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Developmental Analysis of Iraqi EFL University Students' Use of Discourse Markers in Composition Writing

Iqbaal Majeed Hameed

Ministry of Education, Iraq

Fine Arts Institute, Rusafa 1

تحليل تطور أستخدام طلبة الجامعات العراقية دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة اجنبية لعلامات الخطاب في كتابة الانشاء

إقبال مجيد حميد

وزارة التربية والتعليم العراق معهد الفنون الجميلة الرصافة ١

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Abstract

The present paper delves into the Iraqi undergraduate EFL students' use of discourse markers in essay writing. Discourse markers, hence (DMs) are characteristic feature of any type of text as they maintain and enhance the logical semantic relations and provide the basis for coherence. The researcher targets the undergraduate students (1st, 3rd and 4th stage) of the Department of English language in Al-Mansour University / Iraq, with respect to their qualitatively and quantitatively based abilities in knitting the texts with the appropriate discourse markers. The study has a multipronged aim involving that studying the nature of the student`s competency in the knitting of discourse is crucial for establishing pedagogical solutions to enhance their production of discourse. The study uses quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze the essays written by Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners. The study found that the higher the students advance in their academic profession the more competent and frequent use of discourse markers is developed. It is also found that students across the three stages pay a greater attention to the temporality of the text via the heavy use of temporal DMs in their texts. Key words: Discourse markers, Discourse, Students' development, Second language teaching, Discourse structure.

المستخلص

يتناول هذ البحث استخدام طلبة الجامعات العراقية دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية لعلامات الخطاب في كتابة المقالات. تعد علامات الخطاب سمة متأصلة في أي نوع من النص لأنها تحافظ على العلاقات الدلالية المنطقية وتعززها وتوفر الأساس للتماسك. استهدف الباحث طلبة المرحلة الجامعية (المرحلة الأولى والثالثة والرابعة) في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة المنصور/ العراق من حيث قدراتهم الكمية والنوعية في حياكة النصوص باستخدام علامات الخطاب المناسبة. للدراسة هدف متعدد الجوانب يتضمن دراسة طبيعة كفاءة الطالب في حياكة الخطاب أمر بالغ الأهمية لوضع حلول تربوية لتعزيز إنتاج الخطاب. تستخدم الدراسة مناهج كمية ونوعية لتحليل المقالات التي كتبها طلبة المرحلة الجامعية العراقية في اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية. وقد وجدت الدراسة أنه كلما تقدم الطلبة في حياتهم

الأكاديمية كلما تم تطوير الاستخدام الأكثر كفاءة وتكرارًا لعلامات الخطاب. وقد وجد أيضًا أن الطلاب عبر المراحل الثلاث يولون اهتمامًا أكبر لزمنية النص من خلال الاستخدام المكثف للرسائل المباشرة الزمنية في نصوصهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علامات الخطاب، الخطاب، تطوير الطلبة، تعليم اللغة الثانية، بنية الخطاب

