

## **AN EXPLORATION OF THE MAIN DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES, IN TEACHING EFL LITERATURE: THE CASE OF TEACHERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TLEMCEEN, ALGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Despite the boundless benefit of teaching literature and the joy that may grow out of its learning, putting an EFL literature course into practice is not always without constraints and challenges. Covering the whole of these challenges and constraints seems to be beyond the reach; nevertheless, the specificities of teaching literature necessitates the examination of the recurrent issues and challenges that teachers are very likely to face particularly in an EFL context. Though these issues can, by extension, exist in many EFL settings, within the present paper, they will be discussed with a particular reference to the learning and teaching situation at the Department of English at the University of Tlemcen, Algeria. It is also worth noting that examining such intricacies basically stems from the belief that teachers, though most often times are aware of many of them, do little to cope with them on the ground. Thus, the objective of the present paper is not only to list and/or simply enumerate those constraints and challenges, but it is rather to invite teachers to soundly reflect on the implications they carry. Stated differently, highlighting the obstacles in using literature in the classroom is ideally meant to serve a point of departure for a reflective orientation of the pedagogical practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Literature, Literature Teaching, EFL Classroom, Challenges and Constraints

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **What Literature is or What Literature Does?**

It has been conceived that literature is a slippery and loose term; it is viewed differently and no single definition is conventionally decided. The dictionary definition usually suggests that literature is a set of writings that are valued as works of art, especially fiction, drama and poetry. However, such a definition tends to restrict literature to printed writings with no reference to the oral traditions despite the fact that throughout history, the major literary genres (poetry, drama and storytelling) have always involved oral performance. Nonetheless, etymologically speaking, literature stems from the Latin "littera", that is, a letter. This in turn makes a strong case for the claim that a work of art has to be recorded before being qualified as literature.

In the teaching context, the various and yet the conflicting views regarding what literature is rather than what literature does is overtly stated by Showalter (2003) who argues that "unfortunately, many teachers continue to wrestle endlessly with the impossible task of definition, and to twist themselves into semantic knots."(p.22)

Showalter's words carry the claim of abandoning semantic controversies over what literature means and therefore direct attention and focus on what can literature do particularly in an EFL setting. Stated differently, what seems much more important is benefit that can be drawn from the teaching of literature.

This would deliberately lead us to examine the merits of literature.

### **The Significance of Teaching EFL Literature**

Many arguments are advanced in justifying the inclusion of literature in the foreign language classroom. Supporters of literature usually acknowledge its linguistic, cultural and motivational benefits. McKay (1982) succinctly summarizes this idea claiming that

Literature can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge both on a usage and use knowledge level...to the extent that the students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency. It may also enhance students' understanding of a foreign culture and perhaps spur their own creation of imaginative work.(p.531)

In the same line of thought, Lazar (1993) insists on the integration of literature into EFL teaching. She argues that literature has wider educational functions in the language classroom as it stimulates the students' imagination, develops their critical thinking skills as well as their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Because of its motivational aspect literature generates interest in the language learner to interest of reading, and therefore, acquainting with a variety of stylistic features. Besides, being an artifact, the literary texts can depict the cultural norms of the target culture. Literature has also the power to spur thoughts, provoke intellectual productivity and deepen one's insights into the nature of reality (Bennett and Royle, 1995).

### **APPROACHES OF TEACHING LITERATURE**

Many approaches have been suggested for the use of literature in the EFL classroom. Carter and Long (1991) suggest three approaches

#### **The Language Based Approach**

It is an approach within which literature is used for language practice. It seeks to expose the students to the different language forms and patterns both literal and figurative. Thus, within this approach, students are methodologically prompted to examine the language of literature to enhance their linguistic abilities. Adopting this approach requires teachers to select appropriate text to devise grammar, vocabulary and stylistic activities.

#### **The Cultural Approach**

This approach considers the literary text as a means to learn about the target culture. It requires teachers to provide their students with factual information about the text and its author. This approach also lays heavy emphasis on the survey of the historical development of the different literary movements and genres. Because it considers literature as a product of the target culture, this approach enables the students to understand and appreciate new ideologies that are different from their own (Carter and Long, 1991).

