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Dispelling some misconceptions of English-medium instruction

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Abstract

English–medium instruction (EMI) has become a highly contested topic in discussions on the language of instruction policies in the Global South, raising critical questions about whether it truly delivers on the promises made in policy rhetoric and public discourse. While EMI is often promoted as a pathway to social, educational, and economic success for all, its rapid expansion raises concerns about linguistic inequality, social stratification, and unequal educational access. Through a critical synthesis of recent EMI literature, this paper identifies some persistent misconceptions that underpin the promotion and expansion of EMI in the Global South. These include the presumed neutrality of English, the belief in its automatic pedagogical and economic benefits, and the assumption that EMI leads to equitable access and improved content learning. The paper highlights the ideological and material consequences of EMI, such as epistemic injustice, linguistic hierarchies and social reproduction. In doing so, it calls for a rethinking of EMI beyond instrumentalist and Anglocentric logics and urges the centering of linguistic diversity, multilingual pedagogies and critical policy orientations. The article concludes with implications for future EMI scholarship and practices, particularly in contexts marked by deep social, linguistic and educational inequalities.

Introduction

English–medium instruction (EMI) has emerged as a highly debated topic in discussions on the medium of instruction policies and practices globally. While EMI is not a new phenomenon in most post–colonial countries, the discourse surrounding it has gained momentum in the past couple of decades when a large number of public schools and higher education institutions began transitioning to English medium from their national languages (Dearden 2015; Sah and Fang 2023, 2025). This shift has been accompanied by increased research and policy discussions, fueling fresh debates about the effectiveness and implications of English as the primary medium of instruction (MOI). Highlighting this trend, Macaro (2017) called it 'an unstoppable train' that has left the station, raising important questions about whether this movement is truly unceasing or if it is progressing without considering its broader social, educational, and linguistic consequences.

Despite its increasing prevalence, EMI remains a contentious issue. While many stakeholders argue that EMI enhances academic opportunities, economic prospects, and global competitiveness, critics highlight its potential psychological, social, and economic burdens on students, particularly those from non–English–speaking backgrounds (Mirhosseini and De Costa 2024; Sah and Fang 2023, 2025). Scholars warn that the expansion of EMI may contribute to linguistic inequalities, cognitive disadvantages and disruptions in local linguistic ecologies. Motivated by these concerns, in this article, I examine some common misconceptions about EMI to challenge these oversimplified views. Drawing upon years of research in EMI contexts, including local discourses and policies, and insights from international experiences, I aim to shed light on the complexities of EMI. While these misconceptions contain partial truths, they obscure the broader complexities of EMI. They require more critical examination. Similarly, rather than dismissing English–language learning, in this paper, I call for a rethinking of EMI beyond instrumentalist and Anglocentric logics and urge the centering of linguistic diversity, multilingual pedagogies and critical policy orientations.

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Misconception 1: English–medium instruction guarantees quality education

Much of the research on stakeholders' (e.g., parents and policymakers) perceptions of EMI suggests that a key driver of its widespread adoption in multilingual contexts is the belief that EMI ensures high-quality education (Milligan 2020; Phyak and Sah 2022; Sah and Li 2018). This assumption stems from English's global prestige and its ties to modernity and socioeconomic advancement (Sahan & Şahan, 2021). However, the quality of education depends on a complex interplay of factors – language proficiency, pedagogical practices, curriculum relevance, teacher training and sociocultural contexts (Guo et al. 2024; Kirkpatrick 2011). The medium of instruction alone is not a sufficient indicator of educational quality.

