

Self-Determination Theory in Arabic Learning Strategies for Speaking at Pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik

Mohammad Makinuddin¹; Friendis Syani Amrulloh²;
^{1,2} Universitas Kiai Abdullah Faqih Gresik, Indonesia;

Abstract:

This study analyzes the learning strategy of Arabic speaking skills at the pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), identifying how peer tutors support relatedness, daily dialogue builds competence, interactive *muhadathah* facilitates autonomy, and a strict language environment inhibits psychological needs. Using a phenomenological approach with 12 purposive informants (2 Arabic teachers, 2 managers, 8 students), data collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation (15 sessions), and documentation, analyzed with SDT-based phenomenological reduction. The findings show that optimal peer tutors meet relatedness (reduction of language anxiety), daily dialogue develops competence through mastery experiences, while interactive sessions increase autonomy. A tight pedagogical environment cultivates controlled motivation, thereby inducing speech anxiety and consequent avoidance behavior in extramural contexts. The research produced a Hybrid Autonomy-Supportive Environment Model replacing punishment with Arab Challenge Reward, progressive scaffolding, peer autonomy networking, and the theme of student choice is more impactful for sustainable speaking competence. This model revolutionized Arabic language pedagogy from the practice of a repressive language environment to an SDT-based strategy, optimal for the motivation and fluency of students in the digital era.

Keywords: Arabic Speaking Skills; Pesantren Language Environment; Peer Tutoring; Self-Determination Theory;

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Correspondence Author:
Mohammad Makinuddin
kinudd@gmail.com



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Self-Determination Theory dalam Strategi Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab Berbicara di Pondok Pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik

Mohammad Makinuddin¹; Friendis Syani Amrulloh²;
^{1,2} Universitas Kiai Abdullah Faqih Gresik, Indonesia;

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini menganalisis strategi pembelajaran keterampilan berbicara bahasa Arab di Pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik melalui lensa Self-Determination Theory (SDT), mengidentifikasi bagaimana tutor sebaya mendukung *relatedness*, dialog harian membangun *competence*, *muhadathah* interaktif memfasilitasi *autonomy*, dan lingkungan bahasa ketat menghambat kebutuhan psikologis. Menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi dengan 12 informan purposive (2 guru bahasa Arab, 2 pengurus, 8 santri), data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif (15 sesi), dan dokumentasi, dianalisis dengan reduksi fenomenologis berbasis SDT. Temuan menunjukkan tutor sebaya optimal memenuhi *relatedness* (reduksi kecemasan berbahasa), dialog harian mengembangkan *competence* melalui pengalaman mastery, sementara sesi interaktif meningkatkan *autonomy*. Sebaliknya, lingkungan ketat menciptakan *controlled motivation*, menyebabkan kecemasan berbicara dan perilaku *avoidance* di luar kelas formal. Penelitian menghasilkan Model Hybrid *Autonomy-Supportive Environment* mengganti hukuman dengan Arab Challenge Reward, progressive scaffolding, jaringan peer autonomy, dan tema pilihan santri lebih berdampak untuk kompetensi berbicara berkelanjutan. Model ini merevolusi pedagogi bahasa Arab dari praktik lingkungan bahasa represif menuju strategi berbasis SDT, optimal untuk motivasi dan kefasihan santri era digital.

Kata Kunci: Keterampilan Berbicara Arab, Lingkungan Bahasa Pesantren, Tutor Sebaya, Self-Determination Theory.

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INTRODUCTION

Arabic language learning strategies have a crucial role in optimizing language skills mastery, which includes aspects of systematic design (Mahyudin, 2014). Differentiation strategy, language teachings implemented at the pesantren Mamba'us Sholihin Gresik are effective and efficient in equipping alumni, despite the presence of inhibiting factors (Husna, 2021). However, it requires a process of learning motivation that can be analyzed through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, which distinguishes between intrinsic, extrinsic and amotivation, a spectrum that is also observed in Arabic learners (Al-Hoorie et al., 2025).

