

Exploring Writing Challenges in Academic Writing and the Use of Graphic Organiser and Instructional Scaffolding in the Writing Process of ESL Writers

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ABSTRACT

Composing essays in academic writing is often challenging for most ESL writers. Writing process in second language is not easy as it requires the writers to plan, draft, monitor, and edit which may take a lengthy time to complete. Numerous research findings reveal that a significant proportion of university students face challenges in developing writing skills as they face difficulties throughout the writing process. Therefore, the writers should be guided properly by the writing instructors to regulate them throughout the entire writing process. The study aims to explore writers' writing challenges in academic writing using graphic organiser and scaffolding in the process of writing. This quantitative research design involved 30 participants from local tertiary institutions. Results indicated achieving the goals of essay writing was sometimes challenging, as students were unsure about what to include in each paragraph (mean score = 2.7). It was also found that the overall mean of how the respondents perceived the graphic organiser and scaffolding being used in the writing process was high. Results of this study have given a great impact on teaching and learning of ESL academic writing.

Keywords: ESL learners, academic writing, writing challenges, writing skill, graphic organiser, scaffolding. Quantitative method,

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Writing is a process of thinking, composing, and encoding information into text. Writing skill measures writers' ability to interpret and express ideas into a text. This involves understanding information and then translating the thoughts, opinions, and knowledge into a coherent, well-formed product. This skill urges the writers to communicate, express ideas and thoughts with a decent language use (Akram et al. 2020). Hence, it is crucial for every learner to master writing skill in academic writing. Al-Khazraji (2019) pinpointed the importance of learning writing for the students and the need for enhancing writing skill in an academic setting.

In addition, writing skill helps learners to develop critical thinking, simultaneously train them to make their own judgement, and decide their writing styles for their academic writing task. According to Okpe and Onjewu (2017), writing skill helps to improve one's daily communication, obtain good grades, and be a better professional. Moreover, enhancing writing skill can help the ESL writers to perform effectively in a professional environment (Akram et al., 2020). This shows that developing writing skill becomes crucial for ESL writers as the skill does not only prepare them to perform their cognitive domain but psychological aspect too.

Despite the importance of learning this skill for ESL writers, writing has been perceived as a challenging process. Writing has become the most difficult skill in which the writers have to go through complex processes

that engaged several competencies (Ruqiyah et al.,2021). There are several aspects of writing difficulties committed by the writers such as structural, grammatical, mechanical, and vocabulary (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Ginting, 2019; Sabarun, 2019; Toba et al.,2019). Writing challenges hinder the writers to perform well during the writing process. Morgan (2016) states that writers will get stuck when they want to begin writing the first idea of the topic, confused to write the thesis statement, think of audiences' perception, fear or failure while writing because they have difficulties expressing ideas, feeling and experience. Consequently, they could not produce their ideas in well-written paragraphs or essays.

Problem Statement

In writing process, writers are expected to express and translate their opinions, thoughts, and ideas into a well-formed text. To generate a good composition, ESL writers should know the writing process involving planning, translating, and reviewing (Bulqiyah et al.,2021). Besides that, writing is a process to communicate the language effectively in order to deliver their mind and thoughts (Vellayan et al.,2021; Kamaliah et al.,2018; Rusli, 2018; Raba, 2017). Developing writing competencies is important for successful communication at all levels of the education system (Akram et al.,2020).

However, the problems occur when the writers face challenges during their writing process. They are clueless on how to produce well-organised compositions as they do not have a proper writing guideline or template to regulate their writing step-by step. As suggested by Rahmat (2023), writing instructors should teach a variety of writing skills such as brain-storming, mind-mapping, and making detailed outlines before the actual write-up.

Therefore, this quantitative study is intended to explore writing challenges faced by ESL writers and the use of graphic organiser and scaffolding in academic writing. Abdul Hadi et al. (2024) suggested a study to investigate students who are lacking writing knowledge and the potential writing difficulties during the composing process. Hence, it is important for the writers to get a proper instruction before the writing process takes place. This has been proposed by Ha Ead et al. (2023), one of the strategies to alleviate writing challenges is by providing more detailed instructions on the writing process. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions.