One of the most persistent issues with EMI is the assumption that students and teachers possess sufficient proficiency in English to engage in meaningful teaching and learning. Yet, evidence from multiple contexts shows that both learners and teachers often struggle with English, which oftentimes impedes comprehension and reduces opportunities for interaction and critical thinking (Dearden 2015; Macaro et al. 2017; Sert 2008). For example, in many parts of sub–Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia and Latin America, EMI policies have been implemented without adequate teacher preparation or language support, leading to what some researchers describe as 'subtractive education' – where students neither learn English effectively nor master subject content (Heugh 2021; Lasagabaster 2022; Tollefson and Tsui 2004). In Kuchah's (2016, 322) study in EMI schools in Cameroon, teachers highlighted how the lack of proficiency in English poses challenges for both teachers and students, which are 'the main factors militating against quality learning in EMI'. Therefore, he argued that EMI policy in such multilingual contexts 'poses significant barriers to the quality of learning' (Kuchah 2016, 315). The students in AlBakri's (2017, 2) study in Oman also stated that EMI compromised their learning of disciplinary knowledge, and they believed that Arabic 'would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and would most probably lead to better academic performance'. These studies conducted across EMI contexts highlight that the language of instruction matters significantly in shaping learning outcomes. According to UNESCO (2003), education is most effective when learners are taught in a language they understand well, typically their first language. Studies in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Vietnam and elsewhere reveal that using English as the medium of instruction – especially in early grades – can lead to cognitive overload, reduced student participation, and poor academic performance (Brock–Utne 2007).

The belief that EMI equates quality education is also sometimes driven by the narratives and cases of elite schools and universities, whose graduates typically succeed in high–stakes examinations (Sah 2022; Sah and Karki 2023). In reality, as Guo et al. (2024) show in the Chinese context, the success of EMI in providing quality education depends on other conditions, such as extra efforts by students and teachers, their interest and motivation, as well as course-related factors. They argued, 'During the learning process in EMI programmes, effort [from teachers and students] plays a major role in affecting student performance' (Guo et al. 2024, 3581). Hence, simply adopting English as the medium of instruction does not inherently promote quality education.

Furthermore, the assumption that EMI inherently promotes educational quality often masks deeper structural inequalities. As stated earlier, the perceived success of EMI schools is frequently tied to elite institutions with well resourced environments, qualified teachers and middle–class students who have prior exposure to English (Amin and Hamid 2023; Sah and Karki 2023). In contrast, public schools adopting EMI without these structural supports often experience a decline in educational quality. This suggests that the advantages attributed to EMI may in fact stem from broader socioeconomic privileges rather than the language of instruction itself (Shohamy 2006).

Misconception 2: English–medium education promotes equality

In many post–colonial societies in the Global South, EMI is often seen as a pathway to social mobility and equality, particularly for marginalized communities (Milligan 2020; Sah and Li 2018). In India, for example, studies showed that English–medium education is widely believed to offer disadvantaged groups – such as those marginalized by caste, class, gender, or ethnicity – a chance at upward mobility (LaDousa 2014; Mohanty 2019; Rao 2017). Gopalkrishna (2012) describes how some Dalit communities (the low Hindi caste) installed a statue they called the 'English Goddess' and worshipped it, symbolizing their hopes that English could free them from social and economic exclusion. English is often imagined as a ticket to better jobs, global opportunities, and a modern identity.

However, this belief often hides deeper structural inequalities. Without fair access to qualified teachers and learning resources, EMI tends to widen existing gaps rather than closing them (Erling et al. 2017; Tollefson and Tsui 2004; Sah and Li 2018). The idea that EMI brings equality is also rooted in colonial legacies. Under colonial rule, English was used to train local elites, and over time, English–medium education became associated with power and prestige (Faust and Nagar 2001; Kularathne and Karunakaran 2023). Today, these colonial ideologies persist and are further reinforced through neoliberal values, where elite English–medium schools overshadow under–resourced public ones (Sah 2022; Sah and Fang 2023). As Boruah and Mohanty (2022, 51) argue, 'the economically stable middle class nurtures English and keeps the neoliberal rhetoric alive through investment in EME [English–medium education]'.

Under the pretext of neoliberal educational practices, access to quality EMI is shaped by privilege. Students from wealthier backgrounds benefit from early English exposure, private tutors, and better schools (Annamalai 2005; Hamid et al. 2013; Piller and Cho 2013). Their success is less about EMI policy and more about accumulated social advantages. In contrast, students from rural or low–income communities often find themselves in poorly equipped EMI classrooms,

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with limited support and undertrained teachers (Dearden 2015; Macaro et al. 2017).

