

Running head: A FIRST GRADE ESL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

**A First Grade ESL Community of Practice:**

***What am I noticing about the ways in which English as a Second Language (ESL) students regard their peers as language models, and how can I effectively leverage this tendency with five-, six-, and seven-year-olds?***

by

Julia S. Wachtel

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**Approval Page**

Thesis Advisor: Patricia L. McMahon, PhD

*Patricia L. McMahon*

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Signature

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Date

### Abstract

In this Scholarly Personal Narrative, I ask, what am I noticing about the ways in which ESL students regard their peers as language models, and how can I effectively leverage this tendency with five-, six-, and seven-year-olds? Interrogating and researching a troubling classroom moment between an ESL and non-ESL student, I discover pedagogical wisdom largely through metaphors of Indonesian gamelan.

In Chapter 1, I describe the national EL achievement gaps and the iniquitous policies behind them, situating this inquiry as critically important; then, I begin to unravel my troubling moment through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT). In Chapter 2, I investigate Second Language Acquisition (SLA). In Chapter 3, I wrangle with shifting away from individual learning or traditional transmission of knowledge, towards a shared community of learners. In Chapter 4, I metacognitively reflect about writing this narrative inquiry and becoming a scholar-practitioner.

My study is heavily influenced by the work of Lev Vygotsky, and his SCT of learning. Muriel Saville-Troike provided great insight into the process and theoretical underpinnings of SLA. Cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger's concept of "community of practice" is at the heart of my study as I theorize about its use in the elementary classroom.

In studying this inquiry, I've developed a pedagogy of authentic collaborative learning that includes students and teacher, promoting the success of both ELs and non-ELs. I have also learned that scholar-practitioners—like me—don't stop inquiring after the pages end; this is a lifelong endeavor.

### **Acknowledgements**

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I would especially like to thank my ED-731 classmates, each of whom provided moral support, graciously shared valuable resources with me, and gave excellent feedback. I want to thank Dr. Jay Arms, my undergraduate instructor, capstone project advisor, and as of November 2022, my colleague at the University of Pittsburgh, for introducing me to gamelan, as it has become an inseparable part of who I am. Finally, I must thank my family and my partner, who have lovingly supported and gently nudged me through the journey of graduate school and during the sometimes stressful—but ever gratifying—process of crafting this thesis.

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## Chapter 1: A Reflective Introduction

It's on the strength of observation and reflection that one finds a way. So, we must dig and delve unceasingly.

—Claude Monet

### Kaito's Story

Before making the difficult decision not to pursue teacher certification, I briefly taught next to a wonderful veteran teacher at an urban public school located in a culturally diverse Pittsburgh neighborhood. In my short time student teaching at the school, I learned alongside 21 first-grade students who came from all different parts of the city, who spoke many languages, and who had a variety of cultural backgrounds and beliefs. In this class, there were four English as a Second Language (ESL) students: a girl whose first language is Spanish, a boy whose first language is Kazakh, and two other boys whose first language is Japanese. There were many other students in the class who spoke languages other than English, including Spanish, Russian, German, Arabic, Hebrew, and Yiddish (and likely many more).

Some of the ESL students in this class spoke very little English; they had recently begun learning the language, and the boys whose first languages are Kazakh and Japanese were in the process of learning a new alphabet, too. One Japanese student, who I will pseudonymously call Kaito, was particularly eager to learn English. In coping with the challenges of learning both a new alphabet and the conventions of English, as well as the core content of class, Kaito learned to copy everything he saw written in English. He copied word for word from the board, from the easel during rug time, and even from his classmates' notebooks and papers. He wanted to learn to write English quickly and proficiently, and he was very eager to please his teachers. On

one occasion, a student who sat next to Kaito became very upset that he was copying his work during English Language Arts (ELA), because he didn't understand why copying may have helped Kaito pick up English.

Every afternoon, the first grade participated in a writing workshop, where they answered critical thinking questions related to the story we were studying at the time. The students wrote two or three sentences to respond to the question and then drew a picture to support their responses with evidence from the book's illustrations. One day, the group had returned from lunch and sat down at the rug, and I engaged them in a discussion about the book of focus for that unit, *Stellaluna*. The writing workshop prompt that day required knowledge of story elements and adjectives, as it asked students to describe one of the settings of the story with as much detail as possible. We brainstormed together, and I demonstrated an example of a few sentences that answered the prompt. I noticed early on in my student teaching that our ESL students were not very vocal during these discussions; some never spoke at all, but it was clear they were listening and observing. I sent the students off to their seats and walked around the room, observing and assisting students with their writing. Soon, I heard a student yelling, and turned to see a boy pushing Kaito and telling him, "You're copying me!" Kaito looked confused and was hurt that his classmate pushed him. He began to cry. I separated the boys. When I asked what had happened, the boy said that his ESL classmate had written exactly what he had, and that it wasn't fair. He told me that his classmate "actually knows English but fakes it and still copies what I write." He continued, "I tried hard to write this, and he did nothing but copy me."

I was shocked. At first, I was very upset that the student had reacted in this way and pushed his classmate. But later, I realized that because no one had discussed the copying in the first place, the student had no way of understanding why the teachers were letting it happen. He knew that his classmate was learning English, but most six- and seven-year-olds don't understand the process of learning a new language in this immersive environment (unless they are learning one, too). But children *do* know, whether from movies, TV shows, or their own teachers, that cheating and copying are generally wrong. I felt bad for Kaito, because I knew that he was trying his hardest in the only way he knew how, and because he knew that he had only a short amount of time to complete the activity. I felt guilty because I had to help 20 other students, and I wondered if I had given him enough attention during the workshop.

