

Effect of Group Writing Using Genre-Based Approach on Efl Learners' Competence in Writing Argumentative Essays

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ABSTRACT

In English as a foreign language (EFL) education, developing proficient writing skills is crucial for learners. In this domain, the genre of argumentative essays poses a major challenge, as it demands not only proficiency in linguistic but also an understanding of genre conventions and the ability to construct coherent and persuasive arguments. To address this challenge, researchers and educators have explored various instructional approaches to enhance EFL learners' writing competence. This paper reviews the effect of group writing using genre-based argumentative essays on EFL learners' writing competence in the context of Chinese universities. It aims to investigate how collaborative writing activities, facilitated by a genre-based approach, can contribute to the improvement of argumentative writing skills among EFL learners.

Keywords: Argumentative essay; EFL learner; genre-based approach; group writing

INTRODUCTION

The need for written English as a foreign language (EFL) is growing not only in academic or professional domains but also in people's everyday lives. English is an international language and the new universal language of the globe. The most challenging basic language skill for EFL learners is writing, which is a complicated skill that calls for linguistic and cognitive abilities (Moh'd et al., 2022). For students who use EFL and have little experience to the target language, writing is a particularly difficult language skill. Research on EFL writing has been a vibrant area of inquiry, investigating various aspects of the writing process, instructional methodologies, and learner outcomes. Scholars (Lu, 2023; Zheng, 2023) have conducted extensive research to better understand the complexities and challenges associated with EFL writing and propose effective approaches for instruction and assessment.

CURRENT STATUS OF EFL WRITING INSTRUCTION IN CHINA

One of the main objectives of college English instruction in China's current College English Curriculum Requirements is to build students' general communicative competence to satisfy the needs of the country's development and international communication. However, the results so far have not been obvious, especially in the area of writing. In response to this educational reform and to improve students' communicative competence, an increasing number of teachers are including communicative language instruction and collaborative learning as part of the design of university syllabus (Hsieh, 2020). However, the curriculum standards do not include methods to adequately assist students in achieving this goal in language teaching. Most teachers still use traditional teaching models that focus on language accuracy and the final writing product (Jiang et al., 2023). The goal of teaching college English writing for social communicative purposes in curriculum standards has not been addressed.

In numerous EFL/ESL settings around the world (Almacolu & Okan, 2018; Cholifah et al., 2022; Emilia & Ed, 2021; Ganapathy et al., 2022; Mazdayasna & Ghane, 2021), the importance of genre-based pedagogy has been shown to assist students' writing development. As a result, this pedagogy has the potential to help Chinese EFL students strengthen their writing skills.

In addition, group activities have been enthusiastically welcomed by Chinese English classrooms as one of the most popular models (Wang, 2020). Several previous studies (Candito, 2021; Maulidah & Aziz, 2020; Rababah, 2019; Wang, 2020) have found that many students make great progress in their writing skills through collaborative work. Most of them report that the implementation of collaborative learning makes their learning easy and enjoyable, thereby substantially improving their learning ability.

TEACHERS' ROLE IN CHINESE EFL CLASS

Most Chinese English teachers' teaching is unsatisfactory, judging from students' responses. On the one hand, owing to the large class size and limited lecture time, Chinese students have little time to participate in group activities; instead they listen to the teacher's lectures (Sari, 2019). On the other hand, the relationships among peers are completely individualistic. This phenomenon is due to the imbalanced power and position in the classroom caused by some Chinese students who regard the teacher as the source of authority and knowledge (Zeng & Xue, 2022). The pursuit of precious knowledge, which is not helpful for students' knowledge production, may be promoted by inequalities in traditional classroom instruction, preventing students from expressing critical thinking.