1. Introduction

The impossibility of any rigid separation between Language teaching/learning on the one hand and discourse analysis on the other is taken for granted especially if we look at the significance of language use features that have a great influence on the course of language teaching and learning. It should also be mentioned that the development of the arena of discourse analysis has a great influence on the contemporary development in second language teaching and learning hence (SLA). (Gee, 2012 cited in Boxer & Zhu 2017). It is also worth mentioning that, discourse analysis, as a new discipline in applied linguistics, will be of great value and significance as far as language teaching and learning are concerned (Ji, 2015, p.136).The researches on PMs are still paving the way for having a better understanding of what essentially they are, although those researches vary according to certain perspectives. Pons Borderia (2006, p. 94) describes the situation concerning the researches at the present time by saying that "pragmatic markers research is a melting pot of problems and perspectives". PMs are common to the worlds` languages. However; defining them is not an easy task, because, as infinite group, they vary across languages. Moreover, pragmatic markers as units e.g *well* in English exhibit different meanings. In other words, they are a heterogeneous group. As indicators of a relevant structure of discourse, Laurel & Donna Brinton (2010, p.354) argue that discourse markers are important to indicate the relevance of the parts of discourse. Such elements can be described as words, phrases or expressions, like "well, so, y'know, actually, then, and I mean", that are hard to categorize into word class and apparently devoid of meaning, they are highly frequent in speech. They often occur at the beginning of utterances.Within the Applied linguistics related literature, it should be noted that the structuring of discourse by EFL learners is no less a significant subject to investigate which is no less significant than the other subjects like for instance error analysis (Stern 1983 cited in Castillo, 2017, p.11).Although the importance of discourse markers in English writing is recognized widely, there is a remarkable gap in the related Iraqi EFL learners` literature, especially in relation to Fraser's 2005 model. In this specific context there is a need to provide a comprehensive account of the challenges and strategies employed by these learners when applying discourse markers into their writing. To cope with this gap, this study embarks on a cross-sectional analysis so as to uncover how Iraqi EFL learners utilize discourse markers, as conceptualized by Fraser, in English written texts as well as the implications of their usage for the cohesion and coherence of a text.Hansen (2006, p.25) describes DMs in primarily functional pragmatic terms. Accordingly, as linguistic items, they play an important role functioning as DMs is "non-propositional and meta-discursive, and their functional scope is, in general, quite variable". They have a certain role to deliver directions directed to "the hearer on how to integrate their host utterance into a developing mental model of the discourse in such a way as to make that utterance coherent". This indicates that DMs have connection seen as a portion of their implication. Having been termed differently, DMs have no static term to label them and this fact is put forward by Blakemore (2006, p.221) who deals with the overlap of the expression of markers. She states that we cannot always state that "the range of alternative terms which have appeared in the growing literature in this area", for instance, "pragmatic markers, discourse particles, discourse connectives, discourse operators, cue markers" – are actually markers for the same occurrence. She further maintains that the term "DMs" is normally employed to point to a syntactically diverse group of words which are characterized by "their function in discourse and the kind of meaning they encode".The study`s quantitative design involves "the one way ANOVA" (Analysis of Variance) test used to quantify the student`s outcome. The ANOVA test is a statistical test that is used for identifying variances in set means "when there is one parametric dependent variable" as well as one or more independent variables (Sawyer, 2009, p.27). The research aims to investigate the challenges faced by these learners in a way to address the instructional strategies which can be devised to solve such issues in effective methods.The developmental orientation of this study makes a good reference for instructors, curriculum designers to track down the points of fault both in students` discourse proficiency and in course designs so that successful teaching programs can be devised. By having a good understanding of the delays faced by Iraqi EFL learners in discourse production, English language teaching can have a great development.The study

hypothesizes that significant differences in the use of discourse markers exist among Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners at different academic levels, as modeled by Bruce Fraser 2005.The objectives of this study are to conduct an analysis of the patterns of discourse marker procedure, following Fraser's 2005 model, by Iraqi EFL learners in their English written texts. Moreover, the study is set to examine the impact of discourse markers usage on the cohesion and coherence in the written texts of these learners. Finally, the study also aims to provide insights and recommendations for educators and curriculum designers to enhance language instruction for Iraqi EFL learners.

1.2 Problems of Terminology

DMs have a variety of labels, such as "discourse particles, discourse connectives, pragmatic markers or discourse markers" etc. these different labels point to formal and functional features reflected in the nature of the term used. Jucker and Yael (1998, p.2) point out that various expressions are utilized to point to these components. "Among them are discourse marker" (e.g. Schiffrin 1987), "pragmatic marker (e.g. Fraser 1996, Brinton 1996), discourse particle (e.g. Schourup 1985; Abraham 1991; Kroon 1995), pragmatic particle (e.g. Östman 1981), pragmatic expression (e.g. Erman 1987)" or connectives (Blakemore 1987, 1988). Jucker and Yael (ibid) add that the diversity of terms reproduces both the extensive variety of linguistic methods that have been utilized for tackling them, and the diversity of functions which these components are supposed to accomplish. These functions take in "discourse connectors, turn-takers, confirmation-seekers, intimacy signals, topic-switchers, hesitation markers, boundary markers, fillers, prompters, repair markers, attitude markers, and hedging devices".

