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**INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS
IMPACT ON THE FORMATION OF STUDENTS'
LINGUOCULTURAL COMPETENCE**

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Abstract. This article examines the implementation of internationalization at home as a strategic component of the internationalization of higher education, with particular emphasis on its efficacy in fostering students' linguocultural competence and the challenges encountered in the learning process.

The mixed method was used to collect and analyze data. The study involved a total of 60 participants: 30 students from Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University and 30 students from Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University. The qualitative and quantitative research design provided a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of the internationalization at home program.

The outcomes indicate that virtual exchanges are an accessible and inclusive alternative to international interaction, especially for students who have limited opportunities to study abroad. This study provides evidence supporting the internationalization at home program based on virtual exchange improves students' linguocultural competence. Despite these positive outcomes, several challenges such as language barriers and technical issues were identified. The data suggest that institutions seeking to internationalize education and enhance linguocultural competence of students should prioritize internationalization at home strategies alongside traditional mobility programs.

Keywords: internationalization, higher education, internationalization at home, linguocultural competence, foreign language teaching, virtual exchange, intercultural communication, collaboration

Introduction

In Kazakhstan the process of modernization of the higher education system is intricately linked to the nation's integration into the global educational space. This phenomenon is not limited to the exchange of foreign students and teaching staff, but it includes such areas as international coordination of educational programs, multilingual education, development of linguocultural competence and adaptation to the global labor market.

In this context, the internationalization of higher education is emerging as one of the strategic directions of the country's educational policy. A number of programs and initiatives proposed by the President and the Government of the country such as the Bolashak international scholarship program, the Nazarbayev University model, and strategies for increasing academic mobility are examples of concrete steps in this direction. In addition, "The Strategy of Internationalization

of Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2025” [1], “The Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029” [2] set out such priorities as opening branches of foreign universities and aligning them with global education standards.

The main goal of internationalization is the formation of students as professionals who can freely act in a world-class professional environment, capable of multilingual, intercultural communication. The internationalization of a higher education institution requires the development of linguistic competence, and improving language skills increases the quality and effectiveness of internationalization, ensuring the integration of a higher education institution into the global educational space.

Linguocultural competence is an important component of this process. Proficiency in foreign languages and the ability to communicate fluently constitute a fundamental prerequisite for effective international cooperation and professional advancement. The government’s priority strategies include multilingual education, improving international cooperation, and introducing English as a medium of instruction in higher education institutions [3].

According to Byram, English, as the principal language of modern global academic and professional discourse, plays a critical role in the development of students’ linguocultural competence [4]. Such competences are especially important in the 21st century labor market, as graduates need to adapt to working in diverse cultural and linguistic environments, mastering cultural literacy and effective communication skills.

Internationalization of higher education is a deliberate, strategic, and multi-dimensional process by which higher education systems and institutions integrate international, linguocultural, and global perspectives into their core missions, governance structures, curricula, teaching practices, research agendas, and organizational modalities, both within domestic (internationalization at home) and cross-border domains, to enhance academic quality, develop global competencies, and contribute to equitable societal engagement.

Despite these policy achievements, empirical research investigating the actual impact of internationalization on student learning outcomes is limited. Most research currently focuses on institutional indicators such as mobility levels or compliance with Bologna requirements, rather than on indicators of students’ intercultural communication and language development [5]

These issues became the research objective of the article. The aim is to determine the effectiveness of internationalization at home program in fostering linguocultural competence of students. Therefore, a study was conducted to study the impact of a virtual international learning environment on the development of linguocultural competence of students at Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University and Naberezhnye Chelny State University (Russia).

The research was based on a four-week virtual exchange program in English in the second year of our project, which involved intercultural cooperation and interactive teaching methods for students from both countries.

Internationalization at home approach ensures that all students, regardless of mobility, engage in experiences that enhance linguocultural competence, global awareness, and inclusive learning opportunities within domestic educational settings [6,7].

