the virtual speaking course. They thought that the speaking course should be done with a face-to-face meeting. A speaking class should be filled with speaking practice, pronunciation practice, intonation practice, and other relevant exercises. The students did not feel enjoyment, interest, or fun in this class. The observation data revealed that some of the students could not maintain smooth communication during the virtual speaking classroom due to poor internet connection.

DISCUSSION

The current study's findings show that, among the four characteristics of engagement among students, only emotional engagement was absent. The behavioral, cognitive, and agentic engagements were identified, with behavioral and cognitive engagements being the most prevalent. The findings of the present study contradict those of Mulia & Emaliana (2021) but confirm those of Anjarwati & Sa'adah (2021), Ngoc Kim Tuyen et al. (2024), and Philp & Duchesne (2016). The findings of the present study reveal that the setting, the virtual classroom, has considerable influence on how the students engage in their learning. Moreover, the present research confirms Reeve & Lee (2014) that engagement should be seen authoritative act.

The aspects that were frequently exhibited during the virtual teaching and learning activities in the present research were behavioral engagement. The behavior engagement was reflected in the way the students carefully listened and paid attention to the teacher's explanation as well as worked hard to complete their school tasks. The students in the virtual speaking classroom acknowledged that they pay close attention in class when the lecturer explains the material. Being attentive and interested was also indicated by Robillos (2023) as students' active involvement in the virtual learning activities. The present research also confirms Fredricks et al. (2016) that paying attention, raising questions, engaging in conversations, and adhering to rules and conventions are examples of positive behaviors. Similarly, Thi & Ha (2021) state that behavioral engagement relates to the student's participation manners in the instructional process, which could boost comprehension, acquisition of knowledge, and academic work. Besides, this finding supports what Mulia & Emaliana (2021) found, that the students exhibited engagement through their behaviors by exhibiting interest in learning as well as finding personal meaning in it.

Furthermore, the students joining the virtual speaking classroom in the present research were highly engaged in the learning process cognitively. The findings highlighted how students adapt their learning to better understand material, changing factors like time, source, and study style. One

excerpt illustrated that when they believed they didn't fully comprehend the course material, they searched YouTube for additional explanations. This reveals that the students made some efforts to fill their cognitive gaps. This finding aligns with Thi & Ha (2021), who noted that planning, investment, self-regulation, perseverance, and attitudes and self-perceptions about learning are all strong indicators of cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement plays a critical role in determining students' learning motivations, which are closely linked to their level of involvement. Besides, Ceren Çelik & Alpan (2023) argue that when students are cognitively engaged, they can enhance their retention and communication skills.

The agentic aspect was one aspect that occurred in this class. Despite varying in frequency, the students who joined the virtual speaking classroom demonstrated agentic participation by asking questions during the teaching and learning sessions. Additionally, they expressed how they felt about the online teaching and learning experience. The findings support Almusharraf & Bailey (2021) that interaction with the lecturer makes students think they will perform well in EFL lessons. Notably, in their study, they discovered that academic learning expectation and agentic involvement levels were positively correlated in video-conference EFL sessions. The present finding is consistent with Reeve (2013) claim that agentic engagement, which involves personalized participation and authoritative learning, enhances instructional conditions and improves the learning environment. The students utilize independence and initiative to take control of their education (Montenegro, 2017). Furthermore, students actively influence their learning by enhancing instructional settings as the agents of learning (Reeve, 2013; Reeve et al., 2022). By articulating their preferences, posing questions, and conveying their needs, students can become co-creators of their educational experience and work with their teachers to improve classrooms (Wakefield, 2016).

This study describes how students engage in a virtual speaking classroom. The present research reveals that the aspects of learning engagement in the virtual speaking classroom were behavioral, cognitive, and agentic, but not emotional. The students showed behavioral engagement by paying attention, putting effort into the tasks, and completing the tasks. They were also cognitively engaged by applying various strategies and efforts to comprehend materials. The students exhibited agentic engagement by showing feelings and communicating them to the lecturer. The virtual speaking classroom still utilized Google Classroom and Google Meet as the virtual application. The choice of the virtual application might contribute to the establishment of the learning engagement. Widiastuti et al. (2023) found that 83.6 % of 232 student participants said that internet connection was the biggest barrier during virtual teaching learning activities, and 29.8%

said that they lacked of tool to support their virtual learning. The environment, facilities, infrastructure, and student and teacher preparation all are believed to have a considerable effect on learning engagement.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the EFL students in a virtual speaking classroom exhibited behavior, cognitive, and agentic engagement, the four dimensions of engagement by Reeve & Lee's (2014). Exhibiting behavior engagement, the students paid full attention and carefully listened to the lecture during the virtual meeting. Their hard work in completing the course tasks was another behavior engagement indicator shown during the virtual speaking classroom. Cognitive engagement was identified in the virtual speaking classroom. The EFL students showed cognitive engagement in the way they related what they learned to what they already knew. In this case, they tried to connect the new knowledge with their own experience. They also altered the way they learnt when the materials were difficult. These are how the EFL students exhibited cognitive engagement in a virtual speaking classroom. Another dimension exhibited was agentic engagement. This dimension was revealed when the students were found to be actively questioning during the virtual meeting. However, the students were not found to be emotionally engaged in the virtual speaking classroom. In other words, the EFL students exhibited three of the four dimensions of engagement by Reeve & Lee (2014) in a virtual speaking classroom. This study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding student engagement theories and topics. More significantly, it offers insights into the learning engagement that students exhibit in higher education in Academic Speaking virtual classes in EFL countries, particularly Indonesia. This gives other researchers the chance to investigate student learning engagement further.

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