Kaito did copy his peer's page word for word. And in that moment, I really wasn't sure if allowing the student to copy was the right thing to do. But I knew that I immediately had to pull the boys from the workshop to explain to the student that his classmate was not "faking" anything. This was extremely important to address because the classroom must be a place of inclusivity, tolerance, and respect, and this experience could have made Kaito feel bad about his being there. I knew that the classroom must be a low-stress place for ESL students to acquire and practice their new language, or else their progress may slow because students may not become confident enough to take risks. I sat down with the boys near the rug and explained to the student that his friend was copying his work because he saw him as a great language model that could help him learn English. I assured him that his friend knew he wrote great sentences, so he wanted to learn from him. I explained how challenging it may be for our ESL friends to not only learn to speak a new language, but to learn how to write it, too. And even

more than that, I explained how we were all learning about new story elements together, and he began to see how challenging this can be for those who are just acquiring English. The boys made up and returned to their work. My cooperating teacher and I had a class discussion the following week about what it means to learn a new language and how it works—using first grade vocabulary, of course. Then, I made the decision to assist the ESL students in future writing workshops by using an interactive whiteboard and photos to enhance their learning and engage them in their own writing.

I am still unsure of whether it was a responsible or effective decision to let our ESL students copy directly from their classmates. Did copying help Kaito at all in his language acquisition? Perhaps not. This teaching moment took place at the very beginning of the year, and I do not know now whether the copying is still happening in the classroom. If I had to guess, I would think that the students have gained more independence as they pick up new language skills every hour of every day. This specific teaching experience is important for me to reflect on because I worry that my practical knowledge of how to effectively teach ESL students is severely lacking, and that is unacceptable. I have completed more than one course in my graduate studies that gave insight to the experience of ESL students and provided an overview of instruction and pedagogy that is effective for these students. But when I started teaching in front of students and had to put all this knowledge into action, my teaching fell flat, and I didn't know how to help my students. But through my student teaching and specific experiences like this one, it quickly became clear that EL students often look to their peers for assistance in language acquisition, perhaps even more than they look to their teachers.

### Why It Matters

It is important that I take a short detour to reflect more on why I believe that my practical knowledge of teaching ESL students is lacking, and what implications this has for my students. In my review of literature, I found that I am not alone—many teachers in the U.S. feel unprepared to teach ESL students. Li, Hinojosa, & Wexler (2017) conducted a study at a midwestern university in the United States, examining 26 mainstream pre-service teachers' perceptions of their preparation for teaching ELLs; the results showed that “the majority of the pre-service teachers (24/26) felt unprepared to teach ELLs; 19 of 26 reported to have little exposure to diversity in their K-12 school experiences and their home communities before teacher education” (p.49). I resonate with their statements. As a student in elementary and high school, I experienced very little diversity. The private, Catholic elementary school I attended was predominantly White, and I had no peers who were learning English as a second language. All my teachers were White women. I went on to attend a private, Catholic high school in a suburban-rural town, and there was only one student of color in the entire building. My limited experience with diversity in high school came from befriending an international student from Taiwan; she was nearly fluent in English by the time she enrolled at the school, but we learned a lot from each other. Indeed, 85% of teachers are middle class, White, and monolingual; 87.5% have had little or no training in teaching linguistically diverse students; and only 29% have had training in designing teaching for racially diverse groups (NCELA Newline Bulletin, 2005, as cited in Li, 2013, p. 137). In contrast, the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) states that “in fall 2015, about 4.9 million public school students were identified as ELL, representing 9.9 percent of overall public-school enrollment” (para. 2). I

believe I have had excellent training at Carlow University throughout my master's degree program in Early Childhood Education; I am knowledgeable about culturally responsive teaching practices and have studied a wide range of ESL teaching practices for the mainstream classroom. But once I entered a diverse elementary school classroom as an educator, I felt like a deer in headlights.

But I had read assessment statistics about ELL students, and I wasn't willing to let these kids simply become a part of the numbers. For example, in 2019, the National Assessment of Educational Research (NAEP) reading assessment score for 4th-grade ELL students in Pennsylvania (182) was 43 points lower than the score for their non-ELL peers (225) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). A score of 182 is far below the NAEP's "basic" achievement level score of 210. Reading these statistics disturbs and saddens me. Is this jarring data entirely due to teachers' unpreparedness? Are cultural gaps between teachers and students so wide that our students are destined to fail? Is there something else that explains it? Perhaps—and many scholars trace it back to No Child Left Behind.

Though the purpose of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was to "to improve educational achievement by assessing student progress through standardized testing, mandating curricular reforms, and improving teacher quality," the performance requirements for many subgroups of the general student population—including ESL students—remain controversial (Figueroa, 2013, p. 333, as cited in McKinney, 2019, para. 1). Section 3202 of the law states that Limited English Proficient (LEP) students (a term no longer used in discourse) should be able to "meet the same rigorous standards for academic achievement as all children are expected to meet, including meeting challenging State academic content and student

academic achievement standards” (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001, p. 283). In addition, former President Bush and the Department of Education (2001) asserted that states needed to “set performance objectives to ensure LEP children achieve English fluency within three years [...] and ensure that students would meet standards in core content areas” (p. 16). But as McKinney (2019) notes, “the policy neglected to recognize relevant second language acquisition research into how the needs of emergent bilinguals may differ considerably from the needs of mainstream students” (para. 1). In other words, without academic English fluency—language that is characterized by being abstract, context reduced, and specialized—students are very likely to score poorly on state or national assessment tests (Colorín Colorado, 2015). As I will discuss in Chapter 2: Considering Second Language Acquisition, depending on whether the student has had previous schooling in their first language and many other factors, an ESL student may not acquire academic fluency for seven years or more (Colorín Colorado, 2015). If ESL students didn’t score well on standardized tests, schools could face punishment as their federal funding would be withheld. This has promoted—even now, after NCLB was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015—the practice of teaching to the test rather than to the true comprehension and appreciation of content, causing ESL students to fall behind. I was not willing to let down Kaito and his ESL peers by simply teaching to the test and blatantly ignoring the research, so I began the difficult but significant journey of understanding how to best meet the needs of some of America’s public schools’ most marginalized students.

