

Enhancing Vocational High School Students' Reading Comprehension Through Critical Reading Tasks: An Action Research Study in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of critical reading tasks to enhance the reading comprehension, engagement, and strategy use of Indonesian vocational high school students. A total of 36 eleventh-grade students at SMK Negeri 10 Makassar participated in two cycles of Classroom Action Research (CAR), incorporating tasks such as prediction, annotation, questioning, summarizing, and retelling. Data were collected through observations, student questionnaires, teacher interviews, and student work samples, and analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings revealed that critical reading tasks led to significant improvements in students' ability to identify main ideas, make inferences, and summarize texts. Additionally, students exhibited increased engagement and reduced reliance on dictionaries. The study highlights the value of structured reading tasks in promoting active reading and collaborative learning, while also identifying ongoing challenges related to vocabulary acquisition. The research provides practical insights for EFL teachers in vocational settings, demonstrating that critical reading strategies can foster higher-order thinking skills, enhance comprehension, and transform reading into an interactive, meaning-making process. The study concludes with recommendations for future research, including the exploration of vocabulary support and the application of critical reading tasks in other educational contexts.

Keywords: *Critical reading, Reading comprehension, Action research, EFL, Vocational high school, Higher-order thinking.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is an essential skill for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly for those in vocational education settings. In Indonesia, where English exposure is limited and often confined to classroom settings, many students struggle with comprehension tasks that go beyond literal understanding. For vocational high school students, who face the dual challenge of mastering both technical skills and a foreign language, reading comprehension often becomes a significant barrier to academic success.

In vocational high schools in Indonesia, students typically encounter texts that are highly technical and specialized, such as instructional manuals, safety protocols, and professional documents. These texts often require more than just basic reading skills; they demand higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), including the ability to make inferences, evaluate information critically, and distinguish between facts and opinions. Unfortunately, most students in these schools are not equipped with the tools necessary to engage with such complex texts. As a result, students often rely on translation or memorize isolated vocabulary rather than develop a deeper understanding of the material.

The teaching of reading comprehension in many Indonesian EFL classrooms remains focused on traditional, passive approaches, such as answering literal comprehension questions. This practice tends to overlook the need for active engagement with texts. Grabe and Stoller (2011) and Harmer (2007) emphasize that reading should not be viewed simply as a decoding process but as an interactive act of constructing meaning. However, in many vocational high schools in Indonesia, reading tasks remain confined to basic understanding, which fails to promote the higher-order skills necessary for academic and professional success.

In recent years, the importance of critical thinking and literacy in the EFL context has gained recognition globally. Critical reading, defined as reflective, analytical, and evaluative engagement with texts (Kurland, 2000; Blair, 2010), is a key aspect of fostering such higher-order skills. Critical reading allows students to question the text, challenge assumptions, and synthesize information in a meaningful way. It encourages an active stance towards reading, where students do not passively absorb information but actively interact with it. Research has shown that strategies such as prediction, annotation, and questioning can enhance reading comprehension by helping students engage more deeply with the material (Correia, 2006; Icmez, 2009).

The need for critical reading in vocational settings is particularly pressing. In vocational education, where students are often exposed to technical language and professional jargon, the ability to critically engage with texts is essential for success. Studies by Mukhlis (2023) and Santi (2024) indicate that vocational school reading assessments often involve tasks that require students to make inferences, evaluate arguments, and distinguish between fact and opinion—skills that are best developed through critical reading practices. Despite these findings, the use of critical reading strategies in Indonesian vocational schools remains relatively under-researched, with most studies focusing on general EFL contexts or academic settings.

The gap in research concerning critical reading in Indonesian vocational schools is one of the primary motivations for this study. While there have been numerous studies highlighting the benefits of critical reading in EFL contexts (Nurhayati, 2023; Aisyah et al., 2025), there is limited empirical evidence exploring its application in vocational high school settings in Indonesia. This article seeks to fill that gap by examining how critical reading tasks can be used to enhance reading comprehension, motivation, and strategy use among vocational learners at SMK Negeri 10 Makassar, a vocational high school in South Sulawesi, Indonesia.