Materials and methods

The article uses qualitative and quantitative research methods to study the impact of an internationalization at home program on the development of students' linguocultural competence. A joint syllabus was developed in accordance with the curricula of the two universities, and a virtual exchange course was held for 3rd year students of the Department of Foreign Languages and Translation of Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University (Kazakhstan) and students of the Department of Romance-Germanic Languages and Methods of Teaching of Naberezhnye Chelny State University (Russia), planned for four weeks in the second year. As part of the course, discussions, joint tasks, and intercultural communication between students were organized as the main pedagogical strategies. 60 students (30 from each university) participated in the experiment. Educational activities were organized in the form of thematic discussions, synchronous online dialogues, and group projects to develop intercultural communication.

Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews administered at the beginning and end of the course. The questionnaire consisted of questions aimed at exploring the changes that students had noticed in their cultural awareness, communication styles, and use of English. Percentages of students reporting improvement were derived from Likert-scale questionnaire responses and supported by qualitative interview data. In addition, the students from two universities were interviewed via the Zoom platform to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, perceptions of the effectiveness of the course, and challenges encountered during the virtual exchange.

All responses were collected and transcribed in English. Thematic analysis was conducted using the six-step method proposed by Braun and Clarke. Two independent coders analyzed the data and identified recurring concepts related to the themes of intercultural engagement and language development. Coding differences were resolved through collaborative review, increasing the validity and reliability of the study [8, 9].

Results

Analysis of survey and interview data from third-year English language students reveals significant findings regarding the development of their linguocultural competences during a four-week virtual exchange program. The students' linguocultural competence was measured through Popova's three-dimensional framework (Table 1).

Table 1. Students' Development of Linguocultural Competence (based on Popova's three dimensions)

Knowledge (awareness)	Skills	Practical experience (abilities)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> background knowledge of national traditions, customs, norms, moral and cultural values of Kazakhstan/Tatarstan, Russia, including culturerelated vocabulary minimum; awareness of social and political situations in the abovementioned countries and target language (the UK, the USA); knowledge of these countries' most significant historical events and outstanding figures, interesting geographical places, sights, cultural monuments, mythology, literary characters, philosophical tenets, etc.; awareness of aesthetic aspects regarding verbal and non-verbal behaviour of interlocutors in accordance with a certain communicative situation; orientation in the specificity of national humour, irony and other stylistic peculiarities of mother tongue and target languages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mastery to use background knowledge and re-create them simultaneously into a targettextbyadequatemans and devices, preserving national specificity of a communicative situation; skills to act inventively, deliberately, ethically reasonably in relation to representatives of different cultures basing on "mentally processed" information regarding culture-marked components of cross-cultural communication; skills to cooperate efficiently (without any conflicts) with domestic and foreign partners/colleagues as a team (to elaborate and implement joint plans, social projects; to set goals, tasks, strategies and tactics of individual and collective actions) being aware of one's own functions through synchronous intercultural interaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> practical experience in the use of background knowledge in cross-cultural communication; abilities to study how social institutions operate and to understand and participate in effective collaboration with partner countries and colleagues, specifically in professional contexts; practical experience in the identification and adequate decyphering of hidden sociocultural aspects of crosscultural communication; practical experience in performing a correct flexible behaviour model in the dialogue of cultures according to moral and aesthetic norms, typical of countries representing the source and target languages; abilities to analyse linguistic features of interlocutors'culturemarked messages in order to select adequate translation and communication means.

1. Knowledge (awareness)

A large majority of participants (85%) reported increased awareness of cultural, historical, and social-political realities of countries associated with the internationalization at home program. Students indicated that through joint classes, cultural modules, and shared discussions they became familiar with traditions, values, social norms, and cultural vocabulary of target language and partner institutions' countries.

Many (80%) acknowledged that their view of "foreign culture" widened: they could name significant historical facts, national holidays or traditions of peer

students' countries, as well as identify differences and similarities compared to their own cultural background.

Around 70% of respondents claimed improved sensitivity to both verbal and non-verbal communicative norms (e.g., appropriate ways of greeting, politeness norms, culturally appropriate expressions) in cross-cultural interactions.