### **Thinking Ahead**

On this journey, I will explore my observation that many ESL students look to the larger classroom community for guidance and English language modelling. Plenty of research has

shown that collaborative and cooperative peer learning strategies like paired work and turn-and-talks are effective for many students, and not just ELs. Colorín Colorado (2021), a premier national website serving educators and families of English language learners (ELLs) in grades PreK-12, states that peers are a valuable resource in helping English language learners succeed, as they “can help build student confidence and also act as language models, giving ELLs a chance to practice their new language skills in a low-stress setting” (para. 1). Considering this on a theoretical level, these suggestions align with Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory (SCT), where learning is understood as a socially mediated process in which children acquire their cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies through support from a more knowledgeable or capable participant—an expert (McCleod, 2022, para. 2). With the collaboration or support of an expert, a novice learner is able to achieve “a higher level of potential development” (Wertsch, 1985, p.60). The difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner is what Vygotsky (1978) called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). As Turuk (2008) explains, “ZPD helps in determining a child’s mental functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that are currently in an embryonic state, but will mature tomorrow” (p.249). In this way, considering the ZPD and Vygotsky’s theory may be essential to promoting the success of ESL students in the classroom, as teachers must assist them in maturing their language skills every day. On first thought, the teacher may seem to be the obvious expert for students in the ZPD for new language acquisition. But my observations and experiences lead me to believe that, especially for very young English learners, the experts that they gravitate to most are their peers of the same age. Reflecting as I scratch the surface of

my research, I begin to think that there must be a way to develop a sort of pedagogical community where my students can forge collaborative learning relationships to help not only my ESL students, but all my students, to succeed. Though Vygotsky gives some insight into my specific teaching moment, it is worthwhile to continue to ask, *what am I noticing about the ways in which EL students regard their peers as language models, and how can I effectively leverage this tendency with 5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds?*

## Chapter 2: Considering Second Language Acquisition

Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations.

—Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*

As I left school that day, headed to rehearsal for a music ensemble I am a member of, I thought about what I had witnessed in the classroom with my ESL student. I wondered what Kaito was going through, and how it felt to learn a new language in such an immersive environment—and at only six years old. I thought to myself, “Even though I took classes about how to teach ESL students in my graduate program, I feel like I have no idea what I’m doing. How do I help him?” I thought about why I had assumed all this time that it would help Kaito’s language acquisition to copy from his peers. “Probably because I know next to nothing about second language acquisition,” I said out loud to myself as I drove to rehearsal. Although I had read massive lists of “strategies” online and scoured books that describe “best practices” for teaching ESL students, not a single book told me whether copying was actually helpful to second language acquisition, and there wasn’t much content on the web to help me with the situation I had witnessed. Nobody could tell me how to leverage my own ESL students’ tendencies to regard their peers as their guides into the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Instead of furiously searching for some clearcut answer that will likely never exist, I began to reflect in search of some insights, first about the process of second language acquisition.

### My Story

I thought about my own experiences with learning new languages. I can count to ten in Spanish and German. I took four years of French in high school. But that was hardly immersive,

and I haven't thought about French in years, because I don't really have to—my first language is the most prominent spoken in the U.S., and I will probably live and work here for the rest of my life. That's it—that's my only experience with language other than my mother tongue. I remembered reading somewhere, perhaps on some motivational poster, that learning a new language is like learning to play an instrument. This has always sounded spurious to me. How can I possibly compare Kaito's experience to the flute lessons I went to as a child? But as I began rehearsal that evening, I thought about it more deeply. I am a member of an ensemble called gamelan, an indigenous Indonesian instrumental group made up of a variety of gongs and various sets of tuned bronze instruments that are struck with mallets. I stumbled across my love for gamelan in college when I joined the University of Pittsburgh's University Gamelan. I didn't know what it was or even how to pronounce the word *gamelan*, but I dove in headfirst.



Figure 1: A screenshot from the University of Pittsburgh University Gamelan Spring Concert 2021 held on YouTube (Music at Pitt, 2021, 13:02)

What I experienced is quite a lot like what I imagine it feels like to learn a second language in a fully immersive environment. As an undergraduate music major, the only *musical language* I knew was “Western” music theory. I knew what the 12-note scales sounded like, how the sheet music looked, and how the typical rhythms played by orchestras feel. But when I sat down at one of the metallophones at my first rehearsal and the gamelan began to play, I felt like I had heard music for the first time all over again. I picked up the sheet music to try to make sense of what I was hearing, and all I saw were numbers on the page—I later learned that gamelan uses a numbered musical notation called *cipher* notation. I also learned later that there is no real way to translate gamelan’s cipher notation into Western musical notation. The scales sounded unlike anything I had ever heard, and the interlocking polyrhythms rolled around in my brain, because I had no way to make sense of them. I didn’t know the language of gamelan. Slowly but surely, I became more and more proficient. I wouldn’t say I am completely fluent in the language of gamelan, but I believe I will be someday. Below is a link to a performance by Gamelan Semara Ratih of Ubud, Bali, Indonesia, performing “Manuk Anguci,” a now-classic Balinese gamelan instrumental piece. Viewing this YouTube video will allow readers to see and hear gamelan so that that they too might understand how gamelan and language—and learning—intertwine. For my readers, please take a moment now to click this link and listen to the sounds of gamelan: <https://youtu.be/UEWCCSuHsuQ> (Genelec Music Channel, 2017).

This reflective experience helped me to put myself in Kaito’s shoes, if only for a moment. But second language acquisition as a process and a theoretical concept remained beyond my comprehension. How have I become proficient in this new musical language? How does *anyone* learn a new language? What do students like Kaito come to know in the classroom

and how do they acquire this knowledge? I believe that educators who teach ESL students, like myself, should explore second language acquisition if we hope to meet the needs of a diverse set of learners. Most early childhood educators know something of first language acquisition, because teacher training and degree programs require child development courses. I would posit, though, that most programs do not require any notable study of second language acquisition, or of the ways in which first language acquisition contributes to students' second language acquisition. The basic need for teachers of ESL students is to obtain the skills and knowledge for effective teaching of ELLs, so comprehension of second language acquisition is vital—gathering techniques and strategies won't cut it. I began my study of second language acquisition by trying to understand the term.