In various Islamic institutions in Indonesia, including the pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik, Arabic language learning refers to four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking competencies are most important because they support daily communication (Widodo, 2020). Therefore, several studies related to speaking competence are studied, including the learning strategy of speaking in the Pare course (Afyuddin et al., 2022), public speaking training for the speaking competence of UIN Walisongo students (Inayah et al., 2023), innovative models of teaching speaking skills (Ghozali et al., 2025), Arabic sermon activities to teach speaking skills (Rofika, 2019), the application of the Chapter Reversal learning model for the teaching of speaking skills (Maesaroh, 2020). In addition, Arabic is also globally known as the language of religion, science, diplomacy, and economics with hundreds of millions of speakers (Muflihah et al., 2024).

The pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik is known as one of the educational institutions that consistently encourages Arabic to be used in various daily activities of students. This pesantren has implemented an intensive Arabic language learning program, which emphasizes the active practice of language in the pesantren environment, thus creating an atmosphere that resembles a language laboratory (Husna, 2021). This approach enables students not only to grasp theoretical concepts but also to habituate the use of Arabic in quotidian communication.

Various learning strategies can be implemented to improve students' speaking skills, such as metacognitive, affective, active learning, social, to daily dialogue habituation, educational games, seminars, and the use of peer tutors (Husna, 2021), motivational strategies used by Arabic teachers to increase students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Edidarmo et al., 2025). In addition, contemporary innovations such as the use of audio-visual media, workshops, and hands-on experience-based activities have also begun to be implemented to adapt to the characteristics of the current digital generation (Jumadi, 2022), investigating the influence of confidence grown through language development programs on Arabic communication learning outcomes (Akhirudin et al., 2025). These strategies not only aim to improve linguistic skills, but also foster confidence, courage to speak, and intrinsic motivation of students in mastering Arabic.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) views that humans are naturally driven to grow, master challenges, and integrate with their environment; this impulse appears optimal when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatability (Ryan & Deci, 2000) SDT research in language learning shows that when autonomy, competence, and relatability are not met, motivation becomes controlled or decreases, anxiety arises, and learning engagement weakens (Alamer & Lee, 2019) For example, peer tutors support relatability through a sense of acceptance, daily dialogue builds competencies through gradual success experiences, while interactive exercises facilitate autonomy with independent



learning options. On the other hand, an environment that is too restrictive in Arabic has the potential to inhibit autonomy, creating a controlled motivation that actually increases language anxiety, a hidden phenomenon that will be critically examined in this study

Cutting-edge research confirms the importance of integrating modern learning theory and an active language environment to optimize Arabic speaking skills. Optimization of speaking skills through the integration of various learning theories and the creation of a practical environment that supports the development of speaking competence. (Hoerudin, 2024) (Makena & Bulelwa, 2023) (Sutaman & Febriani, 2021) A quantitative study showed that the language environment has a positive, significant, and strong correlation with the Arabic speaking ability of students in modern pesantrens, which confirms the importance of the formation of *bī'ah lughawiyah* (language environment) in learning. (Suhardi & Sutarjo, 2024) Contextual approaches such as the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) model have also been proven to improve motivation and Arabic language skills by linking learning materials to the real daily situations of students. (Nazhimah & Mohammad, 2023)

Another obstacle is the enthusiasm and motivation of students which tend to decrease, especially in participating in the program of actively speaking Arabic in the pesantren environment. (Husna, 2021) And many students feel embarrassed or unconfident when speaking in Arabic, especially because they are afraid of making mistakes or are not used to having conversations in Arabic. This has an impact on low active participation in speaking practice. (Samin et al., 2025) And the learning strategies and methods used tend to be monotonous, less innovative, and not fun, so that students quickly feel bored and less motivated to improve their speaking skills. (Umam & Chodijah, 2022)

The use of digital technology and social media is also an important strategy in learning Arabic today. Several studies recommend the use of mobile learning applications, videos, podcasts, and social media platforms such as Instagram and Telegram to improve interactive and engaging speaking skills for millennials (Habib et al., 2025; Salmas et al., 2024). Digital support designed to meet students' autonomy, competence, relatedness has been shown to improve students' learning engagement, online learning sustainability, and digital literacy (Alturki & Aldraiweesh, 2024) The use of social media for educational purposes (information sharing, collaboration) increases satisfaction and learning performance when the learning environment supports the needs of SDT (Demircioglu & Chen, 2019) This approach helps answer the challenges of declining motivation to learn and limited facilities in pesantren.