Additionally, a significant portion of participants (75%) reported that their target English language proficiency improved as a result of participating in the program. Students noted better understanding of English vocabulary related to culture, more confidence in expressing ideas in English, and enhanced ability to communicate effectively in intercultural discussions.

In open-ended responses, several students noted that awareness went beyond superficial "facts" some began reflecting on cultural values, worldviews, and societal contexts of their international peers, while simultaneously applying and improving their English language skills in real communicative contexts.

The internationalization at home experience significantly strengthened the "knowledge" dimension: students acquired not only factual information about other cultures but also improved their target English language proficiency, using English as a medium to develop meta-awareness of cultural differences and commonalities a foundation for deeper intercultural and linguocultural competence.

2. Skills

Many students (73%) reported being more capable of communicating in intercultural settings not only in linguistic terms (foreign language use), but also in culturally appropriate ways (adapting style, tone, register). For example, students from Korkyt Ata University described feeling more confident when presenting or interacting with Russian peers in a culturally sensitive manner, and vice versa.

Some (65%) indicated improved group-work and collaborative skills: through joint projects, they became better at planning, negotiating, exchanging ideas, and respecting cultural perspectives which reflects readiness for cooperation in a multicultural academic environment.

Several respondents described their growing ability to "switch codes" adjusting not only language but communicative behaviour depending on the cultural background of their interlocutors (e.g., choosing appropriate vocabulary, demeanor, and non-verbal signals).

A minority (27%) reported difficulty still remain for instance, when cultural norms conflicted, or expectations were unclear but most considered these challenges as part of the learning curve.

The program contributed to the development of intercultural communicative skills, particularly in collaborative and adaptive communication. However, full mastery, especially in complex or ambiguous intercultural contexts, remains in progress.

3. Practical Experience (abilities)

During joint coursework and collaborative assignments, about 68% of

participants affirmed they successfully applied their knowledge and skills engaging in cross-cultural dialogue, group tasks, cultural projects or presentations without major misunderstandings or conflict.

Some students (62%) highlighted that exposure to cultural diversity via the program enabled them to anticipate and navigate potential cross-cultural miscommunications e.g., choosing neutral phrasing, asking clarifying questions, or being attentive to non-verbal cues.

Most participants (70%) reported that after the program they felt more prepared to work or study in multicultural or international environments (e.g., joint research, exchange programs, or international cooperation).

Still, a minority (32%) admitted that theoretical knowledge did not always translate into comfort or fluency in “real-world” intercultural communication e.g., they felt uncertain in spontaneous, informal conversations, or when cultural contexts were unfamiliar.

The “practical experience” dimension seems to benefit from the program, particularly in structured academic contexts (projects, presentations). Yet, spontaneous or informal intercultural interactions remain challenging for some, indicating that more immersive or extended experience may be needed to consolidate abilities.

The internationalization at home program significantly contributed to the formation and strengthening of linguocultural competence across all three dimensions of the framework.

The largest and most consistent gains were observed in the “knowledge” dimension; “skills” improved moderately; “practical experience/abilities” improved most in structured academic contexts.

The program facilitated not only acquisition of factual cultural knowledge, but also promoted reflections on cultural identity, tolerance, and readiness for intercultural cooperation.

The study examined the effects of the intervention on participants’ knowledge, skills, and practical experience. As shown in Table 2, all three dimensions demonstrated positive gains from pre-test to post-test.

Table 2. Dynamics of Students’ Linguocultural Competence: Pre-Test and Post-Test Mean Scores

Measure	Knowledge (awareness)	Skills	Practical Experience (abilities)
Pre-Test	3.15	2.60	1.80
Post-Test	4.25	3.65	3.40
Growth	+1.10	+1.05	+1.60

Growth indicates the magnitude of improvement in students' linguocultural competence. Scores were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High).

Knowledge (awareness): Participants' mean knowledge score increased from 3.15 at pre-test to 4.25 at post-test, yielding a mean growth of 1.10. This indicates a substantial enhancement in awareness during the internationalization at home program.