1.3 Previous studies

In this section some previous theme related studies are presented for instance Connor and Johns (1990) who investigated coherence in writing from pedagogical perspectives. This study embarks on coherence in writing in which the indirectly delve into discourse markers. Hinkel, E. (2001) Conducted a study entitled Building Awareness and Practical Skills. He targeted Discourse Markers in ESL Writing. His work maintains a useful guidance for ESL writing instructors in the course of teaching. Furthermore, the work incorporates discourse markers in the classroom in an effective manner. In his remarkable work, Hyland (2008) investigated how discourse connectives contribute to text patterning in published and postgraduate writing. As being the instructor of English for non-native speaker of English language, Castro (2009) studied discourse markers classroom interaction in the situation of EFL. Among the specific aspects of classroom communication and language practice is the emphasis on discourse markers (DMs). All the above studies show that the current study is an attempt to fill in a specific gap about the discourse markers related literature, that is, discourse markers are required to be studied from a developmental applied linguistics viewpoint in EFL learners' written texts.

2. Methodology

2.1 Subjects

The subjects in this study are Iraqi college students in the Department of English at Al Mansour University / Iraq, involving the 1st, 3rd and 4th stage which involves 50 subjects for each academic level. For the purpose of objectivity, the students are asked to write 200 to 250 words essay about a specific topic they are very familiar with so that they would express themselves freely.

2.2 Adopted Model

The study follows Fraser (2005) categorization and terminology of "discourse markers". Fraser defines "discourse markers" as those "lexical expressions" which are salient in any language and have a very little semantic content and which contribute to the discourse segment in any piece of language use (Fraser, 2005, p.189). **Table (1) Discourse Markers (Fraser, 2005)**

Discourse Markers (DMs)

Elaborative	Contrastive	Inferential	Temporal
Example: and, above all- also alternatively- analogously-besides- by the same token- correspondingly	Example: But, alternatively- although- contrariwise- contrary to expectations- conversely-despite (this/that)- even so	Example: So, after all, all things considered- as a conclusion- as a consequence (of this/that)- as a result (of this/that)	Example: after, as soon as- before, eventually- first- immediately- afterwards- meantime- meanwhile- originally- second, subsequently- when

2.3 ANOVA Test

A One-Way ANOVA test is conducted using a statistical software package (SPSS). The independent variable is the type of the discourse marker, while the dependent variable is the subjects (students).

3. Statistical Analysis, Results and Discussion

As far as the statistical part is concerned, the one-way ANOVA is used to reach precise numbers and percentages. The analysis is conducted for each group across the academic stages 1st, 3rd, and 4th.

3.1 First Year Students

In this section the statistical analysis of the 1st year students` written texts is conducted. It involves tables and figures demonstrating the mean frequency and significant differences of the discourse markers in question.

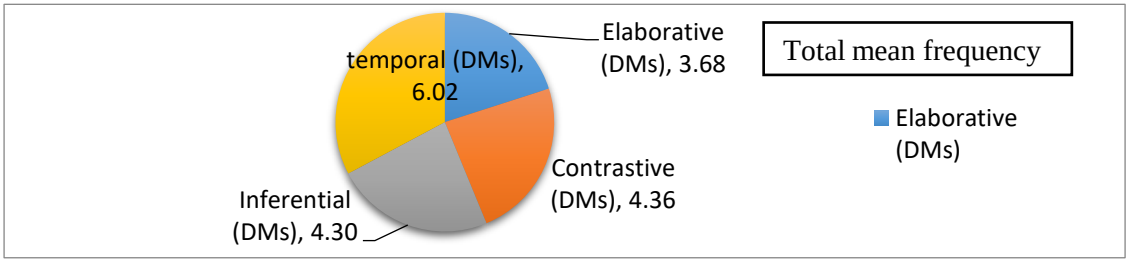

Figure (1) the mean frequencies of 1st year student`s use of DMs

In figure (1), it can be seen that the total mean frequency of DMs in the written texts of the 1st year students is 18.54. It should also be added that the temporal DMs have the highest mean frequency 6.02 among the other categories of (DMs) which suggests a heavy reliance on temporal connections in the students` texts.

3.2 Third Year Students

In this section the statistical analysis of the 3rd year students` written texts is carried out. It involves tables and figures demonstrating the mean frequency and significant differences of the discourse markers in question.