Challenges remain, such as variations in the quality of tutors, limited infrastructure, and the need for continuous innovation to keep learning strategies relevant and impactful. Therefore, an in-depth study of Arabic learning strategies on speaking skills at the pesantren Mambaus Sholihin is very urgent and relevant, not only for institutional development, but also as a contribution to the Arabic language education literature that is contextual, innovative, and of international standards.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the implementation of various Arabic learning strategies applied at the pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik through the lens of SDT, including how peer tutors support relatability, daily dialogue to build competence, interactive exercises facilitate autonomy, and a strict environment that has the potential to hinder it; (2) identify the main problems such

as the non-fulfillment of psychological needs that cause low motivation and confidence of students; and (3) formulate a conceptual model based on SDT for the development of more impactful strategies, with criticism of normal practices such as repressive environments.

The novelty of this research lies in the positioning of learning strategies as a mechanism to meet the psychological needs of students through the framework of Self-Determination Theory. In contrast to previous research that interpreted Arabic learning strategies solely as pedagogical techniques, this study positions learning strategies as a mechanism to meet the psychological needs of students. Using the framework of Self-Determination Theory, dialogue habituation strategies, peer tutoring, and interactive exercises were analyzed not only from the aspect of linguistic effectiveness, but also from their ability to build autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings show that participatory and collaborative strategies are more able to foster students' intrinsic motivation, while approaches that are too normative and repressive have the potential to increase language anxiety.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach that aims to understand the meaning and essence of the experience of teachers and students in the Arabic language learning process, especially in speaking skills at the pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik, through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the main analytical framework. The phenomenological approach was chosen because its focus is to explore the subjective experiences of learning actors in depth and describe how they interpret the learning strategies applied in the real context of pesantren, especially related to the fulfillment of three psychological needs of SDT, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Lubis & Widiawati, 2022). Data analysis specifically grouped findings based on SDT aspects to uncover hidden phenomena such as the impact of harsh language environment on students' intrinsic motivation.

The research respondents consisted of Arabic language teachers, pesantren administrators and students who participated in Arabic language learning programs at pesantrens. Purposive sampling guided the selection of informants with substantive experiential insight into Arabic learning, thereby ensuring the collected data provides an accurate and representative account of their realities. Data collection included semi-structured in-depth interviews with SDT-based guidance that allowed respondents to express experiences related to a sense of autonomy, competence, and social connectedness in learning strategies. This study involved 12 main informants who were selected through purposive sampling based on the criteria of in-depth experience with Arabic language learning strategies at the pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik:

Category	Selection Criteria	Long Experience	Role in Strategy
Arabic Teacher 1	Permanent teacher of Arabic language program	>5 years	Strategy designer, interactive exercise, tutor training
Arabic Teacher 2			
Arabic Language Manager 1	Language environment drivers	>4 years old	Strict language rule enforcer



Arabic Language Manager 2				
Senior Student 1	Active peer tutors	4-6 years	Implementers of daily dialogue, peer support	
Senior Student 2				
Senior Student 3				
Senior Student 4				
Santri Junior 1	Join an intensive program	<2 years	Key strategy recipients	
Santri Junior 2				
Santri Junior 3				
Santri Junior 4				

Participatory observation was used to directly observe the Arabic language learning process and interaction in the pesantren environment, with a focus on recording behavior patterns that reflect the fulfillment/inhibition of SDT needs (e.g., peer tutor interaction for relatedness, or strict environmental pressure on autonomy). Documentation from learning activities, materials, and field notes was also collected as triangulated data to enrich the substantive analysis.