However, teachers can still exert efforts to stimulate effective teamwork in the following areas. First, their instructions should be clear and explicit, such as providing examples and releasing the anxiety of making mistakes. Mercer (2004) illustrated that scaffolding should provide diverse, stimulating support for students. Students can gain understanding of meaning and develop their ZPD through friendship groups. Motivation also deeply influences the level of learner engagement that teachers should be aware of. Dörnyei and Mercer (2020) reported the same findings, where teachers' actions determine the classroom atmosphere and the attitudes formed in the classroom. By matching their behavior to the group's accepted values, teachers can inspire students and serve as a role-model for the group. Second, Chinese English teachers need to think of promoting a cooperative and supportive culture so that students are encouraged to express their ideas. This approach aligns with the idea that teachers should ideally protect each student's turn through prompting and scaffolding and remind other learners to listen when grouping (Candito, 2021). Finally, teachers must be aware of their professional status. Scaffolding is a two-way street, existing not only between novice and expert peer interactions but also between teachers and students. The teacher–student relationship has a reciprocal effect on the affective factors, and once teachers are more professional and confident, students benefit more. Promoting student achievement depends heavily on the effectiveness of the teachers.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN EFL LEARNING

The definition of collaborative learning is much more complex than simply working with others (Raissi et al., 2020). Having students work collaboratively in groups is different from organizing students to work within a group. The existing definition of collaborative learning has shifted from simply working within a group to an action in which two or more learners bring together knowledge, resources, and expertise from different sources to reach a common goal (Azizi et al., 2020). Social interdependence theory provides insight into the nature of

collaborative group work. Collaborative group work prefers interdependent teams dependent on the performance of others, not completing tasks independently, but with shared responsibility and an active division of labor (Butera & Buchs, 2019).

Collaborative learning is considered to be a rather effective and reliable strategy (Rababah, 2019). When working on language learning, teachers tend to assign students into different learning groups. Collaborative learning can happen in small groups of three to four students as well as in large groups of five or more (Abrams, 2019). Group work has a remarkable beneficial effect by prioritizing the negotiation and communication that occur between students. Rohmah et al. (2023) stated that collaborative learning is carried out very frequently in English classes. It makes students feel more comfortable with group work compared with individual work, and students benefit from actively participating in a supportive atmosphere.

Situmorang (2021) conducted a study on high school students in Jakarta on group learning and found that high school students develop high levels of learner responsibility and empathy through group work. Developing responsibility, motivation, confidence, skills, and positive interdependence among them, and providing opportunities for learners to learn from one another through group learning can promote learner autonomy and thus cultivate their independence from the teacher (Wang, 2020). In their study with 60 high school students, Wu and Tao (2022) investigated the relationship between the length of group work and improvement of motivation in EFL classrooms. They found that the longer the exposure to group learning model, the more substantial the increase in students' learning motivation, especially for those with lower language proficiency.

As Pardede (2019) suggested, participation in group activities helps students improve their overall language skills. The benefits of group work on oral skill improvement are obvious. The purpose of group work is to help introverted students integrate actively with other students. Group work allows speaking to a partner so that conversations can be communicative. For example, students can exchange ideas and share their experiences and new vocabulary to increase their knowledge. Teachers control over group formation, topic selection, and role assignment, and the use of technology-enhanced learning strategies and techniques helps students become interested and confident in presenting their results using spoken English (Butarbutar et al., 2023). Using group work in the spoken English classroom has many benefits. Hernández-Sellés et al. (2019) summarized the effect of group work as increasing social awareness and high problem-solving task skills. They also explained that group work helps raise group members' awareness of the resources needed to succeed, thus increasing collective efficacy. Furthermore, they believed that group work promotes interaction. It builds positive relationships among group members and improves the quality of interpersonal relationships. Finally, group work fosters praise, support, and other positive social behaviors. Learners' speaking fluency increases as a result, and they experience a pleasant psychological state.

Collaborative learning develops students' independent learning skills. Teachers can prepare students for individual learning through a combination of small groups and individuals (Situmorang, 2021). This approach can build students' sense of responsibility and self-confidence when they are asked to complete tasks independently. Regarding teaching EFL writing, group work continues to show high effectiveness in improving the skills of learners.

GROUP WRITING

From the perspective of collaborative learning, group writing is an effective process, particularly for writers with low experience (Wang, 2020). Participants in small writing groups listen to their peers' ideas, themes, and descriptive phrases and adapt them to the situation, so peer interaction is productive in creating ideas (Azizi et al., 2020). By sharing their work with

their peers and adapting it to the needs of their readers as part of this process, participants become aware of the demands of their audience. As a result, students develop the ability to adapt their writing to specific contexts.