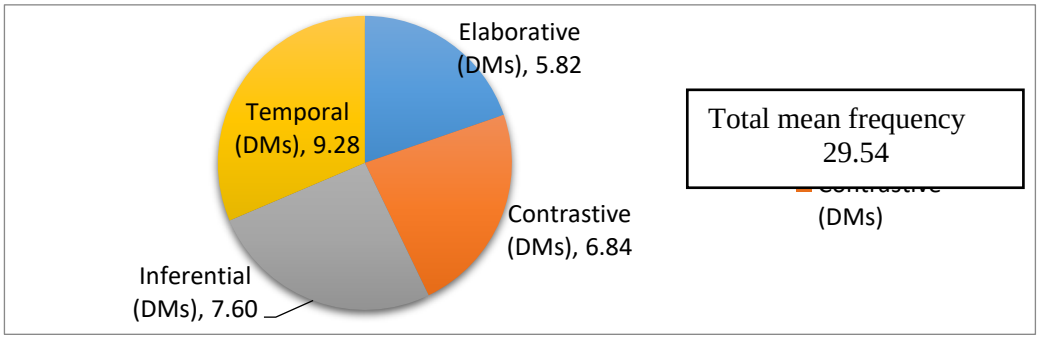

Figure (2) the mean frequencies of 3rd year student`s use of DMs

In figure (2), it can be seen that the total mean frequency of DMs in the written texts of the 3rd year students is 29.54 It should also be added that the temporal DMs have the highest mean frequency 9.28 among the other categories of (DMs) which suggests a heavy reliance on temporal connections in the students` texts.

3.3 Fourth Year Students

In this section the statistical analysis of the 4th year students` written texts is carried out. It involves tables and figures demonstrating the mean frequency and significant differences of the discourse markers in question.

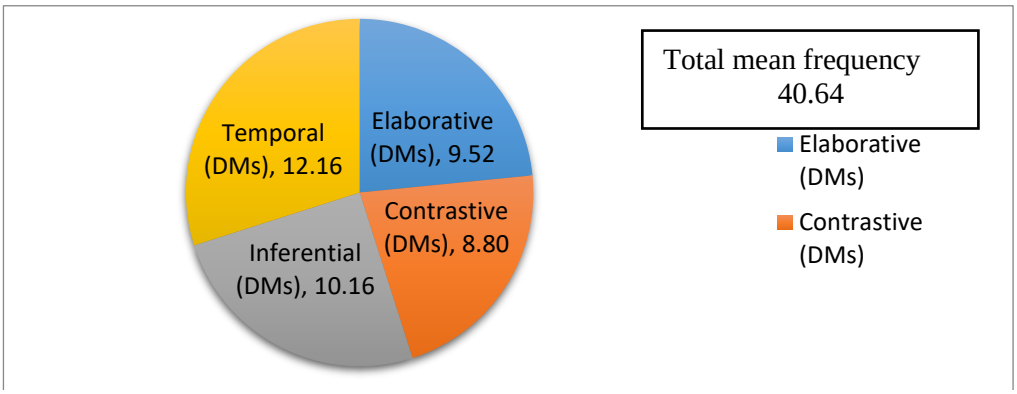

Figure (3) the mean frequencies of 4rd year student`s use of DMs

In figure (3), it can be seen that the total mean frequency of DMs in the written texts of the 3rd year students is 40.64 It should also be added that the temporal DMs have the highest mean frequency 12.16 among the other categories of (DMs) which suggests a heavy reliance on temporal connections in the students` texts.

3.4 Total Mean Frequency per each DMs Sub-group

In this section the total mean frequencies of DMs i.e. Elaborative, Contrastive, Inferential, and Temporal DMs by each academic stage are presented.

Table (2) the ANOVA analysis of individual DMs total scores by each academic stage

		N	Mean
Elaborative_DMs	First-Year Students	50	3.68
	Third-Year Students	50	5.82
	Fourth-Year Students	50	9.52
	Total	150	6.34
Contrastive_DMs	First-Year Students	50	4.36
	Third-Year Students	50	6.84
	Fourth-Year Students	50	8.80
	Total	**150**	**6.67**
Inferential_DMs	First-Year Students	50	4.30
	Third-Year Students	50	7.60
	Fourth-Year Students	50	10.16
	Total	**150**	**7.35**
Temporal_DMs	First-Year Students	50	6.02
	Third-Year Students	50	9.28
	Fourth-Year Students	50	12.16
	Total	**150**	**9.15**

As shown in table (1) temporal DMs have the highest mean frequency following the score by the 1st, 3rd and 4th academic stages.