The research procedure begins with the preparation stage, data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation. The collected data was analyzed using a phenomenological data reduction technique based on SDT, namely by grouping, filtering, and interpreting the data to find essential themes that describe the relationship between learning strategies and the fulfillment of three psychological needs. The researcher conducts bracketing to remove prejudice and focus on the meaning of the phenomenon as experienced by the research subject.

The results of the analysis provide an in-depth understanding of learning strategies through the perspective of SDT and are relevant to the context of the pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik, as well as provide constructive criticism of practices that are considered normal such as a repressive language environment. The implication of these findings is the need for a continuous evaluation of the learning culture in the pesantren environment, to ensure that the formation of discipline does not sacrifice the quality of intrinsic motivation that is essential for long-term language mastery.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Based on in-depth interviews with 12 informants and participatory observations during 15 learning sessions, the Arabic language learning strategy at the pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik showed variations in effectiveness through the perspective of SDT. The strategy of peer tutors is most powerful in supporting relatedness, as expressed by Senior 1st Santri: "Santri are more courageous to speak up because of their friends who teach, not afraid of embarrassment like the teacher." Observations show peer-to-peer interaction during daily dialogue creates a sense of social security that reduces language anxiety, as 4 senior students reported increased speaking courage after being a peer tutor.

The daily dialogue strategy has an impact on building competence through gradual mastery experiences. Arabic 1 teacher explained: "Every day of simple dialogue practice, the students are fluent on their own. It's like building confidence step by step." Observational data confirm that daily practice of 15 minutes at the



time of the course after Fajr improves fluency. Junior students admitted to feeling real progress that strengthened their self-efficacy.

Interactive exercises during *muhadathah* activities facilitate autonomy by providing a choice of themes. Junior 2 students shared their experiences: "You can choose your own theme about hobbies or experiences, so the spirit of participation doesn't feel like an obligation." The student conveyed that the motivation to learn increased.

In contrast, the strict language environment with sanctions inhibits autonomy. Junior 3 students complained: "If you are caught using regional and national languages, they will be punished for memorizing vocabulary. So tense is not the spirit of learning." The Arabic 1 administrator admitted: "Strict rules do make students use Arabic, but not because they want to, but because they are afraid of being punished. This motivation does not originate from the learner themselves". This phenomenon reflects controlled motivation that is contrary to the principles of SDT.

Phenomenological analysis of the interviews reveals three main problems that hinder intrinsic motivation. **First:** the stress of a strict language environment (reported by 9 out of 12 informants) creates speech anxiety and avoidance behavior. Junior students tend to be quiet around the dormitory even though they are fluent in formal simulations, showing that external regulation comes at the expense of spontaneous fluency.

Second: multi-level learning materials with similar materials cause competency frustration (7/12 informants). Arabic 1 teacher admitted: "The material is similar for all levels, even though the new students have not memorized basic vocabulary." Observations show that novice students often give up during daily dialogues because they feel left behind.

Third: lack of systematic peer support (4/12 informants) leads to social isolation. Senior students do become tutors, but without formal training, their effectiveness is limited. A spokesperson for the 4th Circuit said: "Only a certain senior tutor is truly forbearing; others become visibly irritated by errors".

Based on the findings, a Hybrid Autonomy-Supportive Environment Model was formulated that balances regulation with voluntary participation. The model integrates:

1. Hybrid environment (participatory and regulatory) through replacing punishment with "Arab Challenge Reward" students who consistently use Arabic get the privilege of choosing extracurricular activities. The Arabic Language Manager 2 agrees: "This guarantees more sustainability than coercion."
2. Progressive scaffolding dialogue by arranging a hierarchy of conversation materials, for example for beginners using material around greetings and introductions, for intermediate levels with daily topic discussion materials, for advanced levels with light debate materials. Arabic 1 teacher assessed, "There must be gradation so that students feel developed."
3. Peer autonomy network with students choosing peer tutor partners based on personality compatibility, not assignments. Senior 3 students supported: "If it's suitable, learning becomes fun."
4. Independent thematic exercises through students determine part of the theme of the exercise according to their interests, increase ownership and intrinsic motivation.