Writing in groups results in better language writers (Li & Zhang, 2021). As group members share ideas, students develop a great sensitivity to the aspirations, objectives, and social setting of their audience and develop an appreciation for their peers' viewpoints. Group writing improves writing skills and gives rise to many comprehensible ideas during oral discussions, which advances language learning in general. Effective group writing also fosters interactions that help learners value, respect, and recognize one another when they are learning a foreign language.

In the EFL context, group writing is considered an important behavior; it is also social in that a team works to accomplish a common goal while negotiating, coordinating, and communicating during the creation of a shared document (Iadabi & Karpinski, 2020; Abrams, 2019; Hsiu-Chen Hsu, 2019; Zhang, 2018). McDonough et al. (2018) found that EFL undergraduates produce more accurate text when working collaboratively to compose passages compared with those who work independently. EFL students make remarkable improvements in linguistic features and rhetorical organization as they embrace collaborative and independent construction of text (Thongchalermsri & Jarunthawatchai, 2020). Students feel that writing in groups while participating in co-construction improve their writing abilities and give them confidence while producing text in the target language. Chinese EFL college students who participate in group writing perform better than their counterparts in the control group in terms of linguistic accuracy, fluency, and text quality, including organization, vocabulary, and grammar (Chen, 2019). Additionally, Elabdali (2020) thoroughly reviewed 24 studies on the advantages of group writing in EFL situations and showed that texts created collectively are more correct than those written individually. Recently, Shinde and Shinde (2022) emphasized the enhancement of problem-solving strategies through collaborative learning, which has a major effect on students' critical thinking. Rahayu (2021) investigated the effects of group writing embedded in blogs for online learning on Indonesian EFL students' writing skills. The researcher found that learners exposed to group writing activities integrated with blogging online perform through traditional methods of learning. One can infer that group writing has a positive effect on the writing skills of EFL learners because it improves the accuracy of language and grammatical units and the overall quality of written texts.

Previous studies have demonstrated that group writing collaboration enhances the quality of writing that involves challenging tasks (Liu et al., 2018). It leads to deep understanding of content and improves writing accuracy and vocabulary acquisition (Chen, 2019; Latifi, Norrozi, & Talaei, 2021; McDonough & De Vleeschauwer, 2019). It also provides learners with opportunities for brainstorming, feedback, and meaning making (Alghasab et al., 2019; Bhowmik et al., 2019). Studies on the collaboration and interaction that naturally occur in small groups of students in Chinese higher education situations are rare. The goal of the present study is to investigate how students interact when writing in groups at a Chinese university as well as how they employ writing variety and language functions throughout the writing process in an EFL classroom setting. When doing a study on group writing, interaction patterns must be considered because they shed light on how group members cooperate, communicate, and plan their writing tasks. The next section covers the importance of interaction patterns.

STRUCTURES FOR GROUP WRITING IN EFL CLASSROOM

On the basis of previous discussions of sociocultural theory and social interdependence theory, the positive effect of group writing in writing classroom applications is well supported by

theory and practice. However, several issues should be kept in mind when constructing group work. Some students act as if their groups are better than others when they choose their friends as group members (Wang, 2020). Simply placing learners in groups and expecting them to work together does not promote collaboration and learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, 1998). When students construct groups, they tend to choose their friends, and some learners may be excluded.

Students have more opportunity to converse and share ideas while they are in groups, which mostly helps their language development. To receive clear input and adapt their output so that it is understandable to others (Swain, 1985), learners negotiate their viewpoints and exchange ideas (Krashen, 1985). Friendship groups provide a more intimate and less stressful environment for students (Li & Zhang, 2021). Therefore, in group work, students are open to offering input and receiving peer feedback (De Smedt & Van Keer, 2018). As a result, students find that not only their communicative skills but also their listening skills improve significantly. In addition, the group develops social skills to help learners interact fairly with different people (Candito, 2021). This interactive activity facilitates them to organize their thoughts in a logical manner, solve problems, seek clarification, choose social strategies, and persuade others.