### **Defining Second Language Acquisition**

Saville-Troike (2006) states that second language acquisition (SLA) refers “both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language” (p. 2). In other words, SLA is both a scientific discipline and a process. Interestingly, the additional language is called a second language (L2), although it may actually be the third, fourth, or fifth one acquired. One of my ESL students was learning English as their third language acquired; the boy from Kazakhstan had also acquired Russian in addition to his first language, Kazakh, but his process of learning English can still be understood as SLA. As I began to understand the term more effectively, I wondered, how does second language learning happen? SLA includes informal and formal L2 learning, or a combination of both; informal L2 learning takes place in “naturalistic” environments, while formal L2 learning takes place in a classroom, like a foreign language class

in college (Saville-Troike, 2006). Most elementary-aged ESL students experience a combination of formal and informal L2 learning, as they learn English in ELA classes as part of the daily classroom schedule, as they are pulled-out for tiered ESL instruction, and as they interact socially with their peers in a natural setting.

### **Five Stages of SLA**

Slowly coming to understand the basic “how’s” of SLA, I started to wonder “when?” In other words, what are the stages of SLA? What are the approximate time frames that students begin to acquire new SLA knowledge? Educational theorists and linguists Krashen and Terrell (1983) identified and described five stages of SLA, which include preproduction, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advanced fluency. The preproduction stage, which lasts from zero to six-months, is also called the “silent period,” because many students won’t speak any English at all during this stage. Students may nod “yes” or “no,” draw and point, but they have minimal comprehension. In the early production stage, lasting six months to a year, students begin using single words or two-word phrases, yes/no responses, names, and repetitive language patterns (Hill & Bjork, 2008). In the speech emergence stage, students can produce simple sentences, but grammar and pronunciation may be incorrect. Their comprehension is good. This lasts for one to three years. In the intermediate fluency stage, which lasts three to five years, students can use sentences of increasing length and complexity, until finally, at the Advanced Fluency stage, they demonstrate a near-native level of fluency. Reaching this stage takes seven years or more. Referring to these stages, I thought that my ESL students, including Kaito, were somewhere between the preproduction stage and the early production stage. Kaito spoke using short phrases in English and participated minimally in

class using key words and familiar phrases. His comprehension was growing with support.

Another Japanese ESL student in my class, however, was still partially in the “silent period,” as the only time I ever heard him speak English in school was when he uttered the word “bathroom,” pointing to the hall pass.

### **BICS and CALP**

Educators must also understand the difference between social language and academic language acquisition. The acronyms BICS and CALP, which were distinguished by James Cummins in 1979, refer to the length of time required by ESL students “to develop conversational skills in the target language and grade appropriate academic proficiency in that language” (Colorín Colorado, 2015, para. 1). Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, or BICS, refer to linguistic skills needed in everyday, social face-to-face interactions. A common example of BICS in action is seen when children communicate on the playground. It takes the learner from six months to two years to develop BICS (Colorín Colorado, 2015). Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, or CALP, focuses on proficiency in academic language or language used in the classroom in the various content areas. It takes learners at least five years to develop CALP. Collier and Thomas (1995) have shown that it may take children with no prior instruction or no support in native language development at least seven years to develop CALP (as cited in Colorín Colorado, 2015). Knowing the stages of SLA and the differences between BICS and CALP has great implications for mainstream instruction, as educators must know where students should be headed toward to challenge and push them to the next stage.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of Second Language Acquisition**

Later, of course, I began to ponder the “why’s.” SLA is a fascinating discipline, as research has highlighted the many ambiguities of the process (Aljumah, 2020). Why is first language acquisition effortless in comparison to the difficulty of second language acquisition, which never guarantees success? Why does it seem like some people are more successful at learning second languages than others? I do not have all the answers to these questions—it is beyond the scope of my study. So, who does? SLA researchers have turned to several theoretical frameworks that have influenced approaches to second language learning to find the answers to these types of questions. It is important to understand these theoretical underpinnings of SLA to dismantle assumptions about my students and their learning so I can best facilitate their learning. To begin to explore these theories, I return to the work of Lev Vygotsky. While Vygotsky did not write about SLA per se, he did provide a foundation for understanding SLA through analysis of “the development of mental systems as humans acquire and develop the ability to communicate through language” (Mahn, 2012, p. 1). In fact, for Vygotsky, studying and understanding language acquisition itself was pivotal to creating a foundation for his theories of learning. He states, “The acquisition of language can provide a paradigm for the entire problem of the relation between learning and development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 89). As mentioned previously, Vygotsky theorized that learning, including second language acquisition, depends on other humans and the interactions between them; Vygotsky was one of the first researchers to emphasize the impact of the social environment on learning, beyond just biological and psychological factors (Rublik, 2017). For example, Vygotsky (1935) criticized a psychometric interpretation of low IQ scores of Chinese American children in San Francisco, noting that the test was in English. Vygotsky “pointed out that ‘concrete conditions in

which the children's development took place' had been ignored. He argued that 'the entire problem of bilingualism should be viewed dynamically, not statistically'" (Vygotsky, 1935, p. 51, as cited in Rublik, 2017, p. 341). As Rublik (2017) poignantly notes, "Vygotsky made it clear that learning not only occurs inside people's minds, but begins with social interaction, which in turn, forms a complex, interactive, psychological and cultural process" (p. 342). Language cannot be separated from culture and social interaction in any possible way. Speaking any language is a cultural act in and of itself. Thinking back to my experience in learning gamelan, I see a strong parallel to SLA in that music-making and learning the language of any music is a very similar cultural and social experience. Perhaps learning a new music is a lot more like learning a new language than I had previously thought. It may be worthwhile to continue to reflect on this parallel to connect to my ESL students' experiences in a deeper way.