This study builds on the growing body of research advocating for the integration of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) into EFL classrooms. It presents an action research project that explores how structured critical reading tasks—such as prediction, annotation, questioning, summarizing, and retelling—can improve students' engagement and comprehension of English texts. Specifically, the study investigates the effects of these tasks on 36 eleventh-grade students at SMK Negeri 10 Makassar, a school offering technical and business-focused programs.

The use of critical reading tasks in this study is based on the assumption that reading comprehension should be seen as an interactive, dynamic process that goes beyond understanding the literal meaning of a text. By engaging with texts through critical reading tasks, students are encouraged to not only understand the text but also question it, make predictions, and discuss it with their peers. This approach aims to transform passive reading into active meaning-making, where students become more autonomous and confident in their reading abilities. In turn, this may foster higher-order cognitive skills, such as inference-making,

problem-solving, and analytical thinking, which are essential in both academic and professional settings.

The primary research question guiding this study is: How can the use of critical reading tasks enhance the reading comprehension of vocational high school students in Indonesia? To answer this question, the study utilizes Classroom Action Research (CAR), a reflective and cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection. By applying this approach in two research cycles, the study aims to provide practical insights into how critical reading tasks can be effectively implemented in EFL classrooms, particularly in vocational contexts.

In the following sections, the study presents a detailed description of the research design and methodology, followed by the results and findings of each research cycle. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for teaching and recommendations for future research in the area of critical reading in vocational education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts Classroom Action Research (CAR) as the research design, guided by the cyclical model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). Action research is an approach that combines practical inquiry with reflection and iteration, enabling educators to test, evaluate, and refine teaching practices in real-time. CAR is particularly suitable for educational contexts where the goal is to improve teaching practices through direct involvement of teachers and students. The cyclical nature of CAR allows for continuous improvements based on reflective feedback, making it a dynamic and responsive approach to teaching and learning.

In this study, the action research design was used to explore the impact of critical reading tasks on the reading comprehension and engagement of vocational high school students at SMK Negeri 10 Makassar. The research focused on two main research cycles, each of which involved four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. These cycles allowed for an iterative process of refinement, ensuring that the tasks and strategies used were continually adjusted based on student responses and outcomes. The integration of teacher reflections, student feedback, and data analysis in each cycle helped ensure the study's relevance and responsiveness to classroom dynamics.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted at SMK Negeri 10 Makassar, a vocational high school located in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, offering specialized programs in technical and business fields. The school was selected for this study because preliminary observations suggested that students in this context faced significant challenges in reading comprehension, particularly when engaging with English texts that were dense, technical, or professional in nature.

The participants of the study were 36 eleventh-grade students, purposively selected due to their consistent struggles with reading comprehension. These students were enrolled in an English language course that aimed to improve both their linguistic and vocational skills. Despite their exposure to English in the classroom, their ability to comprehend and engage with texts remained limited. The study's focus on this group was therefore driven by the necessity to find

effective strategies that would foster their reading comprehension, particularly strategies that could be applied to the types of texts they encounter in their vocational studies.

The class consisted of mixed-level learners, with a range of abilities in English comprehension. Some students were more comfortable with technical vocabulary, while others struggled with basic reading tasks. The diversity of language proficiency in the class provided an opportunity to observe how critical reading tasks could address varying levels of reading comprehension.

Classroom Action Research (CAR) Model

The study followed the cyclical model of Classroom Action Research, which consists of four phases: Planning, Action, Observation, and Reflection. This model was chosen for its iterative process, which allows researchers to continuously improve teaching practices and adapt strategies based on real-time feedback. The following is a breakdown of each phase and its role in the study:

a. Planning:

- 1) During the planning phase, the research team, consisting of the classroom teacher and researcher, identified the specific critical reading tasks to be implemented. These tasks were designed based on best practices in reading comprehension and critical reading, incorporating strategies such as prediction, annotation, questioning, summarizing, and retelling. The planning phase also included setting clear objectives for the cycles, such as improving students' engagement, reducing dictionary reliance, and fostering a deeper understanding of texts.
- 2) A key part of the planning phase was also preparing the materials to be used in the study. This included selecting appropriate reading texts, both in terms of content and difficulty, that aligned with the students' vocational fields. In the first cycle, texts were selected from technical manuals and short articles, while the second cycle introduced multimedia elements such as short videos to stimulate prediction and discussion.