#### **The personal Growth Approach**

This approach seeks to achieve a fullest engagement with the reading of literature. It enhances the students' personal pleasure to read and appreciate literature as it stresses their response to the content of the text by drawing on their own experiences, feelings and emotions. The students are therefore encouraged to assume more participatory in making

meaning. Text selection within this approach is of great importance as teachers need to opt for texts carrying interesting themes.

### **Issue and Challenges in Teaching EFL Literature at the University of Tlemcen**

Based on the results of semi-structured interviews with seven (07) teachers of literature at the English Department at the University of Tlemcen, the followings issues and challenges have been revealed and identified.

#### **Mixed-Ability Classes**

Similar to teachers of other subjects, teachers of literature usually face the problem of mixed ability classes. Yet, it is worth noting that there is a wide consensus among teachers at the English Department that unlike previous years, mixed ability classes have unprecedentedly become a striking phenomenon that teachers ought to cope with. It seems wiser then to cast light on this issue and its potential implications on the pedagogical ground.

Commonly, mixed ability classes are classes wherein the students exhibit differences in their individual achievement, needs, interests, educational background, learning styles, level of anxiety, motivation and their readiness to learn. (Kelly1974, Ainslie1994).Bremer (2008) opines that the difficulty in teaching mixed ability classes does not lie only in the differences that the students show in terms of intellectual faculties and academic achievement, but it also deeply concerns and directly relates to their learning styles and interests as well. He accordingly writes that

A mixed ability class does not just consist of a range of abilities but also a range of learning styles and preferences. All pupils will show strengths at different times depending on the topic being studied and the learning style being used. When pupils are working without their preferred learning style then they will not perform as well. (Bremer, 2008,p.02)

Bremer's quotation carries a universally agreed fact that classes worldwide tend to be multileveled and heterogeneous and all teachers, regardless of their fields, cannot escape the challenge of dealing with the mixed-ability classes. This is because as posited by Bremer (ibid) students are, all too often, randomly grouped in classes regardless of their attainment and/or competence. Yet, the real challenge is that in many teaching contexts, some classes tend to be more multileveled than others. Within these unhappy circumstances, the teacher is likely to find her/himself in a daunting task as how to involve all students in learning, how to address their different needs and how to spur their interest and motivation in learning.

In a similar way, Hess (2001) points to the immense hurdles the teacher is likely to encounter in keeping the students' interest in learning particularly if their motivation is low. Another obstacle the teacher might face in such a context is the amount of time s/he should devote to assist slow learners and the impact of this on the general flow and the normal progression of the syllabus. Moreover, taking into account the differences in the students' aptitudes, the teacher might well find him/herself in a dilemma with regard to the input to be introduced and the amount of time to be allotted in order to better cope with the students' weaknesses. What is more, from the psychological standpoint, the teacher dealing with mixed ability classes is vulnerable to frustration and sometimes even to demotivation when s/he feels powerless to react to a situation within which some students are making progress while others are attaining little improvement. This reason why Bowman (1992) sensitizes teachers to the complexity of their task in mixed ability classes. He argues that teachers' unawareness of the need for the quest of alternative approaches and their reluctance to cope with the negative

impact of multileveled learning environment have regretfully become commonplace. Bowman's assertion brings into discussion one of the most important roles of the teacher-the teacher as a needs analyst. In its essence, needs analysis requires the teacher to be engaged in some kind of activity with the students so as to locate and accurately determine what their learning needs. A good understanding of the students' needs will significantly contribute to successful course planning and higher levels of achievement.

### **Students' Low Language Aptitudes**

Raising the point of mixed ability classes would deliberately lead us to bring into discussion a very sensitive point which relates to the students' linguistic abilities and its impact on attaining a successful implementation of literature in an EFL setting.

In this context, it is particularly worth noting that literature teaching at the English Department at the under graduation level, in particular, has always been a huge challenge for some teachers, yet a nightmare for others. Indeed, teachers have always been complaining about the low level of language proficiency of their students. Worse still, teachers deplorably report that the situation seems to get worse year after year despite the latest reform launched by the Ministry of National Education. This reform though theoretically seem very ambitious in terms of objectives has brought about little change. This situation is mainly due to the sharp discrepancy between what is officially stated and the actual classroom practices. Indeed, some teachers at the lower levels of education in Algeria are still struggling with understanding and precisely defining the objectives of the competency based approach since its implementation in 2003. Ironically, some teachers at the English Department claim that many newly enrolled students face acute difficulties in both speaking and writing skills. This unpromising situation has had a disastrous effect on students' achievement in literary studies, impeding them to develop empathy with the literary discourse.