Moreover, the push for EMI often ignores the benefits of mother tongue education. Research, including UNESCO's (2003) recommendations, shows that learning in one's first language supports stronger academic performance and greater inclusion (Benson 2004; Heugh 2013, 2021). Imposing EMI too early can hinder understanding and learning – a phenomenon Cummins (2000) describes as 'cognitive short–circuiting.' It also devalues local languages and knowledge systems, threatening linguistic diversity and cultural identity (Skutnabb–Kangas and Phillipson 2017). EMI often reflects Western education models that may feel disconnected or alienating to students from non–dominant communities (Park and Wee 2012; Pennycook 2017).

Misconception 3: English–medium instruction inherently develops English proficiency

One of the most common reasons parents and students support EMI is the belief that it improves English proficiency (Curle et al. 2020; Guo et al. 2024; Lei and Hu 2014; Sah and Li 2018). Many assume that simply switching the language of instruction to English will naturally boost students' language skills. However, research suggests otherwise. Without strong pedagogical and structural support, EMI often fails to deliver on this promise (Curle et al. 2020; Lei and Hu 2014). For example, a study in China found no significant improvement in students' English use from EMI itself; rather, targeted English instruction had a greater impact (Lei and Hu 2014). While some studies (e.g., Hong and Basturkmen 2020) have shown that EMI courses may facilitate incidental learning of disciplinary vocabulary and discourses, it does not necessarily enhance overall language competence. These findings suggest that English proficiency development in EMI settings depends less on the medium of instruction itself and more on factors such as dedicated language instruction, learner motivation, and individual investment.

Language acquisition requires more than exposure – it demands interaction, scaffolding, and purpose–driven engagement (Ellis 2005; Lightbown and Spada 2013). In many EMI classrooms, especially in under–resourced public schools in the Global South, these conditions are rarely present. Teachers often struggle with English themselves and lack training in integrating language and content (Dearden 2015; Macaro et al. 2017). As a result, they may rely on rote instruction or frequent code–switching to manage lessons (Coleman 2010; Mohanty 2019; Sah and Kubota 2022). This limits both content understanding and language development. Students, meanwhile, often face the double burden of learning complex material in a language they have not yet mastered, which can impede participation and critical thinking (Erling et al. 2017).

Therefore, the assumption that EMI alone develops English proficiency overlooks key pedagogical realities. Language learning is not a passive process that occurs simply through exposure to English–language textbooks or instruction. Without adequate teacher preparation, structured support and interactive opportunities for students to practice English meaningfully, EMI may do little to enhance English proficiency. Instead, it risks creating classrooms where neither content nor language learning is fully achieved.

Misconception 4: Subjects like mathematics, science, and computer science should be taught in English

Another widespread misconception is that STEM subjects – like mathematics, science, and computer science – should be taught in English because it is seen as the 'natural' or most appropriate language for these fields. This belief shapes not only the views of parents and students but also influences education policies. For example, while Nepal's 2019 National Education Policy encourages using students' home languages in the early years, it still mandates English as the medium for science and mathematics, based on the assumption that English is the language of science and technology (Sah and Li 2024). Teachers and students often share this belief, assuming that English is a more effective and neutral medium for technical learning (Manan and Hajar 2024; Sah 2023). However, research shows that this assumption overlooks important pedagogical and cognitive concerns.

Students learn more effectively when they understand the language of instruction. Deep learning in science and math depends on clear conceptual understanding, which is difficult when lessons are delivered in a language students have not mastered (Cummins 2000; Heugh 2021). Studies from Africa and South Asia show that students perform better in STEM subjects when taught in their mother tongue or a familiar language, especially in the early and middle years of schooling (Benson 2004; Mohanty 2019). Meanwhile, many STEM teachers are not equipped to teach in English or support students' language development. In Kazakhstan, for instance, Manan and Hajar (2024) found that science teachers saw themselves as responsible only for content, not for helping students learn English. This disconnection between language policy expectations and teachers' actual practices and capacities further complicates the implementation of EMI in STEM education, potentially undermining both content learning and language development.