b. Action:

- 1) In the action phase, the critical reading tasks were implemented over the course of the two research cycles. The tasks followed a structured pre-reading, whilst-reading, and post-reading framework:
 - a) Pre-reading: Students engaged in prediction tasks, where they used titles and visual cues (e.g., images or videos) to anticipate the content of the text.
 - b) Whilst-reading: Students annotated texts, wrote margin questions to guide their thinking, and were encouraged to avoid excessive dictionary use. This phase aimed to shift students away from translating each word and towards inferencing and contextual understanding.
 - c) Post-reading: Students were asked to summarize the text and retell it in their own words, focusing on identifying main ideas and supporting details.
- 2) In Cycle 2, the tasks were refined based on reflections from Cycle 1. For instance, guided annotation prompts were introduced, such as "underline the main argument" or "circle unfamiliar words and guess their meanings." Group discussions were also

incorporated to foster collaborative learning, with students encouraged to scaffold each other's understanding and compare interpretations of the text.

c. Observation:

- 1) Observations were conducted throughout both research cycles, with the aim of documenting student behaviors, engagement levels, and responses to the tasks. This was done through observation sheets and field notes that recorded specific instances of student interaction with the reading tasks. The researcher and teacher made detailed notes on how students engaged with the tasks, whether they struggled with specific parts of the task, and whether they began to use inferencing strategies more effectively.
- 2) In addition to the teacher's observations, student questionnaires were administered at the end of each cycle to gauge their perceptions of the tasks, including how engaging they found the tasks, whether they felt more confident in their reading comprehension, and if they felt the tasks helped them understand the texts better.

d. Reflection:

- 1) Reflection was an ongoing process that occurred after each action phase. At the end of Cycle 1, the teacher and researcher held a reflective meeting to assess what had worked well and what needed improvement. For example, Cycle 1 revealed that while prediction and annotation tasks were engaging, many students still struggled with dictionary dependence, which hindered their reading flow and confidence.
- 2) Based on these reflections, adjustments were made for Cycle 2, such as introducing multimedia to aid in prediction and refining the annotation tasks. The use of peer discussions in Cycle 2 allowed students to support one another in making inferences, which further promoted engagement and deeper comprehension.
- 3) The teacher's interviews also played a critical role in the reflection process. These interviews provided insights into the teacher's perception of student progress, classroom dynamics, and areas that required additional focus.

Data Collection Methods

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, multiple data sources were used, allowing for triangulation of the findings. The following data collection methods were employed:

- a. Observation: The researcher and teacher took notes during each lesson to observe how students engaged with the tasks, their interactions during group discussions, and how they responded to the tasks. These observations were structured to focus on student behavior, participation levels, and task completion.
- b. Student Questionnaires: At the end of each cycle, students completed a questionnaire consisting of both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The Likert-scale items measured students' perceptions of their reading comprehension, confidence in using inferencing strategies, and the overall usefulness and engagement of the critical reading tasks. The open-ended questions provided qualitative insights into the students' experiences and challenges.
- c. Teacher Interviews: Interviews with the teacher were conducted to gather reflective feedback on the implementation of the tasks, classroom atmosphere, and students' overall

progress. The interviews focused on the teacher's perspective regarding student engagement, task difficulty, and the overall effectiveness of the critical reading strategies.

- d. **Student Work Samples:** Student work samples were collected throughout the research process. These included annotated texts, summaries, and retellings. The analysis of these samples allowed the researcher to track individual students' progress and evaluate how well they were able to engage with the text, identify main ideas, and make inferences.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data, including observations, interviews, and open-ended responses, were coded thematically following the methods outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). This allowed for the identification of key themes and patterns in student behavior and feedback. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the results from the student questionnaires, providing a clear picture of how students perceived the tasks and their level of confidence in reading comprehension.

This combination of data types and analysis methods ensured a well-rounded understanding of the impact of critical reading tasks on student comprehension and engagement.