Unavoidably, within this unhappy context, literature teachers usually find themselves involved in two challenging missions. The former concerns language teaching since it is quite impossible for students to penetrate literary meanings without a minimum of language proficiency. Littlewood (1986) emphasizes this point, noting that in an EFL context, the student is not likely to appreciate literary works without a proper linguistic readiness. He rightly posits that "it is fruitless to expect pupils to appreciate literary works for which they are not linguistically ready" (1986, p.181)

In a similar manner, Rodger (1983) argues that introducing literature to EFL students is an intricate issue, in the sense that these students cannot extract meaning from the text unless they possess a linguistic proficiency closer to that of the native speaker. He accordingly notes that "they [students] must already have a thorough going proficiency in the use of that language." (Rodger, 1983, p.44)

Rodger (ibid) went further to assert that a successful teaching literature in an EFL context heavily depends on the students' advanced level of communicative competence in the target language. The latter mission, which ought to be the focus of the teaching process, is assisting students to achieve literary appreciation. Covering the two aspects becomes de facto a duty, yet a real challenge for teachers. Consequently and inescapably within these circumstances, the literature course is very often transformed to an accessory setting to learn language rather than literature.

In fact, teaching literature to students with poor language proficiency and unfamiliarity with the necessary reading strategies will undoubtedly result in de-emphasizing the literary aspects of the text. The course, therefore, will be a matter

of achieving a global and, sometimes, a superficial comprehension of the text. In brief, within these conditions, teachers who dare to go to the extreme are likely to find themselves teaching the self (reflexive teaching).

### **Students' Lack of Interest in Reading**

Another inherent problem in teaching literature at the English Department relates to the students' lack of interest in reading literature. In fact, in spite of teachers' significant efforts to make space for reading in literature classes, students' lack of interest in reading has become an undeniable truth. Today's students do not read as well as would be desirable owing to the heavy dependence on the new technologies, particularly the Internet.

According to Birkerts (1994) the sporadic nature of on-line reading has significantly changed people's reading habits. He argues that the spread of the Internet has tremendously affected our reading which has become unfocused; preventing us from achieving deep thinking. He regretfully admits that though people tend to read different things, they rarely read them in depth because of the deficient attention spans and equally the lack of a true interpretation of the information they come across.

The prevalence of the web and personal computers in this digital age has had an undeniable negative impact on students' literacy. They have become so fond of digital-based resources that reading lengthy texts has become a true struggle. Many students nowadays seem to be unable to nudge themselves in extensive reading which has become a source of frustration and discomfort to them. What is more, this reluctance of reading has noticeably created a gaping hole in both students' prior knowledge and background which is indisputably crucial to bring to the page when reading takes place. Indeed, very often, students can decode words on pages; yet they cannot comprehend the text as an entity because they lack requisite prior knowledge and background information to interact and transact with the text and therefore decipher meaning. This idea has been clearly explained by Smith (1982) who posits that the reading process does not involve only the extraction of information, but it equally involves supplying it. He accordingly writes that "the basic skill of reading lies more in the non-visual information that we supply from inside our head rather than in the visual information that bombards us from print." (Smith, 1982, p.105)

The students' low reading rate has other disastrous effects on other skills especially writing. Needless to recall, reading and writing are interrelated and depend on each other in the sense that reading serves the most efficient means to provide input in writing tasks. Thus, insufficient and ineffective reading will inevitably have a negative impact on the students' writing skills.

Unfortunately, despite the immeasurable merits of reading, many students today tend to neglect it as they have become much more interested in other things; they have encapsulated themselves in texting and messaging and other social media instead of immersing themselves in reading which is not only a tool for language mastery, but the route to enlightenment. Regretfully, many of them do a lot to entertain themselves, but little to inform and educate themselves. That is the reason why they find reading a struggling activity especially with difficult texts, not least literary ones. They exhibit a striking deficiency in monitoring their comprehension and fixing it when it falters. Teachers in general and those of literature in particular at the English Department deplorably report that the students' ability to focus in on their reading seems to lessen year after year.