- a. How do ESL learners perceive writing challenges in academic writing?
- b. How do ESL learners perceive Graphic organizer and scaffolding in academic writing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing Skill and Academic Writing of ESL Writers

Writing is a challenging skill and it involves social and cognitive processes. Writers are required to develop the ideas and then transfer them into a well-formed composition. Parnabas et al. (2022) defines writing as a process of constructing ideas and conveying them to the reader through paragraphs and statements. Writing process involves a few stages as asserted by Hasnawati et al. (2023) writing is a process that involves pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading stages, which provides a systematic approach to the writing process. Writing does not only promote learners to excel cognitively but this skill also builds social connection between the writers and the readers. Instead of sharing ideas, writers are also capable of sharing feelings and convincing others through their writing (Aluemalai and Maniam, 2020).

In academic writing, ESL writers are expected to compose a good text by communicating their ideas through writing using their second language. As such, this process becomes complex when the language proficiency of the writers becomes a matter. Al- Sawalha et al. (2012) also state the complexity of learning writing in the second language as they claim that the process is much more complicated than writing in one's native language. The process demands ESL writers to learn and apply some specific processes and strategies to produce good text. The most important thing is the writers must ensure that the written text should be successfully delivered to the readers.

Writing Challenges in Academic Writing

Writing process becomes challenging for ESL writers when they do not get good instructions and assistance during the process. The writers who are clueless on how to write will face difficulties and struggles to compose essays. As stated by Park (2020), those who have not yet developed their writing skills will struggle because writing requires a level of sophistication and understanding that can be difficult to master. This is due to some challenges that the writers encounter during the writing process including cognitive demands, language commands, physiology, and others. Baharudin et al (2023) state that writing challenges stem from several areas such as strong language command, strict conventions and structure of academic writing, and critical thinking process. These overwhelming factors make academic writing more challenging to the ESL writers.

In academic writing, writers are demanded to understand the conventions of academic writing such as using proper grammar and punctuations. They are also expected to think critically and analyse topics academically during the writing process. Academic writing is not easy for ESL writers as it demands them to be proficient at the second language. According to Parnabas et al. (2022), students face challenges in transforming ideas into written form due to their low English proficiency and often struggle with coherence, cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, and overall essay structure. On the other hand, Bulqiyah et al., (2021) found that writing challenges can be sourced from affective problems such as students' and lecturers' attitudes while learning and teaching essay. Hence, the challenges are not solely sourced from writers' cognitive and linguistics problems but affective problem.

Theories of Graphic Organisers and Academic Writing

Graphic organisers have a crucial impact on the English language classroom. McKnight (2010) suggested that graphic organisers are essential and effective teaching tools for generating and organising ideas, besides aiding learners' comprehension. Graphic organisers provide templates of what learners know and how they know them. In writing, using graphic organisers enables learners to practically see the relationships, links, and connections between terms, ideas, facts, and information. Graphic organisers are also known as one of the metacognitive strategies that allows students to organise, regulate, and evaluate their learning. According to Flavell (2004), a metacognitive strategy is an effective strategy that reveals knowledge of cognition process. It is a method that helps students to understand the way they learn and make they think about their thinking. A graphic organiser can be created manually, by drawing or digitally using software.

Briefly, graphic organisers are grounded in metacognition and core cognitive theories, such as cognitive constructivism and schema theory. Cognitive theories propose that graphic organisers are powerful tools that allow instructors to interact with learners' individual knowledge or schemata. Schemata is a condition where learners can store and retrieve codes or information, and the structure for constructing and representing a complex idea. In addition, the study is anchored on "Dual Coding Theory," developed by Paivio (1971), who proposed that humans code information in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Besides that, the other two theories that support the use of graphic organisers in the learning process are "Cognitive Load Theory" introduced by Sweller (1988) and "Schema Theory" developed by Bartlett (1932). According to schema theory, learners can use graphic organisers to link new material to the current knowledge stored in the schemas, while cognitive load theory allows working memory to load and handle information, thus when the load is exceeded, learning will not occur.