Skills: Skills scores showed an increase from a pre-test mean of 2.60 to a post-test mean of 3.65, corresponding to a mean growth of 1.05. This suggests that participants developed moderate-to-high skill levels as a result of the program.

Practical Experience (abilities): Practical experience exhibited the largest growth, increasing from 1.80 at pre-test to 3.40 at post-test (mean growth = 1.60). This demonstrates that participants' practical abilities improved considerably after the program.

Overall, the results indicate that the program was effective in enhancing participants' knowledge, skills, and practical experience, with the most pronounced improvement observed in practical abilities.

As presented in Table 2 and Figure 1, students showed significant development in their linguocultural competence as a result of their participation in the internationalization at home program. Knowledge (awareness) showed the highest gains, with the percentage of students demonstrating awareness increasing from 63% in the pre-test to 85% in the post-test. This suggests that students substantially broadened their understanding of cultural, historical, and sociopolitical realities related to the partner countries. Skills also improved markedly, rising from 52% to 73%, reflecting enhanced intercultural communication abilities and more culturally appropriate interaction styles, including collaboration and code-switching. The greatest relative improvement was observed in practical experience (abilities), which more than doubled from 36% to 68%. This suggests that students became significantly more confident and effective in applying their intercultural knowledge and skills in real academic and social contexts, although some challenges in spontaneous interactions likely remain. Figure 1 visually illustrates the progression in knowledge, skills, and practical competencies achieved through the internationalization at home program.

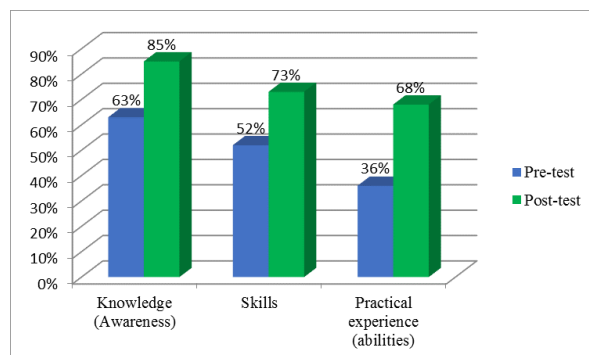


Figure 1 – The development of students' linguocultural competence

In addition to the survey data, students' detailed responses to open-ended interview questions offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of their lived experiences during internationalization at home program. The interview data further substantiate and contextualize the patterns identified through quantitative findings and thematic coding.

Findings from the internationalization at home program indicate a measurable change in students' cultural consciousness. One of the participants described the change in cultural cognition as a transition from passive, theoretical knowledge to active, experiential learning. The student stated:

"Previously, I knew about other cultures only theoretically, but this program allowed me to delve deeper into their views and ways of life through direct communication with real people. In addition, my respect for the culture of partner University has also increased by introducing and comparing my own cultural background."

Also, some students noted an increase in their communicative competence and motivation:

S1: "My motivation to learn English has increased. As I spoke more with others, my motivation to master the language also increased."

S2: "I learned not only the language, but also to clearly express my thoughts, ask questions and express opinions."

These changes indicate not only language development, but also an increase in pragmatic competence, an important aspect in mastering a second language in the context of intercultural communication.

Participants generally rated the course content and structure positively. During the interview, one participant commended the consistency of the course structure:

"The course structure was well thought out – first an introduction, then thematic discussions, and finally project work. Everything developed in stages."

Additionally, several students mentioned language barriers when describing challenges during the internationalization at home program. One participant stated:

"Some students were unable to express themselves fluently in English, and sometimes I couldn't find the right words and couldn't fully convey what I wanted to say."

Several students noted communication barriers, and suggests that even highly motivated learners face challenges in speaking the language spontaneously in an intercultural environment.

Most students rated the platform as accessible and effective. However, some participants cited technical difficulties as barriers:

"It was mostly convenient, but sometimes there were technical difficulties — slow internet or microphone/camera were not working."

Another problem encountered is that not all participants were equally active at the beginning of the program.

"Some participants were very active, while some students were not. This created an imbalance in the group work."