There are numerous other theories regarding SLA with differing views of the process. Two other dominant frameworks of SLA are the linguistic framework and psychological framework. In the linguistic perspective, SLA is understood by accounting for speakers' internalized, underlying knowledge of language. In other words, the linguistic framework views language acquisition as a biologically determined process and that humans are born with an innate language capability that enables them to learn any human language. The paradigm is mostly based on theoretical linguist Noam Chomsky's claim that there are certain principles that form the basis on which knowledge of language develops; these principles are biologically determined and specialized for language learning (Chomsky, 1969, 1980, 1986). In the psychological framework, which is heavily based in Information Processing (IP), SLA is understood through the mental processes involved in language learning and use (Saville-Troike,

2006). Saville-Troike (2006) states that the psychological paradigm of SLA, particularly the IP model, claims that “learning language is essentially like learning other domains of knowledge: that whether people are learning mathematics, or learning to drive a car, or learning Japanese, they are not engaging in any essentially different kind of mental activity” (p. 73). All three of these theories are plausible to me and give me perspective into my ESL students’ processes of SLA. However, the sociocultural framework of SLA theorized first by Vygotsky deepens my understanding of why Kaito and other ELLs look to their peers as language models. SLA is not a solely internal process, as IP models of learning tend to posit. I believe that deeply reflecting on the complex and socially interactive nature of SLA, especially within the classroom itself, is essential to the success of my ESL students. It also gives me a perspective of why I must leverage the students’ tendencies to rely on their peers. Equipped with this new perspective, I began to research cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger’s (1991) concept of “community of practice.”

### Chapter 3: Developing an Elementary ESL Community of Practice

Our knowing—even of the most unexceptional kind—is always too big, too rich, too ancient, and too connected for us to be the source of it individually.

—Etienne Wagner, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*

#### Our Story

Kaito was not the only ESL student in my classroom who regarded his English-speaking peers as language models. In fact, I noticed this tendency in every one of my ESL students. In the classroom, up to four students were seated at each elongated desk, so that collaborative work could take place—though, often, my cooperating teacher did not actually prescribe any time in the daily routine for peer-to-peer work. One ESL student, whose first language is Spanish, constantly looked over the desk to see what her non-ELL peer was writing during ELA class. She would try to emulate what he was writing; unfortunately, the peer she regarded as a language model was struggling in reading and writing, too, and needed intensive intervention. He had scored very low on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment, so when the ESL student copied or wrote something similar to his work, her writing assignments were scored poorly. I had noticed this happening often, so I tried to give her one-on-one support with her writing during class. I would sit next to her with a whiteboard and a list of high-frequency words and help her write sentences. When she got stuck on a word, I would write it with her on the whiteboard. However, when I asked her to brainstorm a sentence to write, she would again look over the desk to see what some of her classmates wrote, or ask the student next to her, “What did you write? I want to write that, too.” Even when I would give her some ideas, she seemed to believe that her classmates had better ones. These repeated

observations point back to my assertion that the experts that ESL students gravitate to most are their peers of the same age, and not necessarily their teachers. But I cannot simply let my ESL students copy from their peers; not only is it unfair to the students whose work is being copied, it is unfair to my ESL students, because they are holding back their own learning.

But how can I leverage the tendency with five-, six-, and seven-year-olds? Collaborative learning and peer work is utilized more often with older students, for instance in group projects or presentations. In fact, literature that is related to collaborative learning in very early childhood education (PreK through first grade) is a bit limited, especially when compared with other educational levels. Most of the studies I found concerning collaborative learning for our youngest learners investigates learning through play. Though this is an incredibly important piece of early childhood learning, it doesn't exactly relate to my inquiry. Even as a student teacher with my first-grade class, I observed very little collaborative learning time put aside during the school day. Students had some time to interact and discuss amongst themselves during time on the rug, but only when my cooperating teacher and I asked the students to turn and talk to their peers. When students were seated at their desks, talking without raising their hand and being called on was prohibited. If a student needed help, they were to raise their hand and wait patiently for a teacher to assist them. In other words, my cooperating teacher ran a tight ship, and I mostly followed suit. In fact, even as I began to consider the use of more collaboration in the classroom, I had some reservations. I questioned whether it would be too challenging to implement. Would the classroom be too chaotic? Do these five-, six-, and seven-year-olds students have the advanced cooperation skills needed for this kind of peer learning? Would I still be able to maintain control, especially with some of the student behaviors that are

already challenging in the classroom? Would students truly collaborate in learning, or would they just chatter away? Will my non-ELL students be open and willing to be language models their ELL peers? As I reflected on all the questions bouncing back and forth in my brain, I quickly realized that it's probably not enough to simply set time aside in the school day for collaborative learning. For collaborative learning to really be effective, not only for my ESL students, but all my students, it can't just be a 30-minute free-for-all before lunch time. I realized that I would have to build a whole new classroom framework and develop an improved classroom culture.

So, I dove into more research. I read about collaborative learning, and what I found on the surface was mostly more of the strategies and instructional tips and tricks that are ultimately unhelpful, because none of them perfectly match my classroom situation. Just as I did in Chapter 2: Considering Second Language Acquisition, I decided to reflect on my own experiences in truly collaborative learning environments. I thought about my school experience in early childhood and could not recall a single instance of collaboration that I believe really benefitted me in a special way as a young learner. I thought about high school, and I remembered some group projects I did, but everyone hated them, including the teachers. Teachers didn't like group projects because they didn't want to have to deal with the behavior of some students as they worked in groups, and I didn't like them because the classroom culture didn't allow me to feel comfortable enough to work with my peers. I felt safer just to produce my own work. When my teachers announced that we were going to be completing a group project in science that quarter, or that we would be working in peer groups in English that day, the whole room would groan. Even in college, some of my classes didn't foster that

kind of classroom community that allows and encourages students—and teacher—to learn *together*.

But then I remembered gamelan again. Learning to play gamelan, whether in a college course or a community group, is a truly collaborative experience. One simply cannot learn to play gamelan on their own, and they shouldn't try to, because it would be pointless and boring. Even at that first gamelan rehearsal I went to as a student at Pitt, the first words my instructor said to me were not the usual "Take a seat" or "This is Gamelan 101. Are you in the right class?" that I've heard from many professors. Instead, already seated with all the other new and repeat students, he said, "Please, come sit with us and let's talk together about what you're seeing in the rehearsal room." The instructor had already created a classroom community that ran on collaboration, and peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher alliances. And as I mentioned above, teaching/learning gamelan is a collaborative endeavor. Gamelan is taught and learned mostly by rote, where a more practiced musician, or sometimes, an expert sits in front of the novice and their instrument and models a melody. After watching the expert play the melody a few times, the novice jumps in and begins to play with the expert. They play the melody together, over and over, until the expert slowly backs off and watches them; the expert corrects any errors as the novice begins to gain independence. Most often, the instructor is not the only figure to model the melodies. Once a student learns a melody, they take on a teacher-like role and help others learn the melody, too. This reminds me a lot of the characteristics of Vygotsky's ZPD and scaffolding. What makes learning gamelan even more meaningful is that players of gamelan are extremely passionate; the interactions in rehearsals are based on a group desire to create a create something beautiful.