3.5 Significant differences among DMs subgroups

This section presents the significant differences among the DMs mean frequencies.

Table (3) Significant differences among DMs groups

		Sum of Squares	df	Sig.
Elaborative_DMs	Between Groups	872.920	2	.000
	Within Groups	570.740	147	
	Total	1443.660	149	
Contrastive_DMs	Between Groups	495.093	2	.000
	Within Groups	416.240	147	
	Total	911.333	149	
Inferential_DMs	Between Groups	863.053	2	.000
	Within Groups	337.220	147	
	Total	1200.273	149	
Temporal_DMs	Between Groups	943.693	2	.000
	Within Groups	497.780	147	
	Total	1441.473	149	

Following table (2) there is a significant difference 0.000 among all DMs subgroups

3.6 Significant Differences among Academic Stages

This section presents the significant differences among the scores of the 1st, 3rd and 4th academic stages.

Table (4) significant differences among the 1st, 3rd and 4th academic stages

Dependent Variable	(I) Subjects	(J) Subjects	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Elaborative_DMs	First-Year Students	Third-Year Students	-2.140*	.394	.000
		Fourth-Year Students	-5.840*	.394	.000
	Third-Year Students	First-Year Students	2.140*	.394	.000
		Fourth-Year Students	-3.700*	.394	.000
	Fourth-Year Students	First-Year Students	5.840*	.394	.000
		Third-Year Students	3.700*	.394	.000
Contrastive_DMs	First-Year Students	Third-Year Students	-2.480*	.337	.000
		Fourth-Year Students	-4.440*	.337	.000
	Third-Year Students	First-Year Students	2.480*	.337	.000
		Fourth-Year Students	-1.960*	.337	.000
	Fourth-Year Students	First-Year Students	4.440*	.337	.000
		Third-Year Students	1.960*	.337	.000
Inferential_DMs	First-Year Students	Third-Year Students	-3.300*	.303	.000
		Fourth-Year Students	-5.860*	.303	.000
	Third-Year Students	First-Year Students	3.300*	.303	.000
		Fourth-Year Students	-2.560*	.303	.000
	Fourth-Year Students	First-Year Students	5.860*	.303	.000
		Third-Year Students	2.560*	.303	.000
Temporal_DMs	First-Year Students	Third-Year Students	-3.260*	.368	.000
		Fourth-Year Students	-6.140*	.368	.000
	Third-Year Students	First-Year Students	3.260*	.368	.000
		Fourth-Year Students	-2.880*	.368	.000
	Fourth-Year Students	First-Year Students	6.140*	.368	.000
		Third-Year Students	2.880*	.368	.000

Based on table (3) the use of all the subgroups of DMs by all stages marks a significant difference 0.000.

3.7 Developmental Pattern

This section demonstrates the developmental pattern which involves the left to right arrow direction showing the dependent and independent variables in this study as presented in figure (4)