Positive interdependence among groups encourages students to function as a cohesive unit and provides them a sense of belonging to others (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Scager et al., 2016). By peer scaffolding, individual learning intertwines as a whole learning community in a mutually supportive manner and gradually approaches its goals (Aini & Ashadi, 2022). Although certain students in a group will not be excellent at the activity itself, they can use their knowledge to help with collaborative tasks, such as technology-related issues. Positive interdependencies within a group can enhance each student's contribution and offer chances to develop ZPD (Arnold, 1999). The friendship grouping concept also makes developing mutually reliant relationships and individual accountability easy. They can expand their social circle and acquire friendship-building skills. Additionally, as everyone succeeds in achieving the same goals, students feel strongly morally obligated to contribute to the team's success (Alfares, 2017), which promotes team cohesion and individual growth.

Fear of losing face and being silly is a major threat to traditional classes (Wang, 2020). However, the collaborative motivational structure of group work creates a supportive environment in which group members feel less embarrassed and anxious compared with speaking in public (Abdelmohsen, 2023). Peer collaboration's sense of security can boost involvement when accompanied by a positive and welcome environment. As a result, students can collaborate, receive feedback, and practice making contributions to the group, boosting the possibility of success. An additional effect is a rise in student motivation. Learners, especially the shy and uninterested, can get assistance from collaborative groups in contributing. They care about the group and gain the advantages of self-identification from group members, thereby activating learners' behavior (Dörnyei & Mercer, 2020; Slavin, 2015). Importantly, they are passionate as a result of the support system provided by their peers, including praise and encouragement. These elements can boost their self-efficacy because they are acknowledged and helpful to others, which encourages teamwork and increased interaction (Slavin, 2015).

When students work in a group, several drawbacks may arise that can hinder their progress and effectiveness. The deep-rooted traditional culture influences most Chinese participants on their grouping experience. Chinese people are concerned about their public image. Although speaking in a group somewhat reduces anxiety compared with speaking in public (Butera & Buchs, 2019), concerns about "saving face" still deeply influence some Chinese students' group performance, such as "fear of making mistakes." In addition, harmony is highly regarded in ancient Chinese writings (Wang, 2012), and society's youth are hesitant to express their disagreement with others' viewpoints to prevent conflict. On the one hand,

students think their responses are useless to the group. They do not wish to distribute them to others as a result. Moreover, Wang (2012) noted that some Chinese students prioritize creating strong social networks. This priority is because Chinese people frequently sustain positive relationships and are cordial with one another.

One of the issues with Chinese groups' ways of working is their lack of linguistic proficiency. Some of the remarks to this point mention communicating almost entirely in Chinese rather than English. This issue can be because China is a monocultural country with limited access to real resources for Chinese students. Plenty of evidence demonstrates how Chinese culture negatively affects the group activities under consideration.

GENRE-BASED APPROACH

Genre-based approach has gained much attention since it was first introduced in the 1980s by John Swales in the field of English for Special Purposes (Swales, 1990; Li, 2022). Dissatisfaction with the process approach to teaching writing in Australian schools, which prioritizes natural learning, personal voice, and attention to narrative texts, has contributed to the development of genre-based approach. EFL learners who wish to interact successfully through discourse knowledge should combine linguistic and communicative competence in their essays (Melissourgou & Frantzi, 2017).

Today, genre-based approach is popular in language teaching and learning (Martin, 1992; McKnight, 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2021; Negretti, 2021). It has been widely used in teaching academic writing courses in EFL. In the English writing pedagogy, teachers give explicit instructions to explain the linguistic features and rhetorical devices specific to the discourse in which students need to engage (Hyland, 2007). They also need to explain the linguistic features of social communicative purposes, structures, and genres (Hyland, 2003). Through this pedagogical approach, English teachers can help improve EFL students' understanding of text structure, instill in them genre awareness, and increase their knowledge of academic writing conventions in English (Lu et al., 2021; Nagao, 2018). Several researchers also adopted genre-based pedagogy to study the effectiveness of teaching writing in different discourses and using genre-based approaches to increase students' genre awareness (Dong & Lu, 2020; Guerra-Lyons & Mendiñeta, 2020; Morell & Pastor Cesteros, 2019; Negretti, 2021; Ye, 2020). Therefore, research on developing genre-based writing methods may improve students' English writing skills.

BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF GENRE-BASED APPROACH

First, in terms of benefits, learners generally appreciate models or examples that show specifically what they must do linguistically. Studying a particular genre also allows them to understand why a way of communicating is the way it is by reflecting on its social context and purpose. In this context, the genre approach is beneficial because it combines the formal and functional properties of language in the teaching of writing and recognizes the strong connection between them (Al Hinai, 2018; Ghane & Mazdayasna, 2022; Wismanto & Ullumudin, 2022). As Zhao (2022) suggested, writing instructors should connect the formal and functional properties of language to promote students' awareness of how and why linguistic conventions are used to achieve particular rhetorical effects. If students analyze the rhetorical structure of content using a genre approach, they can identify common patterns in each genre. Naturally, these patterns form a background knowledge that students can activate in the next learning situation.

The genre approach also helps students interact with their environment, see writing as an instrument which they can use, and realize how authors organize their content to support

logical flow (Chen, 2022). Additionally, it helps students develop flexible thinking skills and finally comprehend how writers structure their writing.

The strengths of genre-based writing instruction can be summarized as follows. It clearly states what is to be learned to facilitate the systematic acquisition of writing skills. It also provides a coherent framework for focusing on language and context based on needs (Nagao (2018). In addition, it ensures that course goals and content are supportive from students' needs (Chen, 2022). Moreover, it empowers teachers to play a central role in fostering student learning and creativity (Irannezhad et al., 2022). Providing access to patterns of change and possibilities in valuable texts is critical (Emilia & Ed, 2021). Genre-based writing instruction provide resources for students to understand and challenge valuable discourse (Wismanto & Ullumudin, 2022). Furthermore, it increases teachers' awareness of the text so that they can confidently advise students on their writing (Aini & Ashadi, 2022).

Although the majority of studies on genre-based instruction have found it effective for EFL students, most of them have revealed insufficient comprehension of the helpful aspects of the strategy. A number of studies (Fathy Abdel Wahab, 2020; Jung, 2020) have emphasized how learners' genre awareness is growing more than how teachers' knowledge of how to teach writing using a genre-based method is changing. Shi (2015) used a qualitative case study methodology to examine data from student writing, observations in the classroom, and interviews. For these students, discourse text is the intended text type. The authors discovered that these instructors acknowledge that their previous method of instructing students on how to compose texts in the desired genre was very general and lacked sufficient information on generic structure. The researchers discovered that the genre method can give students detailed instructions on how to write the desired material. Teachers can learn subject-specific knowledge and curriculum knowledge thanks to their content knowledge of the target genre book. These educators believe that the teaching and learning cycle's modeling phase in particular help students comprehend the textual characteristics of the text in the target genre.

Some studies have argued that the genre approach is more appropriate for second language learners at beginner and intermediate levels than at advanced levels because it frees students from deep anxiety about writing tasks (Sari, 2019). When people learn something new, they usually want to find examples they can refer to. Writing tasks can be more demanding than other language skills, so low-level students need something they can rely on because they have little exposure to English writing.

Furthermore, genre-based approach neglects the importance of teaching basic language, grammar, and vocabulary knowledge so that EFL learners can express their ideas in English (Aswani et al., 2023). Many scholars argued that genre-based approach limits the production of creative ideas by EFL students because they cautiously follow the structure of a genre (Thongchalem & Jarunthawatchai, 2020).

GENRE-BASED APPROACH IN CHINA'S EFL CLASS

Genre-based approach is practiced in many areas of language education in China. Compared with traditional teaching methods, teaching English in a Chinese context has many advantages (Zhao, 2022).

Genre-based writing enables students to learn English while absorbing social and cultural information. Cultural diversity is reflected in the character of writing, which has its own particular social purpose and stimulates the expectations of the target audience (Fu et al., 2019). In China, where English is a second language, the lack of cultural context in English places a great burden on learners (Jiang et al., 2023). However, with the guidance of genre theory, English learners can construct the social context of the target language based on its genre structure. They can then analyze, evaluate, and study the language, ultimately learning

the social, cultural, and ideological knowledge of the target language.