When learners use graphic organisers during their writing process, the charts or template will minimise the cognitive strain which allow additional resources to be accepted. It has been affirmed that graphic organisers make the information much more comprehensible by organising the content and allow the materials to be arranged accordingly at more sophisticated levels. Therefore, this proves that graphic organisers will positively affect students' performance in academic writing.

Theory of Scaffolding and Academic Writing

The theory of scaffolding is derived from Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD by Vygotsky (1978). According to Vygotsky, scaffolding refers to the amount of learning that learners receive

with assistance or guidance. Based on the theory, in order to pass the ZPD, the presence of an expert or a teacher, social interactions, scaffolding and other supportive activities are crucial. Scaffolding acts as models, cues, prompts, hints and direct instruction to help learners learn on how to solve a problem, work on a task, and achieve their goals.

In academic writing, scaffolding combines the three writing approaches namely text approach, process approach and social practice approach. Scaffolding helps learners to develop writing skills as it aids support and provide language instruction. According to Spycher (2017), students who are exposed to academic writing are more prepared, and know how to write well when they are properly guided by a writing teacher. It is suggested that teachers scaffold their students to help them build their writing skills and make them aware of what a piece of good writing is. PSA and Classroom Strategies

Past Studies

A study on the use of graphic organiser on second language students' writing performance has been conducted by Aznan and Saad (2023). The study examined the use of graphic organiser (GO) as a pedagogical tool on writing performance of Malaysian ESL learners. Twenty-seven intermediate students from a secondary school in Malaysia participated in a series of 11 writing sessions using GO in writing descriptive essays. In the study, the researcher applied graphic organiser in composing the descriptive writing was carried out throughout the writing lessons consisted of modelling, scaffolding, individual prewriting, drafting with peers and group writing. The study used a qualitative method, and the data analysis involved content analysis obtained from participants' essay scripts. 54 descriptive essays were evaluated and analysed to observe any changes in writing in terms of content, communicative achievement, language, and organisation. Results showed that the use of graphic organiser in developing descriptive essays helped in improving learners' writing all writing components. The findings also revealed that successful writers require creative graphic organiser, accompanied by systematic writing activities for ESL learners.

On the other hand, a study on the effects of using scaffolding in academic writing to on non-proficient EFL learners has been conducted by Piamsai (2020). The objective of the study was to investigate the effect of scaffolding teaching in academic writing class where students were non-proficient writers. The study involved 20 second-year Economics students enrolled in academic writing course at public university in Bangkok, Thailand. Cognitive, metacognitive, and affective Scaffolding were integrated into classroom activities. The pre-test and post-test were conducted using the same test and there was one essay prompt selected based on the level of difficulty, genres and topic. The findings showed positive effects of using scaffolding in teaching academic writing to non-proficient writers. The participants showed a significant improvement in their writing abilities, besides displaying positive attitudes towards scaffolding teaching approach in the writing class.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework of the study. This study investigates ESL learners' writing challenges and how they use graphic organiser and scaffolding as their writing template.

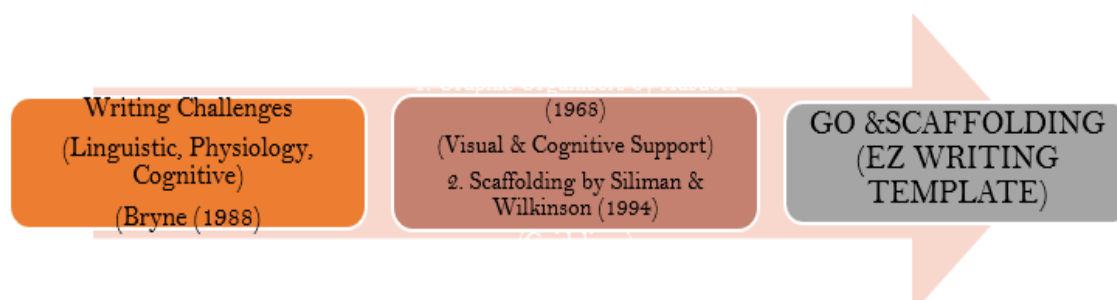


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1 above shows the conceptual framework. The need for EZ writing is due to the fact that writers face difficulties when they wrote. According to Byrne (1988), the difficulties can be categorized as linguistic,

physiology and cognitive. What makes writing even more difficult is that the composing process involves three main stages such as planning, translating and reviewing (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Hence EZ writing was constructed bearing roots from classic theories of graphic organizers by Ausubel (1968) and scaffolding by Silliman & Wilkinson (1994). The theory of graphic organizers states that learning can be facilitated using a template (EZ template). This template provides a visual of representation of the concepts used in writing. The concepts help students see the relationship between ideas when they wrote. Next, the use of EZ writing acts as scaffolds to help students write. The scaffolds provide temporary support to learners so they can grasp the writing task using the guidelines provided.