Even performing gamelan music is an act of collaboration, characterized by a tight network of musicians who are constantly listening to and watching the other members play. The technique of playing interlocking rhythms, called *kotekan* in Balinese gamelan, require intense collaboration and total trust between musicians. In *kotekan*, melodies are divided in such a way that musicians play alternate notes to form one melody line. In other words, one musician plays a series of notes, and another musician plays the notes in between them, forming one, usually very complex and fast melody. In learning to play the *kotekan* technique, I found that I must not listen to just myself playing, or else I immediately fall off the rhythm and get lost. Instead, I must listen to and feel the aggregate of both my melody and my fellow musician's melody—our melody. "I wish my classroom could be like that," I said as I reflected.

### **Communities of Practice**

When I found the work of cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger (1991), specifically their concept of communities of practice (CoP), I immediately connected it to my experience with learning and playing gamelan. I started to picture what my classroom would look like as a CoP, and how it would benefit my ESL students. "I don't have to wish for a classroom like the one in which I learned and played gamelan; I can create it," I told myself. So, what are CoPs? Wenger (2006) defines them as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly;" they are "formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor" (p. 1). The concept may sound simple upon first consideration, but there are three characteristics that work in combination to form a community of practice: *the domain*, *the community*, and *the practice* (Wenger, 2006, p. 1). A

CoP has an identity defined by a shared *domain* of interest (e.g., Star Trek superfans, Pittsburgh Steelers lovers, or a group of high school math teachers). It's not just a network of people or a group of friends. A CoP also requires that members of the specified domain interact and engage in shared activities, help each other, and share information with each other to form a *community*; they build relationships that enable them to learn from each other (p.1). In this way, that group of high school math teachers isn't really a CoP unless they meaningfully interact and learn together and from one another. Finally, a CoP isn't just a group of people who have a particular interest in something and interact together, members must also be *practitioners*. Wenger notes that members of a CoP "develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice" (p. 2). Those high school math teachers undoubtedly are practitioners in their field, as teachers constantly develop and share these kinds of resources. Wenger (2006) notes that this practice may even be developed casually but still requires periods of sustained and recurrent interaction. For example, he gives an example of a nurses who unconsciously create an effective CoP as practitioners in their field:

Nurses who meet regularly for lunch in a hospital cafeteria may not realize that their lunch discussions are one of their main sources of knowledge about how to care for patients. Still, in the course of all these conversations, they have developed a set of stories and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice. (p. 2)

Without a doubt, teachers often create their own CoPs based on these three characteristics. And, as I posit, teachers and students together can and should create them in their classrooms, too; creating an elementary CoP would greatly benefit ESL students as it consciously leverages

their tendency to regard their peers as language models. As described in Chapter 2: Considering Second Language Acquisition, studies of SLA and ESL learning have encouraged teachers to “pay particular attention to particular social contexts in which a second language is learned, the learners’ relations with other participants in the community, and their different modes of participation” (Haneda, 1997, p.12). In this way, considering the community of practice in an elementary classroom offers a new social framework for second language learning contexts, like my own classroom. As Toohey (1996) writes, “the second language learner is seen not as internalizing the second language, but rather as a newcomer beginning to participate in the practices of a particular community” (p. 553). Based upon this idea, creating this classroom CoP requires educators to shift away from individual learning or traditional transmission of knowledge and towards a shared community of learners.

But does intentional instruction still have a place in a classroom CoP? We still need teachers to be teachers, after all. Key to the concept of CoP and its application in the classroom is the process of *legitimate peripheral participation* which Gherardi, Nicolini and Odella (1998) define as “the newcomer’s progressive involvement in the community by virtue of his or her increasing mastery of the practices of the community and of his or her membership” (p. 279). Thus, educators are still a more advanced learner within the CoP, and as Vygostky (1978) would have it, must still help to provide scaffolding the development of the less advanced learners. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe this relationship within a CoP as “newcomers” and “old-timers.” The teacher isn’t the only “old-timer” in the classroom, though, believe it or not. Many of the non-ESL students in my class, even at the age of six or seven, are already old-timers at the English language. In this way, they can be of assistance to the newcomers, their ESL peers.

In the same way, though, the newcomer ESL students bring their own wealth of knowledge to the CoP, from which the rest of the community can learn. But to create a true CoP, we—my students and I— would first need to create a classroom culture that evokes the characteristics that Wenger (2006) defined.

I return to briefly my original troubling moment. Part of what really shocked me about the students' squabble was the way Kaito's non-ESL peer responded. He immediately became defensive and said Kaito was "faking it" (by this, I figured he meant that Kaito knew English already but was hiding it). I know why this child became defensive; as I briefly mentioned in Chapter 1: A Reflective Introduction, he knew that copying and cheating are wrong, and he didn't want his work to be taken from him without Kaito even asking if he could. Cheating and copying *are* immoral. The student claiming that Kaito was "faking it" is a lot more loaded of a situation; I can't really know for certain why he said that. But it probably stems from the fact that many non-ESL students see ESL students as different, or strange, and don't really understand what they are doing in the classroom, why they may sound or look different, or why they are learning English. If not addressed, this can lead to exclusion, bullying, and discrimination. In this way, it is important to immediately create a classroom culture that celebrates a diverse group of learners. Even more than that, if I can create a classroom culture where students acknowledge each other's differences as a way to *learn*, we're already on our way to forming an elementary classroom CoP. As I mentioned above, there must also be a classroom culture shift away from what many consider traditional teaching and learning. As Osman, Cockcroft, and Kajee (2008) put it, in successful CoPs "there is a move away from the reification of knowledge and the teaching of skills and information to the negotiation of

meaning among participants and a concern with how such meanings are contested ... or privileged” (p. 1). I would guess this might be difficult for many teachers to accomplish, as it requires a total reimagining of how learning takes place. But as scholar-practitioners, educators must take the step to do this kind of work to better their pedagogy and practice for students and the profession as a whole—I cover this more in Chapter 4: A Reflective Afterword. Making these changes may even be difficult for students like the one in my troubling moment, who has already been ingrained to the often-restrictive individualism we see in traditional schooling.