Another justification for using English in STEM is the lack of equivalent terms in local languages. Although some scientific vocabulary lack direct translations, this does not justify entire instruction in English. Research in multilingual education shows that technical terms can remain in English while the rest of the lesson is taught in a language students understand (Heugh 2021). A translanguaging approach, where students and teachers move fluidly between languages, can make learning more inclusive and effective (García and Li 2014). In fact, many universities in multilingual contexts already use bilingual strategies – teaching in English while offering explanations, glossaries, or support in local languages (Erling et al. 2017).

Misconception 5: English–medium education is necessary for professional and economic development

Another common assumption connects EMI with better career opportunities—such as enhanced skills, increased

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employability, and access to global jobs—and broader economic growth driven by heightened competitiveness and income. However, this connection is not inherent to EMI itself but is shaped by larger sociolinguistic and ideological forces surrounding English (Choi 2008; Huang and Curle 2021). For example, Sah and Li's (2018) study in a Nepali EMI school found that many teachers, students, and parents viewed EMI as a gateway to higher education, economic mobility, and participation in the global knowledge economy. Yet, the authors cautioned that this portrayal of EMI as an equalizing force for marginalized communities was largely illusory, describing it as a superficial promise' (Sah and Li 2018, 120). Similarly, Sah and Karki (2023) reported that parents feared their children would be unemployable without EMI–based English learning. These beliefs are not limited to school communities; policymakers and politicians also promote them, often using the narrative of EMI as a tool for upward mobility to divert attention from deeper structural issues. As Sah (2025) argues, such narratives constitute a *politics of distraction*, a strategy to divert public attention from structural issues while advancing their own agendas, such as promoting privatization in public education through the commodification of EMI.

While some studies suggest that EMI may support career advancement, these claims largely rely on stakeholders' perceptions rather than concrete outcomes. In their survey of EMI students in China, Huang and Curle (2021) found widespread belief in EMI's benefits for employment. However, these views often stemmed from the value attributed to English proficiency itself, not the effectiveness of EMI programs. As discussed earlier, EMI does not guarantee improved English skills. Moreover, many respondents reported limited use of English in their workplaces, apart from occasional interactions with foreigners, thereby questioning the blanket justification of EMI based solely on its association with English. Choi's (2008) review of EMI in Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong shows that English–medium education is not intrinsically beneficial; its success depends on the broader educational and economic context. Across South and Southeast Asia and sub–Saharan Africa, research consistently finds that employment opportunities are more influenced by factors such as access to quality education, vocational training, social capital, and systemic inequalities than by the language of instruction alone (Erling et al. 2017; Heugh 2021). Kubota (2011) similarly notes that in countries like China, South Korea, and Thailand, public discourse often overstates the role of English, even though its use in everyday professional contexts is limited.

These findings raise a critical question: How many people secure employment solely because they speak English? While English may be necessary in certain sectors, such as tourism and media, its overall role in national economic development is often exaggerated. In Nepal, for instance, the latest census shows that only 7.3% of the population lives abroad, mostly in non–English–speaking countries. Designing the national education system around EMI for this small group is a misguided policy choice that ignores the needs of the majority. Moreover, English proficiency can be developed later in life as needed. Research in second language acquisition shows that motivated adult learners can reach workplace–level English within a few months of targeted instruction (Ellis 2008). This raises a fundamental question: Is it necessary to impose EMI from the earliest years of schooling just to ensure English proficiency later in life?

Misconception 6: The 'more and earlier' approach is beneficial in English–medium education

In many multilingual societies, language–in–education policies – whether explicit or implicit – are often driven by a 'more and earlier' approach, based on the assumption that early exposure to EMI will accelerate English language acquisition. For example, Sayer (2015) observed that in Mexico, policymakers promoted English instruction in kindergarten, believing that early immersion would yield better outcomes. Bentley (2020), in a commissioned Cambridge Papers in ELT report, similarly argued for early English exposure, claiming it promotes linguistic richness and learner confidence. These points have been broadly used to support the adoption of EMI in early childhood education, often treating it as an automatic immersion model.