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study is intended to investigate some major elements of writing difficulties that influence writers' writing process. Besides that, the study aims to identify the effectiveness of using instructional scaffolding, namely EZ writing template during the composing process of ESL writers. To meet the study purposes, a pilot study was conducted to 30 participants of a local institution in Selangor. The participants enrolled in an English course called LCC113 and they have been taught writing for 14 weeks. A writing template has been introduced and used by the writing lecturer to regulate the writers during the composing process. To obtain the pertinent data, a survey questionnaire was administered through google form. The instrument used a 5 Likert-scale survey rooted from Flower and Hayes (1981). The gathered data were then analysed using SPSS 30.0.

Table 1- Likert Scale Use

1	Never
2	Rarely
3	Sometimes
4	Very Often
5	Always

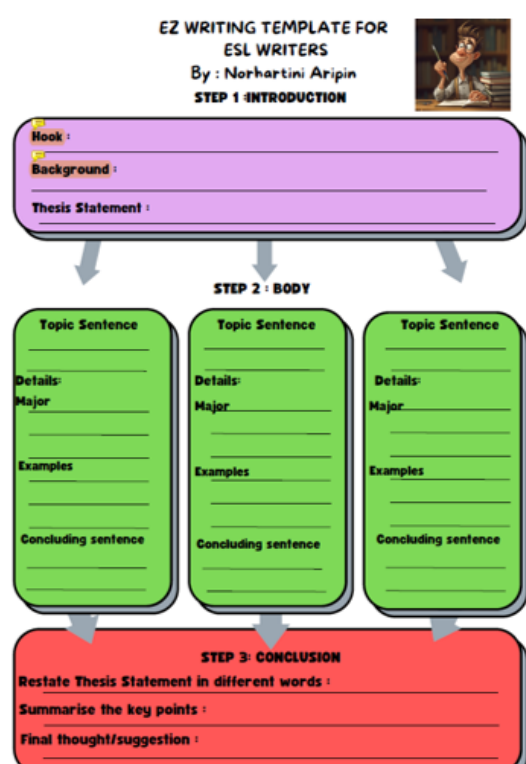


Figure 2: Model of EZ Writing template

Figure 2 shows the writing template used by the participants in their writing process. The model, called EZ writing template presents three major steps in the writing process. This model was useful to investigate students' perspectives on academic writing as it offers a comprehensive understanding of students writing experience. The academic literacies model, which was adopted as a theoretical framework, focus on making meaning and understanding institutional and academic constructions of knowledge (Boyle, Ramsay, & Struan, 2019).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study based on the analysed data obtained from adapted questionnaires. The findings are discussed according to the following research questions.

- i. How do ESL learners perceive writing challenges in academic writing?
- ii. What are the perceived effects of using Graphic organizer and scaffolding in academic writing?

Findings for Demographic Profile

The following table indicates gender of respondents in the study.