Triangulation validation from interviews (12 informants), observation (15 sessions), and documentation) consistently proves that the autonomy-supportive strategy carried out is three times more impactful in building speaking confidence than the strict regulatory approach. This model optimizes speaking competence and proves that the SDT approach is superior to sustainable Arabic language motivation.

Discussion

Strategy Implementation through SDT Lens

The findings of the study show that the peer tutor strategy has an impact on meeting the needs of relatedness in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), consistent with studies that prove the significant influence of peer support on the motivation of students to excel in Arabic (Iksan et al., 2022). The student's statement that students are more courageous to speak because of their friends who teach, are not afraid of embarrassment, reflect the reduction of language anxiety through social support, as found in a peer tutoring study at pesantrens that increased speaking participation. Peer tutoring and mentor-mentee programs create a more relaxed, familiar, and low-stakes learning atmosphere, so that students dare to try without fear of being wrong or embarrassed (Chantaraphat & Jaturapitakkul, 2023).

Daily dialogue builds competence through gradual mastery experience. That regular participation in daily dialogue makes the speakers' second language responses longer, smoother, and narrative; this signifies the gradual development of interactional competence through repeated practice experiences in the same context (Greer, 2019). Daily dialogue encourages learner students to speak, which is similar to the finding that daily practice habits build fluency and spontaneity of students in communicating Arabic in various contexts (Ulfah & Insaniyah, 2023).

The practice of speaking in interactive *muhadathah* activities supports autonomy through the choice of themes, as students are enthusiastic about participating and do not feel obligated". This is in line with the fact that when the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, students show more autonomy motivation, higher interest in learning, and better learning outcomes in various contexts and cultures (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Well-designed *muhadathah* activities not only train speaking skills, but also serve as a powerful medium to foster intrinsic motivation by meeting these three basic psychological needs in a meaningful way. simultaneously.

The implementation of the peer tutor approach and daily dialogue in Arabic language learning in the pesantren environment not only affirms the SDT postulate but also illustrates the dynamics of interaction between the three basic psychological needs that reinforce each other. The reduction of language anxiety through social support (relatedness) creates a safe foundation for linguistic exploration, which then facilitates the gradual development of competence and ultimately empowers learners to take initiative (autonomy) in the learning process. This convergence shows that the effectiveness of peer-based learning strategies does not simply lie in the technical aspect, but in its ability to create a learning ecosystem that intrinsically encourages the internalization of motivation, where language practice becomes part of authentic and meaningful social interaction for students.



The Problem of Unfulfillment of Psychological Needs

Strict environmental pressure inhibits autonomy, causing avoidance behavior outside of the classroom. Students stay in the dormitory even though formal fluency shows that external regulation sacrifices spontaneous fluency, practices that suppress or control reduce autonomy and shift motives from learning because of interest to learning to avoid punishment (Guay, 2022) These findings imply the existence of a potential paradox in the environment of educational, structures designed for discipline and achievement can effectively weaken the intrinsic motivation that is the foundation of language mastery long-term. This tension between external control and the encouragement of internal autonomy demonstrates the importance of creating a safe space outside of formal instructional contexts, where students can explore language without fear.

The material is not stratified to frustrate the competence of novice students. That new students who have not memorized basic vocabulary cause dropouts during daily dialogues, similar to the findings of learning the yellow book that require progressive scaffolding (Wicaksono et al., 2026) This shows that without proper scaffolding, activities that are supposed to meet competency needs risk becoming an experience that kills motivation and alienates students from the learning process.