### **Lack of Library Resources**

Students' reluctance to read has been further encouraged by the lack of resources on the "shelves". Indeed, the limited number of titles at the university's library is another factor that has worsened the situation. As a matter of fact, the growing number of the students enrolling in the English section and the availability of few collections spell big problems for teachers to engage students with literature as well as motivating them to seek further knowledge about the study materials. Stressing the vital importance of the availability of academic resources in the study of literature, Bachrudin (2015) writes that

Good academic programs should equip themselves with a wealth of academic resources. EFL/ESL literature programs are no exception. The resources should at least cover the following categories: collections of literary works, references, theoretical readings, research-based reports, and on-going projects documenting research on instructional practices. (Bachrudin, 2015, p.143)

Very often, the students and even teachers find themselves obliged to Xerox copies of books or retrieve them from the Internet. Duplicating books, though it seems a practical solution, is not affordable for all students. Retrieving e-books, on the other hand, besides being a real hurdle for both teachers and students as it is not easy to get access to all electronic resources, it is not always the best solution in the sense that some e-retrieved materials tend to distort the original text; this is particularly true for poetry. Indeed, some Internet retrieved poems differs from the original ones in terms of form. Worse still, some of them carry spelling mistakes.

The issue of text availability has been a subject of discussion among many specialists. Carter and Long (1991), for instance, insist on selecting texts that both teachers and students can afford a copy of. Ironically, Carter and Long claim that in many countries where EFL literature constitutes an essential component of the curriculum, the number of available books in the library might not exceed thirty. Carter and Long (ibid) go further to assert that if the study material that the teacher intends to use in the classroom is not affordable for all students, it is advisable to be left out.

### **Teachers' Lack of Training**

Another contextual problem affecting the teaching of literature at the English Department is the teacher's lack of training. Indeed, many teachers feel discouraged from teaching this subject not only because of the sharp challenge and the huge hindrances they are likely to face with EFL students whose language proficiency and cultural knowledge are, all too often, insufficient to cope with literary texts, but also because they, themselves, don't feel fully ready to immerse themselves in the field owing to the lack of training which has become a source of anxiety for many of them. In this very specific context, Showalter (2003) asserts that "the most profound anxiety of teaching is our awareness that we are making it up as we go along. Teaching is a demanding occupation, but few of us actually have studied how to do it."(p.04)

Showalter's last statement is, to a larger extent, true and relevant to the context of teaching literature at the Department especially for novice teachers who, though they have studied literature, still face enormous difficulties from the pedagogical standpoint. This is because the training they received is essentially theoretical rather than practical. In other words, the focus is still on what to teach (content) with little or no attention to how to teach (pedagogy).

Consequently and inevitably, the teaching practice will shift to an endless worry about what the teacher says rather than what the students are learning and the way they are doing it. It seems therefore axiomatic that teacher's training

in literary studies is badly needed for many considerations, most importantly for facilitating the students' learning. Ideally, truly prepared teachers implement various techniques which have the very potential to achieve sustainable learning. This, in turn, needs not only a competent teacher as a master of content, but also a skilled teacher who has a well-equipped repertoire of professional strategies to teach literature as a set of skills, not only as a matter of knowledge transmission. To put it another way, the teaching of literature must not be conceived only as a matter of content, but also a matter of process and practice which necessitates teaching preparation in its fullest sense.

Therefore, both pre-service and in-service training are necessary for teachers to keep pace and better deal with the recent changes and latest trends in literary studies in terms of approaches, methods and techniques. Unquestionably, for a teacher of literature pre-service training is of capital importance to function adequately as a skilled and qualified practitioner. Teaching western literature with all what the subject carries to non-native students who usually approach it with big apprehension and enormous uncertainties is not that easy task without appropriate training. In brief, an adequate pre-service training is necessary if quality teaching is sought.