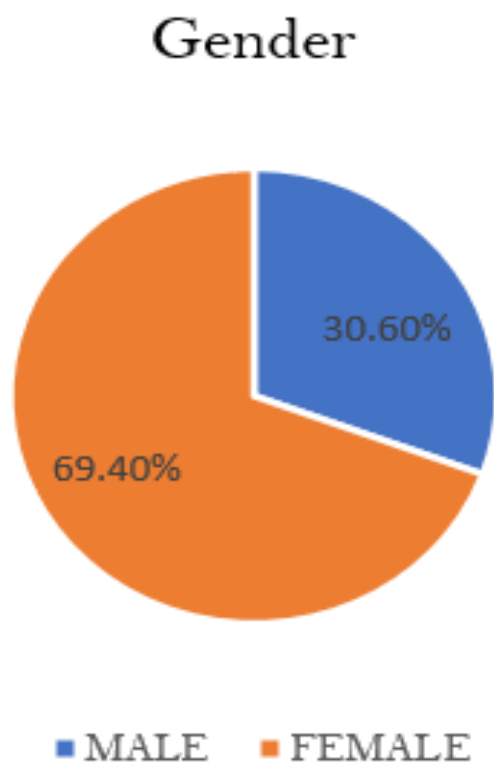


Figure 3: Gender of Respondents

Figure 3 shows the gender of the respondents for the study. The finding shows that 69.4% are female, and 30.6% are male.

Findings for RQ 1

This section presents findings to answer research question 1- How do ESL learners perceive writing challenges in academic writing? The following table shows items for writing challenges that the writers encounter during their writing process.

NO	ITEM	Mean	SD
1	Rhetorical situation WCQ1I find writing difficult because I am not familiar....	2.7	.96
2	Goal setting WCQ2I find writing difficult because the goal for the essay writing...	2.7	1.10
3	Teaching instruction WCQ3The teacher's instruction on what to do is sometimes not clear...	1.8	1.07
4	Teacher explanation WCQ4Sometimes the teacher's explanation makes...	1.8	1.16
5	Long term memory WCQ5Writing essays are difficult because I do not have background...	2.5	.98
6	Individual paragraph WCQ6Writing essays are difficult because I <u>have to</u> know what...	2.7	1.04
7	Writing Process WCQ7I find the writing difficult because I am unsure...	2.5	1.07

Table 2: Mean for Writing Challenges

Table 2 presents the mean score for seven different factors contributing to writing difficulties. As reported by the respondents, the highest mean score that contributed to writing difficulties was 2.7 representing item 1,2 and 6. The findings indicate that the participants find writing difficult because they are not familiar with different types of writing, the goal for the essay writing is sometimes hard to achieve and they need to know what to write in each paragraph. Furthermore, the respondents agreed that writing is difficult because they do not have background knowledge of the topic given and they are unsure of the writing process (Mean score=2.5). Findings also show that participants feel that essay writing is difficult because the teachers' instruction on what to do is sometimes not clear and sometimes they feel that the teachers' explanations make the writing more difficult.

Findings for RQ 2

This section presents findings to answer research question 2- How do ESL learners perceive Graphic organizer and scaffolding in academic writing? The items in the table below view students' perception about using graphic organiser and scaffolding as their writing template during the writing process.

NO	ITEM	Mean	SD
1	WTQ1 With the templates given, I am able...	4.5	.82
2	WTQ 2The template allows me to learn writing...	4.5	.89
3	BWTQ 3The template contains clear information on...	4.5	.74
4	BWTQ 4The template contains clear information...	4.3	.83
5	WTQ 5The template contains clear information...	4.3	.83
6	WTQ6 The template provides a clear guideline...	4.4	.74
7	WTQ7 I am at ease whenever I use...	4.5	.74

Table 3: Mean for The Effectiveness of Graphic Organiser

Based on the findings in Table 3, the overall mean of how the respondents perceive the writing template being used in the writing process was high. The highest mean score recorded was 4.5, where the respondents stated

that (1) they are able to learn writing with their classmates with the help of the template, (2) the respondents agreed that the template allows them to learn writing step-by-step, (3) the template contains clear information on how to write a good introduction, and (4) they feel at ease whenever they use the writing template during the composing process. Aside from that, the finding indicates that the template provides a clear guideline to write a complete essay (Mean=4.4). Next, the respondents found that the template contains clear information on how to write each developmental paragraph and clear information to write a good conclusion.