FINDINGS

The findings of this action research project were derived from the data collected over the two research cycles. The data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods, and the results revealed significant improvements in students' reading comprehension, engagement, and strategy use, as well as some ongoing challenges.

Cycle 1 Findings

During Cycle 1, students were introduced to critical reading tasks that included prediction, annotation, questioning, summarizing, and retelling. These tasks were structured in three phases: pre-reading, whilst-reading, and post-reading. The following summarizes the key findings from Cycle 1:

- a. **Student Engagement:**
 - 1) Engagement levels were high at the beginning of the cycle, particularly during the prediction phase. Students responded enthusiastically to visual cues (e.g., images or short video clips) related to the text. The prediction activity sparked curiosity and excitement about the reading content.
 - 2) However, engagement decreased during longer passages, suggesting that students found it difficult to maintain focus and interest during more challenging texts. The shift from short tasks to longer, more complex texts revealed a fragility in student motivation, particularly when they struggled to comprehend the material.
- b. **Use of Dictionaries:**
 - 1) One of the most significant challenges observed in Cycle 1 was the heavy reliance on dictionaries. Despite instructions to avoid overusing them, many students continued to

consult their dictionaries frequently. This slowed down their reading process and diminished their confidence in understanding the text.

- 2) This reliance on dictionaries indicated that students were still struggling to infer meanings from context, relying instead on direct translations for understanding unfamiliar vocabulary.
- c. **Comprehension and Retelling:**
- 1) In terms of comprehension, students demonstrated some improvement in identifying main ideas but often struggled to include supporting details in their retellings. The summaries and retellings were often incomplete or inaccurate, with many students omitting critical details or misinterpreting inferences. This was particularly evident in texts that required higher-order thinking, such as making inferences or distinguishing between fact and opinion.
 - 2) The questioning and annotation tasks helped students engage with the text on a deeper level, but many still missed key points or failed to engage critically with the content.
- d. **Classroom Dynamics:** The classroom atmosphere during Cycle 1 was somewhat passive, with limited peer interaction during reading activities. Although students participated in prediction and annotation tasks, there was limited peer scaffolding or collaborative meaning-making. Most students worked independently and did not fully benefit from group discussions or collaborative reflection on the texts.

Cycle 2 Findings

In Cycle 2, several adjustments were made based on the reflections and feedback from Cycle

1. These adjustments included the integration of multimedia to stimulate predictions, more structured annotation prompts, and the introduction of group discussions to foster collaborative learning. The following summarizes the key findings from Cycle 2:

- a. **Student Engagement:**
- 1) Engagement levels increased significantly in Cycle 2, particularly during the multimedia prediction phase. The use of short videos and images related to the text generated lively discussions and anticipation before reading. Students were more motivated to engage with the material, as they had a better idea of what to expect.
 - 2) The group discussions during the whilst-reading phase were particularly effective in keeping students engaged. By discussing the text in small groups, students were able to scaffold each other's understanding and reinforce their comprehension through collaborative learning.
- b. **Use of Dictionaries:**
- 1) The reliance on dictionaries decreased in Cycle 2. Guided annotation prompts (e.g., "underline the main argument" and "circle unfamiliar words and guess meaning") helped students focus on the overall structure and key points of the text rather than on individual words. Additionally, the group discussions encouraged students to guess

meanings from context and confirm their guesses with peers, which significantly reduced the need for dictionary use.

- 2) Although dictionary use decreased, it did not disappear entirely. Some students still relied on dictionaries for unfamiliar vocabulary, particularly in more technical sections of the texts. However, the overall shift towards inferencing was evident.

c. Comprehension and Retelling:

- 1) The quality of comprehension improved in Cycle 2. Students were better able to identify the main ideas of the texts and provide more coherent summaries. Retellings were more complete and included key supporting details. For example, students were able to identify the arguments in the texts and provide explanations for their reasoning, demonstrating a higher level of critical engagement with the material.
- 2) Inferences were more accurately made in Cycle 2, particularly during group discussions. Students were able to discuss the implicit meanings of texts and relate them to real-world contexts, which deepened their understanding of the material.