However, recent research increasingly challenges the effectiveness of this approach. Studies suggest that early EMI may not only fall short of delivering linguistic benefits but may also hinder children's cognitive, social, and academic development. Cognitive and educational psychology consistently shows that young children learn best when taught in their mother tongue, especially during foundational years (Baker 2011). Cummins (2000) emphasizes that cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) – the ability to process complex academic content – takes years to develop and is best nurtured in a familiar language. Evidence from Latin America and South Asia shows that children taught in their first language in early schooling outperform their peers in academic achievement and critical thinking (Heugh 2021).

By contrast, early EMI often leads to cognitive overload. Young learners may struggle to understand academic content delivered in an unfamiliar language, resulting in gaps in both subject knowledge and English proficiency. Research also highlights that early immersion can impede first language development, which is foundational to overall cognitive growth (García and Li 2014). The pressure to simultaneously acquire a new language and academic skills may negatively impact academic performance and self–esteem (Liu et al. 2022). Contemporary bilingual education research supports a more gradual, balanced approach. Studies showed that learners benefit most when instruction initially occurs in their first language, with English introduced gradually as a second language (Cummins 2000). This model enables students to build strong foundations in both languages and fosters transferable cognitive skills. The issue, therefore, is not the age of English exposure, but the quality and timing of instruction within a bilingual framework. Instead of adhering to the myth that 'more and earlier' is inherently better, education policies should prioritize mother–tongue instruction in early education, introducing English progressively to support both language development and academic success.

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Misconception 7: EMI is an English–only teaching and learning space

Research shows that many stakeholders – particularly teachers and parents – perceive EMI as an English-only space, where the use of other languages is discouraged or even prohibited. This view is often based on the idea that EMI improves English skills, particularly when using a 'more and earlier' approach. (Lei and Hu 2014; Sah and Karki 2023; Sah and Li 2018; Sayer 2015). As a result, many parents and students opt for EMI programs based on the assumption that maximal exposure to English in a monolingual environment will most effectively support language development. In practice, however, EMI classrooms are rarely monolingual (Paulsrud et al. 2021; Sah and Kubota 2022; Sah and Li 2022; Yuan and Yang 2020). For instance, Sah and Kubota's (2022) review of translanguaging in EMI classrooms across South Asia found that, despite the English–only expectations held by some parents and school administrators, multilingual practices were the norm. These practices were often driven by two key factors: teachers' inclusive pedagogical orientations and their limited English proficiency. Such multilingual use was typically spontaneous and emerged as a pragmatic coping strategy rather than a formally planned instructional approach.

Increasing evidence from bilingual and multilingual education challenges the assumption that EMI must be English–only. Research in second language acquisition supports the pedagogical value of integrating students' home languages into instruction. Cummins (2000) argues that first and second language development are interdependent, and strengthening the first can support the acquisition of the second. In multilingual classrooms, the use of students' home languages has been shown to enhance participation, engagement, and confidence. For instance, Creese and Blackledge (2010) found that code–switching helps learners build on existing linguistic knowledge to understand new concepts, fostering deeper learning and critical thinking. Conversely, enforcing English–only policies can be harmful. Such restrictions often lead to student frustration, disengagement, and diminished self–esteem, particularly when learners struggle to understand content delivered in an unfamiliar language (Sah 2023; Skutnabb–Kangas 2000). These policies also violate students' linguistic human rights, including the right to use their own language in education – rights recognized by international organizations such as the United Nations.

Therefore, EMI programs should move away from viewing local languages as barriers and instead embrace them as valuable educational resources. Research consistently links inclusive multilingual approaches with improved academic performance and stronger language outcomes (Baker 2011). Teachers and policymakers should create environments that allow students to use their home languages alongside English. Promoting translanguaging not only enhances learning but also affirms students' identities and supports more equitable and inclusive education (García and Li 2014; Heugh 2021).

Conclusion

The discussion in this article shows that EMI is much more complex than widespread misconceptions imply. Rather than serving as a magic bullet for improving academic quality, promoting equality, or guaranteeing superior language acquisition, EMI's outcomes are inextricably linked to multifaceted sociopolitical and socio-educational dynamics. As this article has demonstrated, the uncritical adoption of EMI is grounded in a series of persistent misconceptions that require careful scrutiny.