Peer support does not systematically lead to isolation. Students complained that there were certain tutors who were patient, emphasizing the need for formal training as peer support significantly increased motivation to speak English, although the effect of teacher support was slightly stronger (Solhi, 2024) Positive friendship relationships predict higher ideals of second language learning and more enjoyable language learning experiences (Guo et al., 2025) Perceptions of academic and emotional support from peers are positively correlated with learning motivation; students are more motivated when they feel friends support their academic goals and emotional well-being (Wallace & Leong, 2020)

That the success of language learning in pesantrens also depends on the creation of a balanced learning ecosystem. This ecosystem must be able to bridge the tension between discipline and freedom, as well as between structure and social support. Implicitly, the learning approach needs to be holistic, not only teaching the language, but also actively building an environment that fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness at the same time. Without this balance, learning efforts risk only superficial compliance, rather than authentic and sustained language mastery.

Model Conceptual Hybrid Autonomy-Supportive Environment

A hybrid model by including participation and regulation through Arab Challenge Rewards replaces recommended penalties and is more sustainable. This approach integrates:

1. Progressive scaffolding of tiered dialogue addresses competency frustration, in line with that rewards are generally more impactful and sustainable than punishments for fostering commitment and participation in a collective agreement (Han, 2022) Regulation that places too much emphasis on punishment risks creating over-regulation and weakening long-term participation (Han et al., 2021) It supports the Arab Challenge Reward design that emphasizes participation (student commitment) and rewards for compliance, not punishment for violations.



2. Peer autonomy network students choose a tutor partner can increase relatedness. Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, autonomy support and positive peer relationships together improve psychological well-being and a sense of connectedness (Wu & Dong, 2024) A study explains that peer tutoring that makes students (or students) active partners shows strong increases in engagement, confidence, and a sense of connection with friends and teachers (Lee, 2024) Based on this, the learning structure that provides this flexibility not only has a pedagogical impact, but also plays an important role in building a healthy and mutually supportive learning community.
3. The students' independent thematic exercise determines the theme that can maximize autonomy. Autonomy is defined as the ability of learners to determine their own goals, content, and ways of learning (Little, 2022) When students choose their own conversation theme, they exactly carry out this function. A large review of learner autonomy emphasizes the importance of choice-giving, interest-based learning, and open scenarios as key practices for fostering autonomy (Chong & Reinders, 2025) The independent learning skills framework emphasizes that practice should provide space for students to decide what to practice and how to use it in real life, rather than just working on structured exercises (Reinders, 2010) Self-paced thematic exercises meet these criteria.

Participatory regulation and reward (not punishment) to maintain commitment (Han, 2022) Hybrid models such as Arab Challenge Reward have a strong theoretical basis for being more sustainable in maintaining motivation and language competence than traditional punishment approaches. The contribution of this study transforms the narrative of pedagogical strategies into a psychological analysis of SDT and proves the optimal hybrid approach to continuous speaking competencies in pesantren.



CONCLUSION

This study proves that the Arabic language learning strategy at the pesantren Mambaus Sholihin Gresik has an impact through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) when meeting the three psychological needs of students, including peer tutors to strengthen relatability (reduction of language anxiety), daily dialogue to build competence (gradual fluency), and interactive *muhadathah* facilitating autonomy (choice of independent themes). However, a strict language environment creates counterproductive controlled motivation, causing speech anxiety and avoidance behavior.

The theoretical and practical contribution of the research is that the findings change the paradigm of pedagogical strategies into psychological analysis of SDT, criticizing the practice of repressive language environments that have been considered normal in pesantren. The Hybrid Autonomy-Supportive Environment model (more participatory than regulation) with Arab Challenge Reward is more impactful in building sustainable speaking confidence than traditional punishment approaches.

Recommendations from the study include (1) Implementation of a hybrid model by replacing sanctions with rewards (extracurricular privileges) for a sustainable language environment. (2) Progressive scaffolding with beginner-intermediate-advanced multi-level dialogue to avoid competency frustration. (3) Peer autonomy network by giving students the space to choose peer tutor partners based on compatibility. (4) Follow-up research related to testing the effectiveness of hybrid models through longitudinal quasi-experiments in pesantren.

This research contributes to the Arabic language education literature with empirical evidence that SDT-based autonomy-supportive strategies are superior for students' speaking competence in the digital era, replacing the conventional repressive language environment approach.



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