d. Classroom Dynamics:

- 1) The classroom culture in Cycle 2 became more interactive and student-centered. Group discussions encouraged students to share ideas and challenge each other's thinking. This shift from a teacher-led to a collaborative classroom environment was evident in the increased levels of student interaction and the peer support observed during reading activities.
- 2) Students showed greater confidence in expressing their ideas, and peer scaffolding became a common practice. This change contributed to improved comprehension and a more positive classroom atmosphere overall.

e. Questionnaire Results:

- 1) 70% of students reported that the critical reading tasks were engaging and interesting.
- 2) 65% of students felt that their ability to understand English texts had improved, particularly in terms of identifying main ideas and supporting details.
- 3) 60% of students reported that they felt more confident attempting to comprehend texts without immediately resorting to a dictionary.
- 4) Teacher interviews confirmed that the tasks had a positive impact on the classroom atmosphere, making lessons more interactive and student-driven.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study highlight the effectiveness of critical reading tasks in improving reading comprehension, engagement, and strategy use among vocational high school students in Indonesia. The two research cycles demonstrate that when students are provided with structured tasks that encourage active engagement with texts, they are more likely to develop a deeper understanding of the material and reduce their reliance on translation and dictionaries.

Engagement and Motivation

One of the key findings of this study is the increase in student engagement throughout Cycle 2, which can be attributed to the use of multimedia for prediction tasks and the incorporation of group discussions. These strategies helped students become more invested in the reading process by making the tasks more dynamic and interactive. The importance of motivating students in EFL contexts has been well-documented in the literature (Harmer, 2007; Aisyah et al., 2025), and this study supports the idea that engaging students through multimedia and collaborative activities can foster greater interest and involvement in reading tasks. These findings also align with the work of Icmez (2009), who found that critical reading strategies, when combined with interactive activities, can significantly enhance student motivation.

Vocabulary and Dictionary Use

Another notable outcome of this study was the reduction in dictionary reliance among students, particularly in Cycle 2. The guided annotation and group discussions played a crucial role in helping students develop inferencing skills, enabling them to derive meanings from context rather than relying on translation. However, some students still showed a preference for using dictionaries, especially when dealing with more technical vocabulary. This persistent challenge suggests that vocabulary acquisition needs to be explicitly addressed in future iterations of critical reading tasks. As Fitrawati et al. (2023) note, vocabulary challenges are a common barrier in language learning, and strategies like vocabulary journals or pre-teaching key lexical sets could complement critical reading tasks to further reduce dictionary dependence.

Comprehension and Inference-Making

The study's findings indicate that students' comprehension improved in Cycle 2, with more accurate retellings, better identification of main ideas, and a clearer understanding of inferences. This is consistent with previous studies (Correia, 2006; Nurhayati, 2023), which have shown that annotation, questioning, and summarizing tasks can enhance comprehension by promoting active reading. The collaborative nature of group discussions also contributed to the students' ability to make inferences and engage with the text on a deeper level. These findings suggest that peer scaffolding is an effective strategy for promoting critical thinking and comprehension in EFL classrooms, particularly in vocational settings where texts are often complex and technical.

Classroom Culture and Student Autonomy

The shift in classroom culture from teacher-centered to more student-centered and interactive is another key takeaway from this study. By incorporating group discussions and encouraging peer support, the study created an environment where students were able to take more responsibility for their own learning. This aligns with the findings of Aisyah et al. (2025), who emphasize the importance of creating collaborative learning environments to foster critical thinking and literacy. The study also suggests that gradually reducing teacher support and encouraging students to work independently can help foster autonomy and boost student confidence in their reading abilities.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides valuable insights into how critical reading tasks can be implemented to enhance reading comprehension, student engagement, and strategy use in vocational high school classrooms in Indonesia. The findings from the two research cycles demonstrate that structured reading tasks, such as prediction, annotation, questioning, summarizing, and retelling, are effective tools for promoting active reading and critical engagement with texts. These tasks not only improved students' ability to comprehend English texts but also fostered a shift in classroom dynamics towards more collaborative and student-centered learning.