For example, while the global prestige of English may lead some to assume that EMI is synonymous with high-quality education and upward mobility (Milligan, 2020; Sahan & Şahan, 2021), research shows that genuine academic success depends on a range of contextual factors. Teacher preparation, pedagogical approaches, curriculum relevance and the availability of resources all play significant roles in shaping learning outcomes (Guo et al. 2024; Kirkpatrick 2011). In contexts where these factors are lacking – such as in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America (Dearden 2015; Macaro et al. 2017) – the imposition of EMI can lead to what some scholars have described as 'subtractive education,' whereby students face challenges in grasping both English and their subject matter. Moreover, in some postcolonial contexts, EMI is often positioned as a mechanism for overcoming historical marginalization (Gopalkrishna 2012; Mohanty 2019). The evidence, however, suggests that the benefits of EMI are often confined to those who already occupy a position of socio–economic privilege. Studies indicate that elite educational institutions with adequate resources and well–trained teachers reap the advantages of EMI, leaving under–resourced public schools – and the students they serve – at a comparative disadvantage (Sah and Karki 2023; Erling et al. 2017). In this light, relying on EMI as a tool for equity runs the risk of merely repackaging existing inequalities rather than dismantling them.

Similarly, the assumption that EMI automatically leads to improved English proficiency has been challenged by research showing that language acquisition is a complex process that requires interactive and scaffolded instructional practices (Curle et al. 2020; Lei and Hu 2014). In many classrooms, especially within the EMI programs of the Global South, both teachers and students often struggle with English, leading to rote–based instruction and an over–reliance on code–switching (Mohanty 2019; Sah and Kubota 2022). As a result, students may find themselves struggling to master either the language or the academic content, undermining both areas simultaneously.

Furthermore, the insistence on teaching STEM subjects exclusively in English is not universally justified. Cognitive research demonstrates that students benefit from learning complex disciplines in their mother tongue, at least during the formative years (Cummins 2000; Heugh 2021). Adopting a bilingual or translanguaging approach, where local languages and English are used complementarily (García and Li 2014), may foster a deeper understanding and engagement while preserving linguistic diversity and cultural identity. Likewise, the perceived link between EMI and professional or economic

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development is best understood as part of broader socio–political narratives that often mask deeper structural issues (Huang and Curle 2021; Sah 2024).

The article also challenges the misconception related to a *more and earlier* approach. This approach assumes that immersing students in English from an early age will automatically lead to improved language proficiency and academic success. However, studies have shown that early immersion in English can disrupt cognitive development, hinder subject comprehension, and even lead to emotional distress when students are deprived of foundational learning in their mother tongue. A more effective approach involves a balanced bilingual model that prioritizes mother–tongue instruction in the early years and gradually introduces English in a supportive and scaffolded manner, aligning with the work of scholars like Cummins (2000).

The misconception of EMI as an English–only environment is equally problematic. Research has consistently shown that multilingual practices, including translanguaging, are often employed in EMI classrooms to facilitate meaning–making, engagement, and content mastery. Far from hindering English acquisition, these practices enhance learning and reinforce both linguistic and academic growth. Strict English–only policies, in contrast, can alienate students, undermine their self–confidence, and violate their linguistic rights, as demonstrated by scholars like Skutnabb–Kangas (2000) and Sah (2023).

In summary, dismantling the misconceptions surrounding EMI requires a fundamental shift in how we approach language–in–education policies. Rather than adopting EMI uncritically, all stakeholders – educators, policymakers, and researchers – need to pause and critically assess the ideological underpinnings and misleading narratives that have shaped broader discourses around EMI policies and practices. These false assumptions, often rooted in colonial and neoliberal legacies, have perpetuated a one–size–fits–all approach to language education that fails to consider the complex, context–specific needs of diverse communities. It is crucial for stakeholders to carefully evaluate local educational contexts, resources, and linguistic realities before adopting an EMI program, rather than being swayed by the appealing yet unfounded claims of its universal benefits. As Sah and Fang (2025, 576) argue, stakeholders 'must take a critical perspective and unsettle the coloniality of EMI' by actively questioning and rethinking its assumptions, and taking meaningful action to promote educational policies that are both linguistically and culturally relevant to the communities they serve.

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