Such gaps highlight the need for systematic organizational strategies to ensure equal participation by all students, especially during collaborative tasks. Despite the challenges, the vast majority of students reported an increase in their language skills. Student 3:

“This program has significantly improved my speaking skills. I have gained confidence in speaking English fluently. Daily conversations and group discussions have also expanded my vocabulary.”

Student 4:

“Listening to people with different accents has improved my listening skills. It was difficult to understand before, but now I can respond quickly.”

The combination of qualitative data with statistical and thematic findings suggests that the virtual exchange process created a conducive environment for the development of students’ linguocultural competences. Students demonstrated an increase in cultural literacy, as well as enhanced communicative competence and confidence in speaking English. These findings underscore the fact that virtual exchanges are a powerful and effective tool for internationalizing higher education and preparing students for global engagement.

Discussion

The findings confirm the effectiveness of the development of linguocultural competencies of students during the internationalization at home program. The results of the survey and qualitative data show that students’ English language proficiency has improved significantly. We point out that this is due to the use of interactive pedagogical strategies such as discussions, debates and group projects. The development of language skills was accompanied by an increase in students’ linguocultural competence. This finding is consistent with Bayram’s model of intercultural communicative competence, which posits a close interrelationship between an individual’s linguistic proficiency and cultural adaptation [10].

O. Popova claims that linguocultural competence is developed through the excellent mastery of three dimensions: linguocultural knowledge (awareness), skills, and practical experience (abilities) which can be achieved by exploring country studies, observation and training the specificity of the relevant verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviour of a speaker within a particular situation alongside adequate translation tools and techniques for reproducing the original oral or written communication in the target language [11].

In this regard, the observed increase in students’ confidence in English and their ability to communicate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds corroborates Fantini’s conclusion that intercultural competence develops intrinsically in conjunction with linguistic flexibility [12].

The majority of participants indicated that they felt comfortable and confident on the virtual platform, which supports Helm’s claim that such programs help reduce social barriers [13]. Moreover, Godwin-Jones’s idea that virtual environments can be a safe and comfortable communication platform for introverted students was also confirmed [14].

Overall, the results of the study suggest that internationalization at home program can play an important role in developing the linguocultural competencies of students at universities. Such programs are consistent with De Wit and Hunter's recommendations that internationalization should be re-examined based on the principles of equity and accessibility [15]. Furthermore, the outcomes demonstrate the need for careful pedagogical planning, professional organization of structured teamwork, and sustained institutional support to achieve a quality educational process.

The internationalization at home program has significant scientific and practical value, as it deepens understanding of how multicultural academic environments shape students' linguocultural competence and enriches theoretical models of intercultural communication and language learning. Practically, it supports the development of more effective curricula, teaching methods, and internationalization of education that enhance students' cultural awareness, communication skills, and global employability. The findings also help universities promote internationalization initiatives that do not depend on student mobility and guide policymakers in improving educational strategies aligned with global standards.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of the internationalization at home program in developing students' linguocultural competence at regional universities in Kazakhstan and Russia. The internationalization at home program provided students with an authentic communication-based environment to interact with international partners and develop the competencies necessary for global citizenship. Qualitative data showed that students' linguocultural competence was based on practice rather than theoretical understanding. The outcomes confirm the effectiveness of the program, which is aimed at increasing students' readiness to effectively act in a multilingual and multicultural environment and adapting them to the requirements of the global labor market.

In addition, for students who cannot afford to study abroad, the program provided access to the global educational space and offered an alternative way to exchange international experience for educational institutions with limited resources. However, some challenges were also identified along with these achievements. Technical difficulties, particularly unstable internet connectivity and variability in student engagement, were identified as significant barriers to the effectiveness of the learning process.

It is recommended that future implementations of such initiatives adopt a long-term format and incorporate objective assessment instruments to evaluate the sustained development of linguocultural competence.

In conclusion, this study proves that virtual exchange programs are an affordable and effective tool for the internationalization of higher education. Such initiatives align with national strategies aimed at promoting the integration of regional universities into the global higher education landscape by fostering the development of linguocultural competence.