But I think that five-, six-, and seven-year-olds in first grade are excellent agents of change, and as I have already said, teachers can learn from them, too. Instead of letting Kaito continue to copy from his peers without explanation, I could have created a classroom starting on the first day of school where learning is encouraged to occur in the social contexts in which it truly blossoms. I would have to form an understanding with my students that we come together Monday through Friday to learn together, as a first-grade class (the domain), and that we are more than just individuals, but a collective community. I imagine that this kind of classroom would function much like the gamelan classroom: peripheral participants (newcomers) and experienced participants (experts) share in a mutually beneficial relationship where learning is deepened. I would have to foster true understanding with the students that, together, we are all practitioners of learning who have tools, stories, and ways of thinking that we can share with one another.

I imagine that some of my readers are rolling their eyes at this. Do first graders even know what the word practitioner means? No, they don't. And Lave and Wenger didn't theorize about the development of CoPs in first grade classrooms; in fact, there is very little discourse on

this application of CoPs. But I am willing to bet that first graders already form small CoPs of their own all the time, albeit unknowingly. When a group of first graders who enjoy slime toys come together on the playground every day at 12:00 and one shares their story of making a new slime out Elmer's Glue and how it didn't work out well because they added too much water, they are already some kind of slime practitioner. Creating an intentional and authentic ESL CoP will look different for every classroom, but I am certain first graders are fully capable of being active members in one. After all, first graders are human, too, and we all learn the same way: through social and cultural interaction and experience. By creating an elementary classroom CoP, EL and non-EL students, along with their teachers, join together as practitioners who advance learning for all.

### Chapter 4: A Reflective Afterword

Narrative transforms a mere succession of actions and events into a coherent whole in which these happenings gain meaning as contributors to a common purpose.

—Polkinghorne, “Reporting Qualitative Research as Practice”

#### On Writing in the Genre of Narrative Inquiry

I’ve written quite a few research papers in my career as a student. I’ve written scientific research about bacteriophages and viruses, and I’ve written ethnomusicological-style research about gamelan from Indonesia, reggae from Jamaica, and Rajasthani folk music from northern India (sadly I have never visited those places to do *real* ethnography, though). I love to write, and I’ve enjoyed writing in almost every genre I’ve tried out—except poetry. I just can’t get into poetry. In scientific research, the author basically doesn’t exist as an individual on the pages past the first one where their name is listed, usually amongst several others. The goal in this kind of writing is to be as objective as possible, so that personal beliefs and opinions of the author don’t get in the way of producing valid results. I didn’t mind writing scientific research in my early days of college, but I got bored with it quickly. Ethnographic research is a little different, because its aim is to understand people and culture and society. I enjoyed this genre a lot more. Ethnographic research is more subjective than scientific research, because usually the researcher is both a participant and an observer in their study. Furthermore, self-reflection of the researcher’s own positionality is essential to avoid *othering* the culture that they’re studying. Gamelan expert, performer, and writer Jodi Diamond (1997), who I was lucky enough to interview for my senior capstone project in college, illustrates the importance of self-reflection when writing ethnographic research on world music cultures:

The walls of the laboratory have disappeared.

We are all natives. We are all scientists.

There is only one "time" at a time.

We are all in it together.

There is only one we.

There is no they there. (p. 12)

I think that writing ethnographies prepared me, at least somewhat, to write in the genre of narrative inquiry, as I have already had some experience in metacognitive reflection (i.e., the act of thinking about one's thinking) and I have written about participant-observation experiences with story arcs and thick descriptions. If the only research I had ever written was about the isolation and expression of genes or the effect of alcohol use on brain function or something, I would have been totally disoriented by this genre.

What caught me off guard about writing my Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) is that, in large part, I did it for *myself*. I wrote my SPN to gain practical wisdom that I can take along with me the rest of my career and the rest of my life. Of course, I want others to read my study, too. In these last twenty-some pages, I sincerely hope I have added something worthwhile to scholarly discourses about English language learning in elementary schools and developed new ways of theorizing about the use of CoPs in the elementary classroom. But above all, writing this Scholarly Personal Narrative has allowed me to connect layers of myself, which I had never taken the time and energy to do before. For example, in developing a kind of aesthetic imagination with metaphor, I have connected my two great passions in life—music and education (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). Moreover, using gamelan and my

experiences as a student and performer of gamelan as a way to make meaning of my inquiry question was so fruitful and gratifying, because I was able to “produce a structure...that [gave] rise to feeling” (Eisner, 1985, p. 27, as cited in Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019, p. 254). I was able to inquire into that specific experience with Kaito and come out of it with real pedagogical wisdom, because every step of the way, I situated my study within the context of my own life, my own practice, and my own pedagogy. I was totally taken aback when Dr. McMahon mentioned in class one evening that no one else in the world knows more about my inquiry than I do, because it is *my story*. Her statement, which I am only paraphrasing, was a bit life changing. It made me really feel like everything I put into my SPN was worthwhile and important. Perhaps the neatest thing about narrative inquiry, to me, is how recursive it is; indeed, I situated my inquiry within my life experiences and practice and pedagogy and somehow, my inquiry has also *informed* my life, practice, and pedagogy.