### **Assessing Students' Learning**

Assessing the students' achievement in literature studies at the English Department has traditionally been largely exam-oriented. This practice has accordingly restricted the study of literature to emphasizing rote memory and reproducing already-supplied critical judgments by teachers, with little or no attention to the students' own creative skills. Undoubtedly, within this assessment policy, the wash back<sup>7</sup> is likely to be negative since the focus of learning is not catering for the students' needs. Instead, heavy focus has for long directed to passing examinations.

Moreover, because the interaction with the literary text has usually been reduced to the mere surface comprehension of the different plots and, sometimes, as a means for vocabulary learning as teachers have always been complaining about their students' language deficiencies, the literature examinations, accordingly, have been designed in the form of general text comprehension tasks or/and essay writings on the different literary periods and movements limiting the students' textual focus, personal response and critical thinking skills.

It also worth mentioning that formative assessment has not always been the focus of attention in literary studies. This on-going type of assessment which usually takes place during the teaching and learning process and, which basically, serves the means to provides appropriate feedback has not been the primary concern of many teachers of literature, who tend somehow to ignore formative assessment though, undoubtedly, they are well aware of it significance in preparing the students for formal tests. Stressing the importance of formative assessment, Ross (2005) writes

A key appeal formative assessment provides for language educators is the autonomy given to learners. A benefit assumed to accrue from shifting the locus of control to learners more directly is in the potential for the enhancement of achievement motivation. Instead of playing a passive role, language learners use their own reckoning of improvement, effort, revision, and growth. Formative assessment is also thought to influence learner development through a widened sphere of feedback during engagement with learning tasks. (Ross, 2005, p.319)

The quotation above points to the importance of the formative assessment within which the teacher provides relevant feedback to students, which may also be considered as a form of scaffolding. Therefore, consistent with the idea that students' learning is fundamentally the result of an active process, not of a receptive and passive one, it seems that the



prime objective of feedback, provided by the teacher or even by classmates, is to encourage the students to be self-directed and most importantly to be aware of their weaknesses. In doing so, they are likely to bridge the gap between their current learning state and the intended ideal learning objectives. Ross' view is similar to that of Shohamy (1995) who opines that the significance of feedback, as a defining feature of formative assessment, lies in its utility in providing remedial and suggestive information on the students' performance in tasks rather than being judgmental comments.

### **Managing Students' Anxiety**

Another challenge that the teachers of literature encounter in their classrooms particularly at the undergraduate level is the high level of anxiety and apprehension that the students display when confronting a literary text. It has become commonplace that students in advance conceive literature as an intimidating subject.

Unfortunately, this prejudice has had a negative impact on their attitudes and motivation to explore the literary component of the English language. This state of affairs has in turn led literature teachers, unlike many of their colleagues, to spend much time and energy to convince their students to embrace literature. Therefore, the teacher's prime concern has become, in the first place, creating a low-anxiety classroom wherein the students can confidently tackle literature.

A wide body of literature has covered the notion of anxiety in foreign language education as a whole. According to Horwitz et al (1986), anxiety which is always associated with those feelings of apprehension, tension and nervousness, is a source of discomfort and underachievement, in foreign language contexts. They rightly posit that, "just as anxiety prevents some people from performing successfully in science..., many people find foreign language learning, especially in classroom situations, particularly stressful."(Horwitz et al, 1986, p125)

In brief, anxiety in the foreign language classroom is generally viewed as the combination of multiple states of apprehension, fear and worry associated with learning. All too often, students experience it as a result of their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings towards a learning situation. This is particularly true, as mentioned above, to the study of literature; a process which is characteristically demanding in terms of overcoming the students' negative perception of literature.

According to Berg (1993), it is almost false to think that anxiety in the foreign language context concerns only the acquisition of linguistic skills at lower levels and that easing the students' anxiety is reduced to the early years of language instruction. Berg's idea denotes that anxiety is likely to persist even when students enter high-intermediate and advanced levels of the study of the target language, literature and culture. Sensitizing teachers to the negative impact of anxiety and highlighting the significance of their roles in helping the students overcome and /or, at least, better cope with the potential feeling of anxiety and uneasiness in early contact with literary studies Berg writes that "the introduction of anxiety-controlling measures should also be considered essential during the early stages of literature study, since there can be little doubt that many beginning literature students experience high levels of stress."(Berg, 1993:28)