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ЖОҒАРЫ БІЛІМ БЕРУДІ ИНТЕРНАЦИОНАЛДАНДЫРУ ЖӘНЕ ОНЫҢ СТУДЕНТТЕРДІҢ ЛИНГВОМӘДЕНИ ҚҰЗЫРЕТТІЛІГІН ҚАЛЫПТАСТЫРУДАҒЫ ӘСЕРІ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада жоғары білім беруді интернационалдандырудың стратегиялық құрамдас бөлігі ретінде үйдегі интернационалдандыруды жүзеге асыру арқылы студенттердің лингвомәдени құзыреттілігін қалыптастыру, оның тиімділігі және оқу үдерісінде кездесетін қиындықтар қарастырылады.

Деректерді жинау және талдау үшін аралас әдісі қолданылды. Зерттеу жұмысына барлығы 60 қатысушы тартылды: Қорқыт Ата атындағы Қызылорда университетінен 30 студент және Набережные Челны мемлекеттік педагогикалық университетінен 30 студент. Сапалық және сандық зерттеу дизайны үйдегі интернационалдандыру бағдарламасы

туралы студенттердің ой-пікірлерін тереңірек анықтауға мүмкіндік берді.

Зерттеу нәтижелері виртуалды алмасу халықаралық өзара әрекеттесу үшін, әсіресе шетелде оқу мүмкіндігі шектеулі студенттер үшін қолжетімді және инклюзивті балама болып табылатынын көрсетеді. Зерттеу барысында виртуалды алмасуға негізделген үйдегі интернационалдандыру бағдарламасы студенттердің лингвомәдени құзыреттілігін арттыратынын дәлелдемелермен расталды. Алайда оң нәтижелерге қарамастан, тілдік кедергілер мен техникалық мәселелер сияқты бірнеше қиындықтар да анықталды. Зерттеу қорытындыларына сүйенсек, білім беруді интернационалдандыруға және студенттердің лингвомәдени құзыреттілігін дамытуға бағытталған жоғары оқу орындары дәстүрлі ұтқырлық бағдарламаларымен қатар үйдегі интернационалдандыру стратегияларына басымдық беруі қажет екендігін көрсетеді.

Тірек сөздер: интернационалдандыру, жоғары білім, үйдегі интернационалдандыру, лингвомәдени құзыреттілік, шет тілін оқыту, виртуалды алмасу, мәдениетаралық коммуникация, ынтымақтастық

ИНТЕРНАЦИОНАЛИЗАЦИЯ ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ И ЕЁ ВЛИЯНИЕ НА ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ЛИНГВОКУЛЬТУРНОЙ КОМПЕТЕНЦИИ СТУДЕНТОВ

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Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается реализация интернационализации дома как стратегического компонента интернационализации высшего образования, с особым акцентом на ее эффективность в развитии лингвокультурной компетентности студентов, а также в проблемах, возникающих в процессе обучения. Для сбора и анализа данных использовался смешанный метод. В исследованиях участвовали 60 человек: из них 30 студентов Кызылординского университета имени Коркыт Ата и 30 студентов Набережночелнинского государственного педагогического университета. Качественный и количественный дизайн исследования позволил глубже понять восприятие студентами программы интернационализации дома. Результаты показывают, что виртуальные обмены являются доступной и инклюзивной альтернативой международному взаимодействию, особенно для студентов, имеющих ограниченные возможности обучения за рубежом. Данное исследование подтверждает, что программа интернационализация дома, основанная на виртуальном обмене, улучшает лингвокультурную компетенцию студентов. Несмотря на эти положительные результаты, были выявлены ряд проблем, такие как языковые барьеры и технические вопросы. Результаты исследования показывают, что высшим учебным заведениям, стремящимся к интернационализации образования и к повышению лингвокультурной компетентности студентов, особое внимание следует уделять стратегиям

интернационализации дома наряду с традиционными программами мобильности.

Ключевые слова: интернационализация, высшее образование, интернационализация дома, лингвокультурная компетенция, преподавание иностранных языков, виртуальный обмен, межкультурная коммуникация, сотрудничество

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