All this has given me new perspective on what it means to be a researcher, too. Researchers aren't just people in white coats, gloves, and goggles pouring some liquid in and out of test tubes, or people with a notepad and pencil examining the social phenomena of a particular group of people in another country. Research can be purely interpretive, too, where subjectivity and a sense of self is placed at the very center of the work. Researchers are also teachers, who, during their day-to-day responsibilities, encounter a troubling situation and decide to figure out what just happened and why. They talk to their colleagues, they read online and in journals and books, they reflect (sometimes for hours, days, weeks, or months), they theorize, and they work to better their own practice—and in turn they become stewards

of education (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). Those people are researchers too—and I am one of them.

### **On My Developing Pedagogy**

Before undertaking this project, I had tossed around the word “pedagogy” every so often in conversation and basically pretended that I knew what it meant. I was pretty sure it was something that good teachers develop over years and years but didn’t know much more than that. I’m beginning to understand the concept of pedagogy a little more now, and I can even see my own pedagogy taking shape. Through the many discussions I have had with my peers, teachers, and colleagues throughout graduate school, I have learned that *you are what you teach*, and *you teach what you are*. In other words, my beliefs drive my actions, and so my beliefs make up my pedagogy. Throughout the process of crafting my SPN I have developed a strong and unwavering belief that, as human beings, we learn better *together*. This will drive my pedagogy moving forward. While grappling with the complex writings of Vygotsky and others, I have come to understand that learning and the construction of knowledge is a truly sociocultural process. It’s impossible to learn something about anything entirely by oneself. And who would want to? We acquire more knowledge every time we meet someone new, and in turn, we learn to better navigate our world. This is what I want to give my students: authentic and meaningful opportunities to learn from one another, and with one another, as much as possible. Collaborative learning, student mentoring and modelling, and creating classroom CoPs do not only benefit ESL students. Incorporating these modes of learning and instruction in the classroom can even be considered a Universal Design for Learning (UDL), as it allows students with all different skill levels, abilities, and backgrounds to succeed through legitimate peripheral

participation and a kind of collaborative scaffolding—one where scaffolding comes not only from the teacher but from the students themselves.

Similarly, I believe that, as a teacher, I must take every moment to learn from my students, from my own actions, and from the world around me. Excellent teachers never stop learning. This is part of my pedagogy, too, as it should be for every teacher. Sadly, I think that many give up on their own continued learning, and that's when their practice may fall flat. It is true that repeated reflection and a drive to keep learning every day isn't always easy. It takes effort and time, and it can be uncomfortable and confusing.

I have always loved learning; I'm even a little worried about how I'm going to feel once I'm done with graduate school. I won't be a student anymore, at least not technically. I have been in school nearly my entire life and I worry that once I turn this thesis in, I am going to feel totally lost because I won't have any more assignments to finish, tests to study for, or classes to attend. But in crafting my SPN, I have come to see that the work doesn't end here—in fact, it never really does. Even when I receive my master's degree—any day now—I won't be finished learning. Even if I go on to get a PhD in a decade, I won't be finished learning. I will have new experiences to learn from, new research to learn from, new friends to learn from, new music to learn from, and new students to learn from. I'll even learn new things about myself. In a world that is constantly changing and evolving, it is both dangerous and *incredibly boring* to give up on learning.

### **On Being a Scholar-Practitioner**

I'm a little afraid not to be a student anymore, but now I can don a new title instead, one that I didn't know existed until I embarked on this journey and Dr. McMahon introduced it

to me: scholar-practitioner. Working backwards, I first want to wrangle with the idea of identifying as a practitioner. As I mentioned at the very beginning of my SPN, I have decided not to become certified and will not be pursuing teaching right now. I only taught in my student teaching placement for a handful of weeks. I have little to no previous experience teaching in a classroom. But I still consider myself an educational practitioner because, for one, I have put in the work during the last year and a half in my graduate program, and also because my current position at the University of Pittsburgh is education-facing, and I work with students every day (they're just the big kids instead of the little kids). The title of educator, or practitioner, is part of my identity now, and I refuse to let it go. I am a passionate steward of education, and I think that makes me a practitioner in some sense, too. Second, I must reflect on my identity as a scholar. I echo what Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn (2019) say about this experience, as I cannot pinpoint the moment when I realized I could identify as a scholar. I think it happened sometime in the last few weeks, during class, when I realized that I have already become a member of a CoP. My classmates and I are not just a group of teachers; we are a group of educators who have a whole lot of "curiosity, a love of learning, an appreciation of complexity, a tolerance for ambiguity, and a relentless need to make sense of [our] experiences" (p.17). I've never published an article or presented a keynote speech at a big event, but I am a scholar in every other way.

Putting the two together, scholar-practitioners make a conscious commitment to investigate and learn from the troubling moments they are bound to experience, and then "use the results of their investigations to fulfill their responsibilities as advocates for education and as contributors to the well-being and knowledge-base of the profession" (Piantanida,

McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019, p. 227). The goal of the scholar-practitioner is not to reach definitive answers on how to solve their troubling moments; in undertaking this narrative inquiry, I was not trying to come up with “the five ultimate strategies for teaching ESL students,” like I’ve seen 400 times on the Internet. Rather, scholar-practitioners peel back the numerous layers of their troubling moments, of their practice, and of their own worldviews to develop theoretical understandings that lead them to pedagogical wisdom. Scholar-practitioners strive to develop pedagogical wisdom not only to help students like Kaito, but to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Now, I must close my final chapter and end my Scholarly Personal Narrative. Very soon, I will receive my MEd and I won’t be a student anymore. But the work—the learning, exploring, reflecting, and theorizing—is truly only beginning for me as a novice educator and as a scholar-practitioner. This makes me think of one of my favorite instruments in the gamelan—the *gong ageng* (which literally means large gong). The *gong ageng* can be up to four feet in diameter and is made of solid bronze; in the middle is a protruding polished boss that is struck with a padded mallet. When struck, the *gong ageng* resonates a very deep, warbling pitch that sounds out for what seems like forever. It continues to resonate at some of the lowest thresholds of human hearing for several minutes, or until someone dampens the sound with the mallet. When I play gamelan, I *never* dampen the sound of the *gong ageng*—it’s much too beautiful to quiet. I think the work of a true scholar-practitioner is much like the sound of the *gong ageng*: it never ends if you let it ring.

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