One of the most significant outcomes of this research was the improvement in reading comprehension observed among students. Through the use of critical reading tasks, students were able to better identify main ideas, make inferences, and distinguish between facts and opinions. This was particularly evident in Cycle 2, where students demonstrated greater competence in summarizing and retelling texts, reflecting a deeper understanding of the material. Implication for teaching practice: Teachers can incorporate critical reading strategies into their lessons to enhance students' ability to engage with texts more critically and meaningfully. By focusing on higher-order thinking skills such as inference-making and analysis, teachers can prepare students for the types of texts they will encounter both in vocational education and in the workforce.

Increased Student Engagement: The use of multimedia and group discussions in Cycle 2 significantly boosted student engagement. Students were more motivated to participate in discussions and predicted the content of texts using visual cues, such as images and short videos. The collaborative environment fostered through group work allowed students to share their ideas and support each other's understanding, which further increased their interest in the reading tasks. Implication for teaching practice: Teachers should consider incorporating multimedia elements and collaborative activities into their reading lessons. By making reading tasks more dynamic and interactive, teachers can increase students' motivation and interest in the material. The use of peer scaffolding is also recommended, as it can encourage students to think critically and support each other's learning.

Reduced Dictionary Reliance: One of the challenges observed in the study was the continued reliance on dictionaries, particularly in Cycle 1. Although dictionary use decreased in Cycle 2, some students still struggled with unfamiliar vocabulary, especially in technical texts. This indicates that while critical reading tasks helped students infer meanings from context, vocabulary acquisition remains an area of concern. Implication for teaching practice: Teachers should consider explicit vocabulary instruction alongside critical reading tasks. Techniques such as pre-teaching key vocabulary, encouraging students to maintain vocabulary journals, and integrating vocabulary learning into reading activities could help students build the lexical knowledge needed to fully engage with the texts.

Shifting Classroom Culture: The study also found that classroom culture shifted from a more passive, teacher-led environment to one that was more interactive and student-driven. The incorporation of group discussions and peer scaffolding allowed students to take more responsibility for their own learning, leading to a more collaborative and autonomous classroom environment. Implication for teaching practice: Teachers can foster student autonomy by gradually reducing their support and allowing students to take ownership of their learning. By

creating opportunities for peer collaboration and student-centered activities, teachers can help students become more independent and confident in their reading skills.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research While the findings of this study provide promising insights into the benefits of critical reading tasks, the research also has some limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted with a relatively small sample size of 36 students from a single vocational high school in Makassar, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused solely on reading comprehension and did not examine other aspects of language learning, such as speaking, writing, or listening. Future research could expand the sample size and explore the effects of critical reading tasks on other language skills.

Furthermore, the study found that dictionary reliance persisted among some students, indicating that vocabulary challenges remain a barrier to reading comprehension. Future research could explore strategies for improving vocabulary acquisition in conjunction with critical reading tasks. For example, researchers could investigate the effectiveness of integrating vocabulary-building activities into critical reading lessons, such as word maps, contextual guessing, or vocabulary games.

Lastly, this study focused on vocational high school students in Indonesia, and future research could explore the applicability of critical reading tasks in other educational contexts, including general high school settings, higher education, or adult education programs. Additionally, the impact of online learning and digital texts on critical reading practices is an area that warrants further exploration, particularly in light of the growing use of technology in education.

In conclusion, this action research study demonstrates that the use of critical reading tasks can significantly enhance reading comprehension, engagement, and strategy use among vocational high school students in Indonesia. By implementing tasks such as prediction, annotation, questioning, summarizing, and retelling, teachers can help students move from passive reading to active meaning-making, fostering both literacy skills and higher-order thinking. The study also highlights the importance of multimedia, group discussions, and collaborative learning in increasing student motivation and fostering a more student-centered classroom environment.

While the study revealed positive outcomes, challenges such as dictionary reliance and vocabulary acquisition remain. Addressing these challenges through explicit vocabulary instruction and further refinement of critical reading strategies will be crucial in ensuring that students are fully equipped to engage with complex texts. Future research should explore these areas in greater detail, as well as the potential for critical reading strategies in other educational contexts and language skills.

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