What is more, Berg (ibid) shares with Harper (1988) and Santoni (1972) the view that the in many settings worldwide the traditional methods of teaching literature at the introductory level have failed to soundly address the problems of students' anxiety and inadequate preparation. Their idea is that unlike students of superior ability who usually pursue literary studies with greater confidence, deeper interest and higher levels of motivation, students at beginning levels face immense hurdles, and here lies the responsibility of the teacher in implementing the most adequate approach to help



them surpass their anxiety. Indeed, the teacher as an agent of innovation and change has to act to bring about new teaching techniques which would meet the students' needs and equally make them feel more secure in taking up the task of studying literature. Berg (1993) further argues that besides the limited exposure of students to literature at their early education, traditional methods of teaching literature which tend to be a larger extent teacher-fronted and which often- times tend to neglect learner-learner interaction and seat back cooperative are among the major reasons for students' anxiety in literature courses.

### Course Coverage

Covering the field is a perplexing issue for many teachers across different disciplines, not least literature teachers who usually find them self in an endless competition with their demanding profession, in the sense that the teacher find him/herself in a continuous obsession about the amount of content to be imparted to the students especially with the ever-increasing number of publications in literary studies.(Showalter, 2003)

One source of anxiety for teachers is obviously the inability to, at least, get a copy of these publications. Another worry is the teacher's struggle to cover the content of these thousands of publications and therefore incorporate it into his/her teaching.

Obsession with content at the cost of practice and process according to Showalter is intimidating for teachers who usually feel guilty of not being able to cover all the latest in the field. Still, teachers of literature might well be puzzled and, in many instances, undecided on how much the students must know to achieve a sound understanding of a given text, its author and the historical period in which it was produced. This state of affairs most frequently places the teacher in a real dilemma as what to include and what to exclude given the restricted amount of time allotted to the subject. Commenting on this unhappy and critical situation, Showalter (2003) writes that

One of the major difficult tasks for a literature teacher is deciding what to leave out. Instead aiming for comprehensive coverage, we have to think about what students need to read in order to establish a basis for further learning, and we have to adjust our intellectual aspiration to a realistic workload. (p.13)

The quotation above carries an interesting point which is worth being raised; it relates to the essence of conceiving teaching in general and teaching literature in particular. Admittedly, the teacher has to cover the course content in line with the prescribed syllabus, and even when this becomes a daunting task under some contextual constraints particularly time shortage, s/he has to assign part of it to at least ensure the students' exposure to it. What accounts much, however, is how to best utilize the limited time and the few moments the teacher shares with his/her students to inculcate in them the necessary skills for coping with future learning situations and how to mindfully locate their needs and adequately develop the most efficient pedagogical strategies to meet those needs. In so doing, both the teacher and the students become jointly responsible for the learning process.

### Balancing Teaching and Research

It is axiomatic that teaching, by its very nature, entails research. In fact, one of the major roles of the teacher is being a researcher. Teaching and research are intertwined and function in a complementary relationship to achieve a concrete professional development. This is very likely to happen when research is devoted to explore the teaching practice rather than being basically concerned with scholarly publications. To put it another way, teachers need to devote equal time

and most importantly much commitment to teaching, bearing in mind that before being scholars, they are fundamentally hired to teach. This is, however, not to argue that teachers have to be less devoted to or less interested in their scholarly activity, but rather they should put their research in favour of their teaching. They ought “to make it[ research] more teachable (Graff 1992,p.123) in a way that pedagogical issues become as intellectually challenging for them as research. In a nutshell, teachers in general and those of EFL literature in particular need to work to be primarily professional in their teaching as they strive to be in their research because nowadays “governments and universities are pressing for more and better teaching as well as for more and better research output”. (Leisyte et al, 2009, p.624)

## CONCLUSIONS

The present article has argued for the significance of teaching literature, in the EFL context. It has also pointed to the sensitiveness of this task, and it was within this area of research that, the main issues and challenges relating to literature teaching have been explored and discussed with a particular focus, on the case of teachers, at the University of Tlemcen. Thus, a detailed account on such contextual problems has been provided. The intention was not merely to list these problems, but rather to sensitize the teachers and institutions to their impact on students' learning, and therefore, a plea was made for the necessity, to cope with them.

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