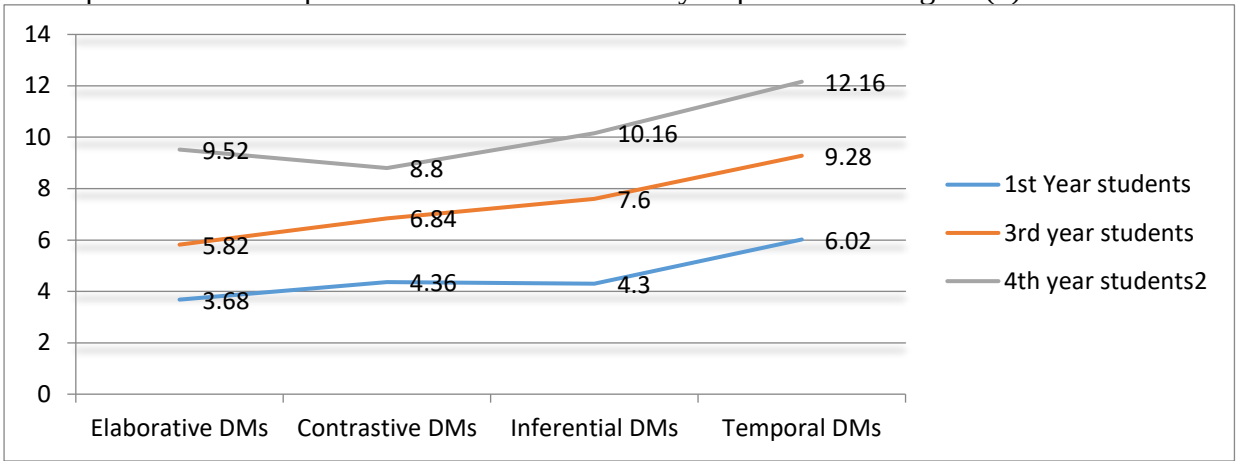

Figure (4) the developmental pattern of the use of DMs in EFL learners written texts Across three academic stages

As shown in figure (4), the horizontal lines represent each academic stage, namely the 1st, 3rd and 4th stages while the horizontal direction represents the total scores of DMs subgroups (Elaborative, Contrastive, Inferential and Temporal) by students from the academic stages in question. The figure asserts that there is a clear developmental pattern concerning all DMs groups across all the academic stages in question.

Starting with elaborative DMs, the developmental pattern is shown below

1st stage: 3.68

3rd stage: 5.82

4th stage: 9.52

The mean frequency of the elaborative DMs suggests that the use of elaborative DMs increases with academic progress. This suggests that as students pass through the academic stages, they incline to manipulate more elaborative DMs in their writing. Students according to the preceding argument tend to provide more comprehensive arguments in their writing.

With respect to contrastive DMs, the developmental pattern is shown as follows:

1st stage: 4.36

3rd stage: 6.84

4th stage: 8.8

In the same fashion of elaborative markers, the contrastive DMs also exhibit an increase in mean frequency as students move to higher academic stages. This may show a growing competency to express contrasting viewpoints in their writing.

Moving to inferential DMs, the developmental pattern is presented below:

1st stage: 4.3

3rd stage: 7.6

4th stage: 10.16

As far as the inferential DMs are concerned, there is a substantial increase in their frequency starting from the 1st to the 4th stage. This can give rise to the inference that students tend to use inferential markers more frequently as they move to higher academic stages indicating that they are in the process of developing a higher level of reasoning as well as inference in their writing.

Finally the developmental pattern of the temporal DMs is shown below:

1st stage: 6.2

3rd stage: 9.28

4th stage: 12.16

The developmental pattern of temporal DMs also shows a higher frequency with academic advancement. This suggests the students` increased ability to organize texts temporally due to the complexity writing tasks.Generally, the statistical analysis shows a positive relation between the academic stage and the use

of DMs. As students advance into higher academic stages, they tend to use DMs more frequently in their writing. This shows that there is a developmental pattern in their discourse markers ability to enhance text cohesion and coherence.

Conclusions

Based on the statistical analysis, it can be concluded that there is a clear developmental pattern of the use of DMs by the 1st, 3rd and 4th year students. As the students move into higher academic stages the tend to have more proficiency in the creation of discourse coherence and cohesion as they become more competent in developing the text`s logical relations. The study too revealed that temporal DMs are the most recurrent subcategory which proposes that they are profoundly employed by EFL students to establish and order the temporality of the written text. It can also be shown that significant differences with respect to the mean frequency 0.00 both among all the DMs sets and among the students` use of DMs across all the academic stages. The study also found that in addition to the clarity of coherence, students tend to overuse temporal DMs due to the latter`s structural simplicity i.e. their grammatical function and position, as well as the fact that students lack the diversity of DMs, the matter which should be taken seriously by course designers so as to be coped with.

Pedagogical implications

The study provides implications for educators and curriculum designers as it paves the way for a better understanding of DMs which in turn can enhance language instruction. The teaching methods and materials should contain a full account of the effective use of DMs. Educators are to encourage students to use DMs effectively, the point which improves text cohesion and coherence in their writing.

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