Within the framework of the genre-based approach, English writing is both a process and an outcome. Genre is concerned with linguistic socio-cultural contexts, representing a high-level domain of discourse consisting of fields and modalities (Laela, 2022). It is manifested through discourse, which is in turn realized by lexico-grammatical resources, and further expressed through handwriting (Laela, 2022). In such a relation of realization, writing is a procedural and progressive realization activity. The use of writing as a result stems from the traditional research of systemic functional linguists to improve the literacy skills of students and workers. This view emphasizes the choice of language systems, that is, writing is the process by which a writer makes linguistic choices to achieve meaning among the rich linguistic resources (Llinares & McCabe, 2023).

Genre-based approach emphasizes learning interaction (Zhao, 2022). To help learners learn the genre, the genre approach advocates learning through interaction in a shared experience (Painter, 1986; De Oliveira et al., 2023), making the pedagogy visible and variable. The teacher acts as a scaffold, assisting students with difficult language learning tasks. The instructional process is accomplished in a genre-based scaffolded teaching and learning cycle of student learning tasks and teacher explanation. Writing instruction thus emphasizes teacher–student and student–student collaboration and support.

Reading and writing reinforce each other. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are developed in a balanced way in the genre-based scaffolded learning/teaching cycle (Triastuti et al., 2022). The genre-based approach incorporates language training with listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. The ultimate goal of learners in this domain is to portray real-world context, and its primary purpose is to convey domain competence, so it concentrates on the study of special-purpose English. As a result, the approach highlights the reconstruction of the target language environment and overall language ability (Yang, 2016).

ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY IN EFL WRITING

Seven key genres are identified in the genre literature: narrative, report, procedural, explanatory, argumentative, and discussion (Derewianka, 1990). The target genre for this study is argumentative essay. In genre-based writing instruction, argumentative essay is a specific type of writing that focuses on presenting a well-structured and well-documented argument about a particular topic or issue. It belongs to the category of persuasive writing, whose main purpose is to convince the reader of the validity and strength of the writer's point of view or claim. Argumentative writing is a key component of academic writing (Kuiper et al., 2017). It involves arguments, facts, reasons, descriptions, or explanations that support the side being argued; uses expert authority that readers can easily believe; and makes the writer's position seem incontrovertible (Munsell & Clough, 1984; Feez & Joyce, 1998b). It is also concerned with the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of the world around us, and its focus is on persuading others to accept our point of view (Derewianka, 1990; Nejmaoui, 2019).

Undergraduate students usually write argumentative essays as a type of academic writing (Shin, 2018). Writing an argumentative essay demands logical and critical thinking as well as the capacity to connect ideas and evidence cogently, which makes this form of writing a part of the academic genre (Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014). It enhances critical thinking, persuasive communication, research skills, engagement with complex topics, and the development of a personal voice; it also prepares students for their future careers. These skills are valuable not only in academic settings but also in career endeavors.

Argumentative writing requires students to think critically and analytically (Oktavianti & Prayogi, 2022). They must evaluate evidence, consider different points of view, and develop logical arguments. Writing essays develops students' critical thinking and enhances the ability

to evaluate information and make informed judgments, which are valuable skills for academic and professional success. In addition, argumentative writing often involves conducting research to gather evidence and support arguments (Sabu & Vernandes, 2019). College students learn how to locate and evaluate reliable sources of information, analyze the information, and incorporate it into their writing. Developing research skills is critical to academic success and provides a foundation for future academic endeavors. Moreover, argumentative writing enables students to explore these topics comprehensively, develop well-reasoned arguments, generate their ideas, and organize their writing into paragraphs that logically connect and unfold smoothly (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022). It encourages them to delve deep into the topic, understand multiple perspectives, and engage with complex ideas.

CONCLUSION

This paper offers a comprehensive exploration of the effect of group writing facilitated by a genre-based approach on EFL learners' competence in writing argumentative essays within the context of Chinese universities. Recognizing the crucial role of proficient writing skills in EFL education, particularly in the challenging genre of argumentative essays, the work explores various instructional approaches to enhance learners' writing proficiency. The findings underscore the importance of collaborative writing activities guided by a genre-based approach, shedding light on their potential to contribute substantially to the improvement of EFL learners' argumentative writing skills. The exploration of this pedagogical strategy adds valuable insights to the existing body of research, providing educators and practitioners with practical implications for refining writing instruction in EFL contexts. Overall, the paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on effective language instruction methodologies.

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