Discussion

Based on the analysis derived from research question 1, the findings of the study were presented in the following section. The first part regarded writing difficulties faced by ESL writers during the composing process. The findings from a survey questionnaire reveals that writing difficulties are sourced from rhetorical situations, goal setting, and individual paragraphs. Similar findings were retrieved in Hamzah et al. (2024), which rhetorical situations, goal setting, and individual paragraphs scored high mean scores. From the result of item 1, students mostly picked out the highest response to being unfamiliar with different types of writing as the one of the sources of writing difficulties. The percentage of item 2 also has the most response in which they set the goal for their essay writing. Hamzah et al. (2024) indicates the similar finding in their study. Setting goals can help the students to keep focus on the writing task. Furthermore, item 3 and item 4 indicate the lowest mean score (1.8), whereas participants' writing difficulties encountered with teaching instruction and teacher explanation. The finding reveals that participants did not see these two factors as the problems in the writing process. This indicates that the participants have been clearly instructed before they start writing. Tseng (2019) states that clear and explicit writing instructions will help students to have a better understanding of the writing process. However, the result opposes the previous studies by Ceylan (2019) whereas the teacher's insufficient writing instructions lead to the problems during the writing task. Furthermore, item 5 and item 7 deal with writers' long-term memory and writing process. From the result, students picked out the neutral response for both items in which they agreed that they did not have background knowledge about the given topics and they were unsure of the writing process. Finally, item 6 reveals individual paragraphs as the significant problem encountered in the writing process. The result indicates that students did not know what to write in each paragraph.

Next, the discussion is concerning the effectiveness of using EZ writing template during the composing process by ESL writers. Based on the findings, the mean scores for all the seven items were high (Mean: 4.3-4.5). According to Bulqiyah et al. (2021), using templates is one of the effective writing strategies. In the study, the researchers stated that the writers were guided by an outline or template while writing. The lecturer should guide the students properly by using a step-to-step procedure so that the students feel comfortable in writing their essays (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). Hence, having this EZ template as writing guideline has proven that the students were at ease while writing as displayed in item 7 where most students picked out the highest response (mean: 4.5) to feeling at ease whenever they use the template during my essay writing. Overall, it can be summarized that the EZ template has helped ESL writers in composing essays in the writing class.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings and Discussion

In the writing process of ESL writers, it is common for the writers to face many writing difficulties that might influence their writing performance. In this study, it has been found that the most difficulties that the students encountered in their writing process were goal setting, rhetorical situations, and individual paragraphs. They admitted that they had writing problems when they were not familiar with the types of writing. Besides that, the students stated that the process of writing was complicated when they were expected to achieve the writing goal especially when they did not know what to write in each paragraph. However, it was good to know that they did not agree that teachers' explanations and instructions made the writing task difficult. This shows that the students did not have problems understanding teachers' explanations, as well as getting clear instructions during the writing process. This situation can be related to the procedure that the teacher conducts in the writing class. In the study, it was found that the students were properly guided by a writing template called EZ

writing template that has helped them to write. This can be proven from the data that most students agreed that the EZ writing template guided them to write step-by-step, besides containing clear information on how to write a good introduction, to develop good paragraphs and to write a good conclusion. The students also admitted that using the EZ writing template, they managed to write a complete essay without any hassles.

Pedagogical Implications of the study

The present study delves into the difficulties faced by the ESL writers in composing their essays. Based on the discussion of findings, it can be identified that writing challenges were sourced from a few factors. Due to the challenges, it was notified that both students and teachers were impacted especially on students' writing performance. These difficulties have caused the students to perceive writing as a difficult and complicated skill. According to Al Murshidi (2014), the arduous nature of writing causes a significant number of instructors to perceive it as the most challenging skill to impart. The findings potentially have valuable implications for identifying and proposing viable solutions to the issue at hand. Incorporating the writing template such as graphic organizer and scaffolding when teaching writing could help the teachers to furnish their students with a proper writing guideline. Hence, the students will be more meta conscious in their writing process, which helps them to produce good quality essays.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is suggested for future scholars to explore a more thorough investigation of the ESL writers' challenges and difficulties in academic writing. To obtain relevant data on students and teachers' perspectives on the writing difficulties, semi-structured interviews should be conducted. Having their personal perceptions about this issue will give a better insight for more fruitful findings. Besides that, the data reliability can be improved if more respondents participate in the study to gather a rich data in which to probe deeper investigation on the writing difficulties. Future studies may also consider exploring some strategies that could help the students to overcome the difficulties in writing. Overall, this study had provided valuable insights into how students perceived their writing process and their difficulties in academic writing.

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